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# *The infamous* **Club Manitou**

Northern Michigan's favorite speakeasy

**... with a 2023 update!**

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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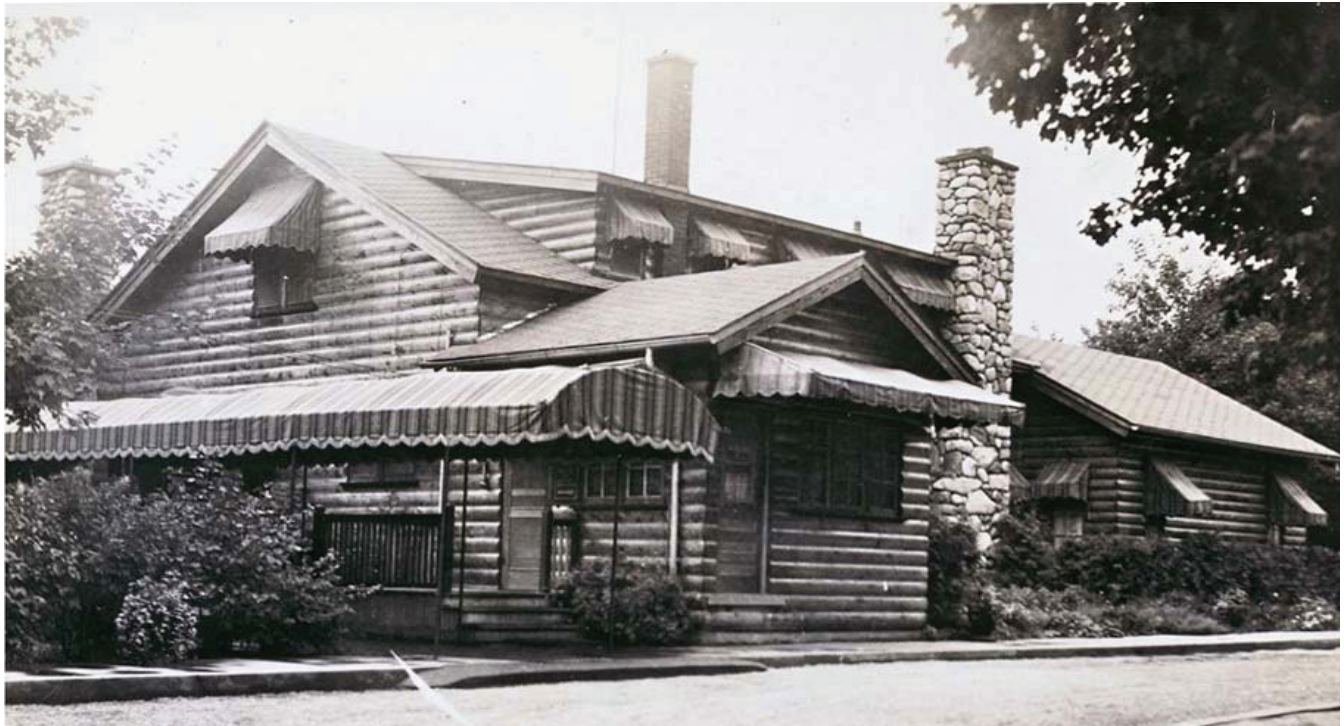
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## 2 - Infamous Club Manitou

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# Northern Michigan's good ol' days at the Club Manitou

By Richard A. Wiles

**T**here are many among us who like to talk about the good old days. How more simple and easy life was back in the 1930s, 1940s and even the 1950s. Less crime, less corruption, less vice and so on. For them, northern Michigan in that era was a nostalgic summer time playground filled with wonderful memories. "Oh," they say, "how I wish I could go back."

More than likely, knowledge of what was really going on in the north after dark during the summer months of that particular era, was, for this same

nostalgia-craving crowd, a well-kept secret. In truth, one just has to follow the money and that money led to smuggling, bootlegging, illegal gambling and even, perhaps, murder, right here in lower northern Michigan.

