

Chief, cop step down amid profiling claim

Sergeant resigns, but officials say investigation will continue

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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The Tiburon police sergeant whose heated late-night exchange with a local Black business owner sparked town-wide discussions on racial bias within the department resigned from

his post. In a Sept. 1 Tiburon Talk newsletter emailed to residents, Town Manager Greg Chanis announced Sgt. Michael Blasi had voluntarily resigned that day and would leave the Tiburon Police Department im-

Undersheriff will take over for retiring police chief

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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Tiburon Police Chief Michael Cronin will retire from the department's top job Sept. 13 — a move town officials said has been in the works for "some time" but comes amid

department handled an August exchange with a Black business owner and reacted to a June Black Lives Matter rally held in Marin City.

Town Manager Greg Chanis announced Cronin's departure in a Tiburon Talk newsletter. See **CHIEF, PAGE 18**

The anchor of Tiburon



ELLIOT KARLAN ARCHIVES / FOR THE ARK

Sam's Anchor Cafe celebrates a century on the bay

By **DEIRDRE McCROHAN**
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PROHIBITION HAD JUST been enacted in the U.S. when Sam Vella began slinging drinks on Tiburon's shoreline. His bar — a wooden plank over a pair of sawhorses under a tent on the beach — would lay the foun-

ation for the town's landmark businesses: Sam's Anchor Cafe.

A century later, the bar and restaurant is the peninsula's longest continuously operating eatery and a mainstay on Tiburon's Main Street waterfront for locals and tourists alike, a place to see and be seen with its twin dining rooms and massive rear deck offering

expansive views of the bay. Though local historians still debate exactly when Vella started the business — and even whether it was really in 1920 — Sam's is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, though the county's coronavirus-related re-

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Marin's plans to reopen gyms, theaters and more delayed by state

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Towns take over enforcement of virus complaints about businesses

20 reported on Tiburon Peninsula; few investigated as county loses track

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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Marin officials have abandoned a countywide task force created to investigate tips about businesses violating COVID-19 health orders and will instead leave it up to cities and towns like Tiburon and Belvedere to handle local complaints and issue warnings or citations.

The decision, effective Sept. 1, comes after difficulties streamlining the complaint system, county officials said, specifically problems with managing and following up on the hundreds of complaints the county has received since mid-July.

That includes nearly 20 complaints about businesses on the Tiburon Peninsula, including at least nine in Tiburon, two in Belvedere and eight in Strawberry. For more than half of those, the county either never followed up or couldn't say what actions were taken, if any.

"In the end, we decided it would be more efficient to do this locally," said Angela Nicholson, assistant coun-

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HIGH-END REMODELS & NEW CONSTRUCTION



Sam's, *continued from page 1*

strictions have prevented any large gatherings to mark the milestone.

Through changes in ownership, remodels and even a global pandemic, the character of Sam's has endured, locals say.

"Sam's has always been the local spot," said Tiburon native Ed Lynch, a retired Tiburon fire battalion chief who now is a real-estate executive. "Every town has one."

Sam's history rooted in Prohibition-era U.S.

By 1928, Vella, a native of Malta, had replaced the tent with a speakeasy at 27 Main St., though he owned several other properties along the shore, including 55 Main St., now occupied mostly by Goldman Law Firm, as well as land he sold to Corinthian Yacht Club for its parking lot. He also had 13 homes in Tiburon and Belvedere, which were all funded by and crucial to Vella's core business as a bootlegger.

According to local historian Chris Morrison, Vella, who would have been a multimillionaire by today's standards, owned a race boat that he'd take out to the Farallon Islands, meeting ships that had sailed down from Vancouver. When he returned, a smaller boat could tuck in under the dock, and he could smuggle cases of whiskey into one of the properties through a trap door.

Vella sold liquor illegally to Belvedere's elites and Tiburon's rough-and-tumble railroad workers with equal vigor, buying up real estate in both communities and elsewhere in Marin with the proceeds. He would invite local residents to visit, giving them an opportunity to pick up their bottled purchases.

Vella once met with notorious gangster Al Capone in Belvedere Cove, Morrison told the Belvedere-Tiburon Landmarks Society for its June 2009 newsletter.

"The upright citizens of Belvedere complained to their one and only police officer there were gangsters with guns on the yacht," Landmarks wrote. "The officer rowed out to the yacht and explained his predicament and offered a solution. If Capone would just move his yacht a hundred yards



VIA BELVEDERE-TIBURON LANDMARKS SOCIETY

Above, Sam's Anchor Cafe in Tiburon's Main Street is seen circa 1952. Below left, former co-owners Brian Wilson (left) of Mill Valley and Steve Sears (right) of Tiburon operated the restaurant for more than 40 years, from 1978 to 2018, when they retired and sold to an investment group led by Conor Flaherty (below right), who grew up in Tiburon.



ELLIOT KARLAN ARCHIVE / FOR THE ARK 2014



panded to include a restaurant after H&H cafe, which had previously been the only restaurant in town, closed down.

