

Nov. 22, 1985---

It's a bitter, broken-umbrella morning on Division Street, where young studs sweep up lies from tavern floors and women new to Chicago look for truth on job applications.

It's a scene Butch McGuire thinks about a lot.

No other Chicago tavern has had the sociological impact of Butch McGuire's, 20 W. Division. The venerable singles bar is commemorating its 25th anniversary this winter, and Butch told me that:

About 12.5 million people have come into his bar.

More than 4,750 marriages have come out of his bar.

Between 25 and 30 people make daily visits to his bar.

"The greatest impact we've made is for girls to realize they can go into a bar without being hassled and harassed - we made it their living room as well as the guy's living room," McGuire said over hot tea on a cold Wednesday morning.

"When we opened, we made sure that all the girls had the opportunity to have a seat and we told all the guys to give their seats to the girls," McGuire said. "That is one tradition that has passed by the wayside. Women do not under any circumstances want you to move a guy to give them a seat. I've considered myself one of the early women's libbers.

"We were one of the first places in Chicago to hire a woman bartender. Out in Mount Prospect, we were one of the first to have women bartenders and a woman assistant manager."

McGuire has used his Alan Alda approach toward women to develop his tavern into one of the nation's first singles bars. With an investment of \$531, McGuire bought Bobby Farrell's Sho Lounge, a busted-out Division Street speakeasy, in June, 1961.

"I made the money back the first week, which is more of a profit than I made the entire year of 1985," McGuire said with a laugh. "Farrell's wasn't a fun stop in the late '50s. They served phony whiskey and it was full of hookers, pimps and gamblers. The only reason I bought it is because it was available." McGuire retained the original speakeasy bar, which used to contain a small stage and piano, and that explains why McGuire's bar juts out at the south end.

"This has been a saloon and speakeasy since Prohibition," McGuire said, peering about the bar's main room. "The neighborhood was quite different when I came in here. There was a deli next door, She-Nannigan's was a cafeteria and the Lane Drug Store where as a wild and crazy guy in the early '70s, I would buy pocket-size bottles of Brut before hitting the bars was where Houlihan's is.

"I lived in Old Town at the time," he recalled. "There were only neighborhood bars, where young strangers weren't too welcome. Over in this area, there were mostly bust-out joints that charged a buck for a tiny bottle of beer, and they didn't want the young people to come in. So we catered to young people like myself who didn't have a place to go."

Besides owning one of the country's first singles bars, McGuire was one of the original networkers: "We had a huge apartment over in Old Town, and we'd have parties a couple of times a week where 100 people would show up. There would be lots of stewardesses, so when we opened up they came here. And we had a lot of pals who worked for the newspapers and who were in sales."

Of course, when you combine newspaper people with stewardesses and salespeople, you're bound to have singles of all sorts.

In a Nights of the Round Table discussion with nine McGuire's regulars from Day 1, we talked about golden moments of the last 25 years.

Bill Olendorf maintained: "There should be some mention of Unsinkable Molly Brown. There was a girl who really knew what she was about. Every night this little sweetheart would come in here and drink until the last guy fell off the barstool and she'd go home with him.

"She was from Indiana and didn't have any place to live," Olendorf said. "She kept all her clothes in a local cleaners. Any guy who took her home for the night had to pay for the cleaning the next morning. She was great until everybody in the joint got crabs in one week.

"I really remember the day this place opened. It was noon on a Sunday and McGuire is worried, pacing back and forth. McGuire says he's going out of his mind because he never owned a bar before. Right at noon about 400 people walked through that door, but I mostly remember this little old lady walking in.

"She gives Butch a big hug and joined us at the bar. I go, 'You must have known McGuire a long time.' She said, 'No, I only met him two hours ago.' I go, 'Where did you meet him two hours ago?' She was driving down Lake Shore Drive and got a flat and McGuire stopped to fix her tire. She told McGuire, 'I can't thank you enough, young man.' So McGuire said, 'I'm opening a bar in a couple of hours,' and he gives her an invitation."

The remarkable characteristic about McGuire's - especially as a singles bar - is the

loyalty created within the tavern. Drinking buddies have chipped in to install gold memorial plaques near the front door for fallen comrades. And transplanted Chicagoans make McGuire's the first stop on a return visit to the city.

"I'd say 20 to 25 percent of our total business is from customers of the past," McGuire said.

Michael Rich was more succinct: "This is the only place where this many guys can meet together all the time, get drunk together all the time, never get laid and not be called fags."

Art Mertz said the camaraderie is drawn from a village-church concept. "Although we're the same age, Butch is almost like a father figure," Mertz said. "Butch and I used to live in Old Town, and one blizzardy afternoon I came home and on each of the steps to my front door there was a bottle of champagne sticking out of the snow. I knew Butch would be in there 'building a pile.' That was our expression for getting people together to throw a party."

One of the unspoken traditions at McGuire's is the free jukebox, which has been a charity case since the bar opened. McGuire said, "In Chicago we're only allowed five coin-operated games, so if the jukebox is free, I can have another coin-operated game. They count the jukebox as a coin-operated game, and if we don't collect coins, it's not a coin-operated game."

Even if you dislike singles bars, McGuire's is a must-see during the holiday season, where the cluttered, colorful Christmas decorations rank with the State Street display.

"When we started, I had an old Italian porter named Michael D'Francisco who brought me a bunch of handmade Christmas ornaments," McGuire said. "In the old Italian tradition, he put them up and they made such a hit with the people that we put up a few more. Then they made more of a hit, so we put up more. And every year we added more and more.

"For example, not too long ago we had one train with four cars rolling above the bar," McGuire said. "Now we've got two trains with lots of cars in each room." He estimated that more than 200,000 lights twinkle in both rooms.

McGuire sneaked a starry-eyed peek at the holiday lights - already up in mid-November.

"What needs to be mentioned is a lot of people come to Chicago with the clothes on their back - that's it. Invariably they end up as friends, customers and employees. There was one kid who came in here who didn't have a damn thing," McGuire said, slamming his hand down on a table, "except a lousy future and certainly a lousy past. Now he has a wife a family and a very good job.

"It's just that somebody took the time."