"Resorting" in northern Michigan began, for the most part, in the Lake Michigan port city of Petoskey soon after the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad came to town in 1873. By the summer of 1876 a group of Methodist Church members began the development of the Bay View resort community just outside the city of Petoskey along Little Traverse Bay. This summer retreat soon grew into an important

venue for music and entertainment. By the early 1900's, the Bay View Association outside Petoskey was nationally known. It drew well-known musicians, entertainers and lecturers to its summer stage.

Soon after Bay View came the development of summer resort communities in nearby Charlevoix, and Harbor Springs. Those mid-westerners who could afford to travel north for the summer, first by railroad and/or Great Lakes steamer, then later by airplane or highway provided the audience needed during the summer months for first class dining and entertainment. By the 1920's, Harbor Springs, Michigan, was



home to the Harbor Point Association, the Wequetonsing Association, the Roaring Brook and Ramona Park communities and offered over 10 summer hotels for those visitors who did not have their own summer cottage.

No dining, dancing and entertainment venue was more nationally renowned in the north than the Club Manitou Supper Club during the summers of the 1930's through the early 1950's. Long time patrons of the Manitou, near Harbor Springs liked to refer to the up-scale dining establishment as the "Stork Club of the North" — a famous New York City nightclub of that time period. During the waning years of National Prohibition from the summer of 1929 until the summer of 1934, the summer-only bar, nightclub, gaming casino and up-scale restaurant catered to the ultra — wealthy resorters of the area. It provided rum, gin, fine French wines and more. The really frequent patrons of the nightclub liked to call it "Slim's." The name Manitou most likely derived from the popular Lake Michigan steamship, *Manitou*, which came to Harbor Springs from Chicago during the summer tourist seasons of that time period.

The original building was erected in a log cabin style between 1928- 1929. The only visible owner of the establishment was 24-year-old Al Gerhart from



Al Gerhart aka "Detroit Slim"

Detroit. He bought the land from the Jablinsky family on a 15-year land contract. No record of the amount paid for the multiple acres of land alongside Emmet County's Pleasantview Road exists and most likely the transaction was in cash. In 1943 a deed was filed naming William Al Gerhart and wife Jeannette V. Gerhart as purchaser of the property from one Agnes Jablinsky. The deed noted that the sale consisted of premises and appurtenances — this was 14 years after the nightclub/restaurant opened in the summer of 1929. It was also three years



Abe Bernstein



William "Al" Gerhart aka "Big Al"



**"They're rotten, they're purple like the color of bad meat, they're a Purple Gang."**



Detroit Bernstein brothers controlled the flow of liquor 1920s-1930s.

## 4 - Infamous Club Manitou

after he married his wife, Jeannette Kenich, of Detroit.

Gerhart was born in 1906 as Allah Schwindner in Reading, Pennsylvania. By the early 1920s, he was employed as a driver for the Purple Gang of Detroit. By then he had changed his name to William "Al" Gerhart, using a Reading neighborhood friend's name. In the 1920s, the underworld city of Detroit belonged to the Purple Gang, so called because it was said of the gang's members, "They're rotten, they're purple like the color of bad meat, they're a Purple Gang." Just as Al Capone ran Chicago, the Bernstein brothers ran Detroit.

The gang was led by the four Bernstein brothers of Detroit who controlled all of the lower peninsula of Michigan's illegal activities as far west as Grand Rapids and as far north as Sault Ste. Marie. Gambling, bootlegging, and other illicit activities in that part of the state were all under their watch. And, the Detroit River was the center of most bootlegging activity in the Prohibition era of the 1920's and early 1930's. After prohibition of alcohol became the law of the land in 1918, illegal liquor grew into the second biggest business in Detroit. Income was estimated at a \$215 million a year in 1929, just behind the building of automobiles.

During Prohibition era, the illegal trade in alcohol employed about 50,000 people in the Detroit area. And, according to The Detroit Free Press (June 22, 1930), there were as many as 25,000 blind pigs (illegal places selling alcohol) operating in the Detroit metropolitan area. This desire for gin, beer, wine and other drinks came north with the cosmopolitan crowd of wealthy summer



Simulated main Club Manitou upstairs dining room

resorters. They were not denied in the city and they were not to be denied in their beloved northland.