H&H had been owned by Tiburon's only Black residents, Henry and Hazel Hunt, and historic photos show the diner called itself Tiburon's only restaurant from 1920 to 1930. Vella reportedly had such great respect for the Hunts that he didn't want to create any competition for them. He only expanded after Henry Hunt died and his wife shuttered the business.

When the law finally started catching up with Vella, he reportedly persuaded friend Louise Garrow to marry him on the promise that she'd inherit his fortune.

In 1960, when he sold the building, res-

or so they would be in Tiburon waters and out of his jurisdiction, and Capone obliged."

While Capone was eventually jailed at Alcatraz for tax evasion, Vella would hide

his booze but leave a pint out for the sheriff to find in a raid — then pay a small fine and get back to work.

Sometime after 1930, the speakeasy ex-

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Tobacco, *continued from page 5*

and Prevention.

Tiburon's ordinance bans all flavored tobacco, which the town defines as having "characterizing flavors" other than tobacco — such as "any fruit, chocolate, vanilla, honey, candy, cocoa, dessert, alcoholic beverage, menthol, mint, wintergreen, herb or spice."

Possession will remain legal.

The change will also require any tobacco retailer to post a visible sign, in letters at least 1-inch tall, that reads, "Flavored tobacco sales are prohibited in the town of

Tiburon."

On Sept. 1, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 793 into law, banning the retail sale statewide of flavored tobacco products — with the loose-leaf and premium-cigar exceptions — effective Jan. 1.

Retailers can be fined up to \$250 and lose their tobacco-sales permits under both the Tiburon and state laws.

The town's ban reflects a previous ban approved by the Marin Board of Supervisors for unincorporated areas, including Strawberry and parts of Tiburon, that took effect in July 2019 and was extended to specialty stores effective Jan. 1 this year.

Bob Curry, executive director of Marin

Smoke-Free Coalition, said it was important for Tiburon to pass its own law because he expects the tobacco industry to challenge the state law, potentially with a ballot initiative.

"Even if they don't do the referendum to challenge it, it's important for the cities to have their own ordinances because the state law doesn't provide any money to enforce it," Curry said.

Town Manager Greg Chanis also said the town didn't want to leave the door open to future sales.

"Just because no one is selling them now doesn't mean it couldn't happen in the future," he said after the Aug. 19 meeting. "This ensures that if a store wanted to sell

(flavored) tobacco, it wouldn't be able to."

The only opposition in Tiburon came from two industry representatives. Jaime Rojas Jr., the legislative consultant for the National Association of Tobacco Outlets, said marijuana use and binge drinking are "bigger problems" and that the council should exempt "traditional" flavors, including menthol, asserting they're "not a problem with the youth." However, some 95 percent of Black youth take up smoking with menthols.

Rima Khoury, general counsel for Fumari Inc., sought an exemption for shisha for cultural reasons.

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restaurant and name to his accountant, Eugene Wheary, and returned to Malta to evade the U.S. tax authorities. He died there, while wife Louise inherited the remaining real estate.

Restaurant weathers ownership changes

Wheary sold the restaurant business a year later to Jim Bigelow, who also owned Sid and Jim's, a Mill Valley bar and restaurant on the Redwood Highway frontage road that's now home to Piatti. Wheary, however, kept ownership of the Sam's Anchor Cafe name and the building, which then had the address 27-29 Main St., and the 31-33 Main St. building next door, which today houses Papparazzi clothing boutique.

In the meantime, a new friendship was budding at the former Refectory Steakhouse in Bon Air Center in Greenbrae. About 1969, Tiburon resident Steve Sears was a bartender when he met Brian Wilson, who had to be a busboy because he wasn't 21 yet. They didn't know it at the time, but that friendship, and Sears' eventual move to Sid and Jim's, sparked the next generation in Sam's history and would put it on the map.

By 1978, Bigelow's wife had had a stroke and his attentions were elsewhere, and he had lost interest in Sam's, Sears said. The building had fallen into disrepair, the interior was dirty, and some days saw no customers at all.

Bigelow had begun looking for buyers and made contact with Belvedere resident and attorney John Clark, who had sent Bigelow a letter a few years earlier asking him to contact him if he ever wanted to sell the restaurant. Clark reportedly was concerned that one of the prospective buyers wanted to turn Sam's into a steakhouse. He thought it should remain a seafood place and keep its early 20th-century character.

Sears said he doesn't feel too bad for the other bidder. That investment group went on to buy Dreyer's ice cream company, he said.

Clark put together a deal to have Sears Wilson run the place. Sears had been the part-owner and manager of Sid & Jim's, but Sears said he would only come in if he and Wilson could have an ownership interest.

Bob Clute, a friend and business partner of Clark's, became the fourth general partner. The four together would own 50 percent of Sam's.

Clark then sought out a group of local residents to put up the remaining 50 percent. Each put up \$6,000 for a 5-percent share of the business. The agreement was signed April 1978.