Gerhart's financial position was always a topic of local discussion. According to those who knew him best, Al never really revealed his early origins. No one knew where he was born or how he came by his financial ability to build the Club Manitou. But, that he did, and did very successfully. It is alleged that Gerhart learned his trade and the trust of mob-connected Detroiters. He spoke openly of being employed by members of the Detroit based Purple Gang. He claimed to be only a chauffeur for the gangster. Whatever the true case may be, at the young age of twenty-four he gained the financial backing from his city connections to come north to Harbor Springs, Michigan. In the years of 1928 and 1929, he first built, and then opened the exclusive Club Manitou. Al oversaw the complete construction of the log cabin structure making sure

that its lower level was built as a concrete and steel-like fortress.

Without fanfare or any type of advertisements, he quietly opened the club just before the July 4th holiday of 1929. Word of mouth was how one learned of the north's new evening social destination. And, no one entered through the front door or the back door to downstairs without being known. Or, knowing somebody! Al's maitre d' and doorman was Paul Pepper. Paul was the one who decided if you could enter. His life history was even more sketchy than his boss, William Gerhart.

The three-story log cabin with a basement reinforced to resemble Fort Knox, had no central heating apparatus, only three giant field stone chimneys with wood fireplaces serving as the source of heat. The massive basement stone fireplace faced two ways to provide heat for the bar-lounge on one side and the adjoining dance floor room (sometimes gaming room) on the other. Upstairs

## Infamous Club Manitou - 5



Outside entrance to basement lounge.



Second steel-lined door on rollers at the bottom of the steps.

on the third floor were four large bedrooms.

By the summer season of 1929, the Petoskey-Harbor Springs area had a wide variety of dining establishments, including the new Douglas Lake Hotel and the newly named Traverse Shores Country Club. It had formerly been the Ramona Park Hotel. But, the Club

Manitou's strongest competition that opening year was the Ramona Park Casino. The original Ramona Park Casino had been built in 1912 and was located to the north of the Ramona Park Hotel (along the northern shoreline of Little Traverse Bay). But by 1929 a newer structure had replaced the older small casino building and its reinforced doors and secret passageways resembled the

nearby Club Manitou.

The building design of the two northern Michigan casinos was not something new. Ever since Prohibition had become law, a flurry of illegal midwestern gambling joints had opened — many built with the intention to hide what was going on inside from the law.

Most notorious were the cities of Toledo, Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio, along with smaller towns in Indiana, and, of course, Detroit. All were home to multiple speakeasies/gaming houses. Americans were not to be denied their alcohol and their desire to gamble. It seems that "Before There Was Las Vegas, There Was the Midwest."

Ironically, the *Petoskey Evening News* ran a headline story the week Al opened his doors. The story warned of increased liquor smuggling from Canada into the United States. The local New Hollywood Theatre in downtown Petoskey even featured, that early summer of 1929, the new movies "Speakeasy" and "Gamblers"—somewhat prophetic

## 6 - Infamous Club Manitou



The first room after twin door entrance which was the dance floor/orchestra area of "Slim's."



to what Gerhart was bringing north.

Dining at Club Manitou was a coat-and-tie affair. Lobster and/or steak was the usual entrée to have for dinner. While other northern Michigan dining establishments fell on hard times during the Depression, the summer resorters of the Harbor Springs area kept the Club Manitou alive and thriving. And, Gerhart, in catering to diner's needs, served nothing but the best of everything. Downstairs in the lounge area, his Scotch was served in one-and-a-half-ounce cruets along with a bowl of ice. The bar Scotch was Dewar's White Label and the top-shelf Scotch varieties were all 12 years old or more (Dewar's, Ballantine's, Chivas Regal types.)

The all-male wait staff and all of the basement kitchen staff were imported from New York City's Vatel Club. The main chef and sous chef were both French. The upstairs main dining room was quite large and contained two cozy stone fireplaces to take the chill off the cool evening air. Prior to the repeal of Prohibition in December of 1933 the lounge was in the basement along with



House scotch was Dewar's White Label served in crystal carafes and cruets with a bowl of ice.



the dance floor, gaming equipment and entertainment stage. Upstairs on the third floor of the log cabin were four separate bedrooms said to have been occupied each summer by the kitchen crew.

During the establishment's first five Prohibition summers alcoholic drinks were served with dinner in the main dining room inside tea cups and tea pots, just in case of a police raid. However, that was not likely to happen. According to the F.B.I. file no. 7-576 section 185 of April 1935, the existence of the Club Manitou and other such establishments such as the Club Ramona, "could be explained because Sheriff Bryant of Petoskey has the reputation

of protecting the criminal element, particularly the powerful gamblers of the Petoskey area and is no doubt receiving some remuneration in that connection ... in particular the Ramona Park Casino ... where it is not unusual for summer resident millionaires to win or lose \$50,000 to \$100,000 a night ... it is also reported that Jimmy Hayes of Toledo brought his own contractors to construct the gambling hideaways and secret passages in the Ramona Club ..."

The report by Special Agent W.J. Wyn went on to state:

"... the Manitou Club operated by Al Gerhart until the close of the 1935 season is another gaming spot in Harbor Springs which has a reputation of being a tough spot ... Gerhart is now serving time in the Jackson Michigan Penitentiary yet still owns this place and intends to open for the 1936 summer season when he is due to be released. ... this club caters to the more lower type of gamblers although the club itself is very elaborate and also purported to have underground passages leading to getaways. Gerhart has a long criminal record."



Ramona Park Hotel "On the Lake Shore Between Petoskey and Harbor Springs" was newly renovated for the 1934 summer season.

From the beginning, the Club Manitou's biggest competition for the summer crowd's patronage and money was the nearby Ramona Park Casino. It was located to the north of the Ramona Park Hotel and by the early 1930s was owned by Jimmy Hayes of Toledo. According to author Kenneth Dickson, a Detroit-area writer who specializes in the history of midwestern gangsters and illegal operations in the 1930s and 1940s, "Jimmy Hayes was an extremely powerful gambler who ran all the gambling operations in Northwestern Ohio during the early 1930s ... Jimmy and his wife, Eleanor, personally operated the VILLA on the Dixie Highway near the Ohio/Michigan line ... but Jimmy's real operation was a club which he operated in Harbor Springs, Michigan. This was a summer resort for the wealthy of Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois." Hayes and Detroit-area partner Abe Ackerman bought the old Ramona Park and decided to update the operation.

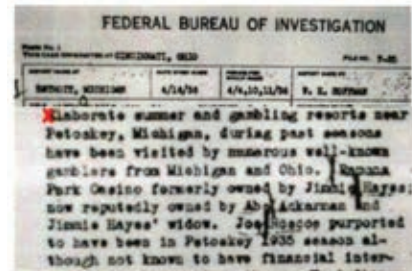
Hayes was known as the "Gentleman Gambler" for his pleasant manner



Jimmy Hayes was found dead in a Detroit alley Oct. 4, 1934.

and generosity but his entrance into the northern Michigan gambling scene just might have been the reason for his demise. Soon after opening a new casino called Club Ramona in the summer of 1934 (which replaced the old casino built in 1912) "Gentleman Jimmy" became a very viable threat to the nearby Club Manitou and its owners.