The new ownership spent the next sev-



ELLIOT KARLAN ARCHIVE / FOR THE ARK 2019

Sam's Anchor Cafe welcomes patrons arriving by sea with an old refrain from original owner Sam Vella now painted on the waterfront facade. As part of a major renovation under new ownership in 2019, the restaurant got new decking, a fresh coat of white paint and nautical themes throughout.

eral years renovating the building, ceiling to floors, food to service, and were doubling business each year for first three or four years.

"Brian and I started buying out these folks in the early 1980s and eventually bought them all out, including Clute and Clark," Sears said.

Over the years, Sam's became the venue for many family and community celebrations, and guidebooks like Frommer's and Fodor's steered San Francisco tourists to the waterfront restaurant. Some arrive by boat, utilizing either of the two 100-foot docks that lead up to Sam's deck. Others arrive by ferry, where it's a straight shot to the rear deck entrance without ever having to set foot on Main Street. Others rent bikes in San Francisco for self-guided tours over the Golden Gate to downtown Tiburon, with the return trip by ferry. Last stop? Sam's, where those entering from Main Street are greeted by long bar, old photos and a popcorn machine.

"It used to be pretty wild," Sears said in an interview for an earlier Ark story. "There was music on the weekends. The late-night bar business was pretty happening."

Lynch called Sam's a "melting pot."

"On any day, you could go in and see an attorney that just got off the ferry talking to a plumber who just finished a job, and they would be enjoying a beer together," Lynch said.

He notes it was easy to tell who was a local and who was a tourist at Sam's, as the locals would sit with their backs to the bay, looking to see who was coming in, and tourists would want to face the water.

"I've been all over the world, and every-

where I've gone, people know Sam's," he said.

As Tiburon evolved, with more young families moving to town, so did Sam's, retaining its popularity but becoming more of a family-friendly joint.

In 2008, Wheary's heirs, to whom Sears and Wilson had been paying rent, put the Sam's and adjacent buildings at 27-29 and 31-33 Main St. up for sale.

It took until December 2010, but with help from another group of investors, Sears and Wilson bought the two buildings, as well as the rights to the Sam's Anchor Cafe name.

In 2018, Sears and Wilson decided it was time to retire sold Sam's and to a group of investors, doing business as Sam's Main Street LLC, also known as Tiburon Investment Group.

Conor Flaherty, who grew up in Tiburon, is among the principals and now serves on the Tiburon Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, as Sears did for many years.

Appeal endures a century later

The new owners remodeled in 2019, giving Sam's a fresh look. The dive-bar aura of Sam's past was washed away by coats of fresh white paint, and navy-blue bar stools sit on terrazzo floors that feature a brass inlay, "est. 1920."

Preserved in the facelift was the local favorite, the popcorn machine, which still sits on a counter just past the bar.

The eastern dining room was renamed the Boathouse Room, replacing round tables and polished dark wooden chairs with four rows of booths upholstered in navy, wood tables edged in brass and wood chairs with saddle-colored woven leather lattice. Framed

black-and-white photos of Tiburon hang on the walls.

Across the hall, the western dining room was converted into the Blue Room, a lounge area that can also do duty as a meeting room.

The deck now sports rows of tables with umbrellas, with a nod to Vella: Words emblazoned in large type on the rear façade above the deck encourage people to "tie up to the pier," as Vella used to say to encourage patrons to visit the restaurant by sea.

"You don't want to change an iconic place like this too much," Flaherty said shortly after he and his partners purchased Sam's. "I want to preserve the Sam's culture."

Before the pandemic, Sam's employed about 75 people. Its operations have been curtailed by public-health restrictions that currently ban indoor dining, though the restaurant remains open for pick-up, delivery and outdoor dining. In April, shortly after the initial shelter-in-place order that closed all but essential businesses, Sam's launched a free Samaritans of Sam's delivery-and-errand service for Tiburon and Belvedere residents who needed help — not just with getting a meal delivered.

Through all the changes, Sam's hasn't changed at its core, locals say.

"You go there for the ambience," said William Lukens, an attorney and one of the local 1978 investment partners. "It's definitely a drawing card in town. People love to sit out on the deck and enjoy the sun."

Morrison, the historian, grew up in Belvedere but has lived in Tiburon for many years — in one of Vella's old properties, where he used to stash his bootlegged spirits. He says his memories are filled with visits to Sam's.

"My first of memory of Sam's is being there with my parents in 1956 and seeing Sam Vella behind the bar and walking out to sit on what was then a small deck," he said.

Morrison said Sam's is still a required stop when his cousin visits Tiburon with his son. "It's a family tradition," he said.

Despite the challenges Sam's and other restaurants have faced amid the pandemic this year, Flaherty said the restaurant has continued to serve the community.

"We are just really thankful to be part of something as special as Sam's," Flaherty said in an interview last week. "The true legacy of Sam's will be the incredible staff, customers and community. It cannot be overstated how incredible and supportive they all are. They truly make Sam's Sam's."

Deirdre McCrohan has reported on Tiburon local government and community issues for more than 30 years. Reach her at 415-944-4634.