By 1934, the Purple Gang of Detroit and its originators, the Bernstein

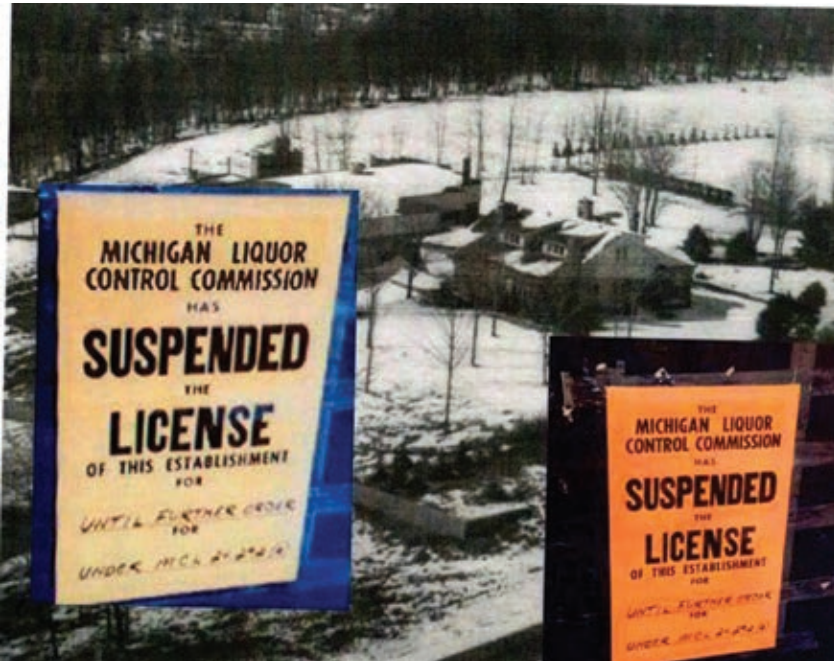


**From this FBI document dated 4/14/56:** Elaborate summer and gambling resorts near Petoskey, Michigan, during past seasons have been visited by numerous well-known gamblers from Michigan and Ohio. Ramona Park Casino formerly owned by Jimmie (sic) Hayes; now reputedly owned by Abe Ackerman and Jimmie (sic) Hayes' widow. Joe Roscoe purported to have been in Petoskey 1935 season although not known to have financial inter- ...

brothers, had been taken over by a new mobster element from St. Louis; these were the Licavoli brothers and they saw Jimmy Hayes as their enemy. Kenneth Dickson's book, "Nothing Personal, Just Business," stated "... the Licavoli gangsters tried to muscle in on the profits from the Hayes gambling enterprises ... They demanded a 50% split ..." In October of 1934, Hayes visited his partner, Ackerman, in Detroit. He told his wife they were going to a World Series baseball game between the Tigers and the St. Louis Cardinals. Eleanor never again saw Jimmy alive.

Hayes was found dead in a Detroit alleyway on Thursday, October 4, 1934. He had been beaten and shot in the head with a shotgun. Nothing had been removed from his body, not his wallet, gold rings or gold watch. But, found in his pants pocket were four gambling dice, which he was never

## 8 - Infamous Club Manitou



known to carry. It was interpreted by police as an indication of why he had been rubbed out.

Eleanor and Ackerman, along with fellow Detroiters, Burt Moss, continued to run the Club Ramona for two more summers before closing down and selling the property to Gerhart. Gerhart tore down the building and used part of the lumber to build Al's Pier Bar on the waterfront in Harbor Springs. Thus, after 1937, the Club Manitou had no competition for what it offered the wealthy summer residents of Petoskey and Harbor Springs. The Club Manitou had won the battle for the hearts of the summer season's guests, along with perhaps a little outside help.

The Manitou continued until the 1952 season when it was forced to close its doors due to the loss of its liquor license. After numerous raids for gambling by the Michigan State Police, the Michigan Liquor Control Commission had had enough and revoked Gerhart's license to serve alcoholic beverages.

The establishment sat empty until June of 1962 when a new club emerged there, the Club Ponytail.

However, Gerhart was not idle after the Manitou's closing. He and Jean opened the Colonial Club of White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, very near to the famous Greenbrier Resort. "Big Al" was how the locals there referred to him by and his restaurant, nightclub and illegal gambling operation flourished until 1963. It was that year when a federal raid by the F.B.I. shuttered his doors. Gerhart eventually returned to northern Michigan where he died in 1987. His legend lives on with the many stories locals like tell about his Club Manitou.

The foremost legend of the Manitou was that it contained secret getaway tunnels under its massive parking lot and one that ran under M-131 (now M-119) to the airport. Both have been filled in but they did exist. Another larger tunnel was built by Gerhart in 1946 when he added a large addition to his original structure. Since his kitchen was

downstairs in the original basement, he had to have a passageway for his waiters to carry food into the new dining hall. That passageway still exists. It is the only one that does. A massive fire destroyed the new addition in March of 1969. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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## UPDATE!

SPRING 2023 — The infamous Club Manitou near Harbor Springs was operated from July 1929 until the summer of 1952 when it closed. From 1929 until the end of the 1933 summer season it had a speakeasy bar-lounge and dance floor in its basement known as Slim's Lounge. It was named after the establishment's owner, William Al Gerhart, who had been known in the Detroit underworld of the 1920s and 1930s as Detroit Slim.

Using financial resources never disclosed, the 24-year-old had the Club Manitou built in 1928. Its basement area was much larger than the log building on top of it where fine dining was offered to selected guests. Once the diners were finished with a gourmet meal, fine wine, and top-shelf liquor, they were welcomed down the outside steps to Slim's. It featured a professional band, a large bar area and also a separate room for entertainment and dancing. It also featured secret tunnels, the existence of which were verified in the spring of 2023 by the Geology Department of Lake Superior State University headed by Dr. Paul Kelso.

Using ground penetrating sonar unit, graduate students from the university did a study of the Club Manitou grounds and were able to discern three separate tunnels. The first tunnel, approximately 3 x 3 feet, ran from the basement's kitchen area east to a garage some 100 feet from the main structure. The tunnel was then investi-

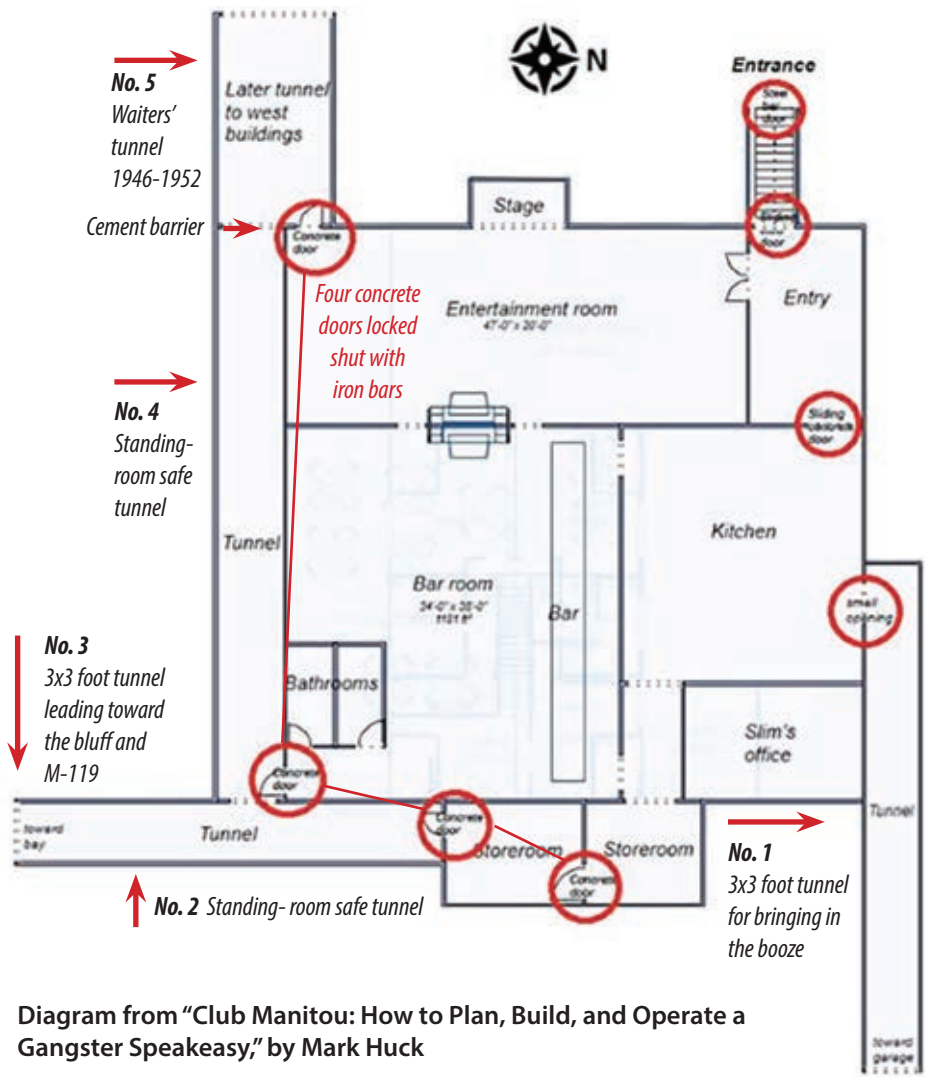


Diagram from "Club Manitou: How to Plan, Build, and Operate a Gangster Speakeasy," by Mark Huck

gated by Beth Wemigwase of the Harbor Springs Museum. She discovered a rail on the tunnel's bottom which most likely was part of a pulley system to bring illegal booze into the club from the garage. A wooden champagne box from the 1930s was found inside the garage opening of the tunnel, named No. 1, and shown on the diagram.

Gerhart, spending time in Detroit and engaged in bootlegging activities, was well aware of the use of secret tunnels to illicitly move booze during the times

of Prohibition. Detroit and Windsor, Canada where alcohol was still being made, was the Midwest's center for smuggling operations across the Detroit River and via the Great Lakes. Gerhart also was well aware of the use of secret escape tunnels or the building of safe rooms by those engaged in illegal gambling and selling illegal alcohol. It can be assumed this knowledge was incorporated into the building of Club Manitou's basement. He initially had four tunnels built with the largest one

## 10 - Infamous Club Manitou

being built in 1945 to connect the basement kitchen with the new addition he built for the club. This tunnel, No. 5, was used by the waiters to take food from the old Club Manitou basement overt to the new dining room and lounge.

Two of the longest tunnels, No. 2 and No. 4, were safe room tunnels that ran along the eastern side of the basement foundation wall and the southern side. The opening for these two tunnels was through Gerhart's basement office door (made of steel and concrete) and through the same type of door in the bathroom section of the basement. They did not lead anywhere and, while narrow, they were tall enough for people to stand in while hiding. Tunnel No. 3 was found to have an entrance from tunnel No. 2 but was only 3-foot-by-3-feet in size. It went partway toward the property's bluff above M-119. Its use is still debatable. Gerhart always said it was a ventilation tunnel. The last owner of the property, Judy Landis, said at one time, a pipe from this tunnel came up out of the ground and had a heavy metal grate with slotted openings. The openings would indicate a ventilation tunnel rather than any escape tunnel.

The stories about the Club Manitou/Club Ponytail tunnels have abounded for years. Many reported being in the tunnels, however, no one has ever shown a photograph until the summer of 2023 when Wemigwase photographed them. Her journey into the basement's five tunnels corresponded with the LSSU Geology Department's ground-penetrating sonar report. Wemigwase and LSSU worked with author Mark Huck, who was the son of the owner. He has written the book, "Club Manitou: How to Plan, Build, and Operate a Gangster Speakeasy," which is available at local bookstores or found at [Amazon.com/books](https://www.amazon.com/books).



Tunnel No. 1 from garage to basement kitchen. Partially collapsed tunnel from garage west to basement. Notice the rail on the floor in the photo on the right of the approximately 3x3-foot tunnel. (photo courtesy of Harbor Springs Museum)



Photo of tunnel used to transport illegal alcohol in Detroit during Prohibition-courtesy of Mark Huck.



Basement steel and concrete door that leads to safe room tunnel No. 2-courtesy of Harbor Springs Museum

## Infamous Club Manitou - 11



Basement door to waiters' tunnel (above) and the waiters' tunnel (right). Photo from Judy Huck Landis



Opening in bathroom to the safe-room tunnel No. 3 and ventilation tunnel. (courtesy of Harbor Springs Museum)