

Aug. 31, 2003----

SAN FRANCISCO--One long ago morning after seeing Tom Jones get slammed by brassieres at the House of Blues nightclub in Los Angeles, a friend and I were hit by road fever. We decided to take a day trip up Highway 101 to San Francisco.

It's not unusual to see the Golden Gate Bridge. And have dinner in North Beach at Ristorante Fior d'Italia, 601 Union, the oldest Italian restaurant in America (est. 1886). Or laugh at the hippies playing hackey-sack in the Haight.

But our destination was Lefty O' Doul's, the last great sports bar in America.

The California sky was as blue as our Advil.

She had the top down on her red Mazda and music from "Tony Bennett's Greatest Hits" and Tom Jones' "Live in Las Vegas" tumbled into the air like lucky dice. By the time we reached Santa Barbara, I was feeling so good I began regaling her with stories of Lefty, who opened his San Francisco restaurant and bar in 1958.

Lefty was born in 1897 in San Francisco. He always dressed in green. He had green suits, green pants, green hats and green socks. He had green eyes.

Lefty is the only major league player ever to hit more than 30 home runs and strike out fewer than 20 times in the same season. He had a lifetime .349 batting average in 970 major league games.

Well, that relationship went nowhere.

But I still visit Lefty's whenever I am in the area, whether it be Walnut Creek, Calif., or Soda Well, Wyo. I'll be back for the Cubs-Giants playoffs in October. Lefty O'Doul's is at 333 Geary Blvd., across the street from Union Square in downtown San Francisco. I recently dropped in for a beer while on assignment in Walnut Creek.

The 200-seat restaurant and bar is in the former St. Francis Theater. Appropriately enough, the theater is an ornate vaudeville house that was built in the early 1900s. It still celebrates that spirit. During the early 1950s O'Doul opened a bar called Lefty's around the corner on Powell Street, but it is the Union Avenue location that is world-famous.

I suppose I like Lefty's so much because it reminds me of a dark downtown Chicago hofbrau, like Miller's Pub or the Berghoff bar. You don't often find places like this in California (except for Musso & Franks in Hollywood).

Lefty's is nightlife unplugged. There's ample elbow room to carry on a good conversation, either at the bar or in a back booth. Lefty played for the Philadelphia Phillies, Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants during the late 1920s and 1930s. The historic baseball pictures that encompass the bar are in grainy black and white and not all duded up like some 21st century sports bar. As for Lefty himself, his face looks like a sack of potatoes.

Lefty's daily specials are served cafeteria style. Lefty's is known for its lively corned beef, served hot and on the plate with potato and side of veggies. Every St. Patrick's Day the restaurant sells up to 1,500 pounds of corned beef.

There's a piano bar in the front of the room and about a dozen people can hang around the piano. Someone is playing the piano seven nights a week. Mayor Willie Brown is a frequent piano bar visitor. The 24-seat main bar is reportedly one of the largest in the city and features barstools made of

baseball bats.

Francis "Lefty" O'Doul died in 1969 at the age of 72.

He is buried beneath the green grass at Cypress Lawn Memorial Park in Colma, south of San Francisco. You cannot miss his gravestone. It is a 6-foot-high piece of granite engraved with his statistics, a baseball bat and his epitaph: "THE MAN IN THE GREEN SUIT . . . HE WAS HERE AT A GOOD TIME AND HAD A GOOD TIME WHILE HE WAS HERE." Of course. O'Doul was a roommate of Babe Ruth's in 1920 when they both were coming up with the Yankees.

Lefty's almost closed down in 1997. Monthly rent in the up-and-coming Union Square neighborhood doubled to \$50,000 and previous owners couldn't make ends meet. That was the year I planned to fly to San Francisco for New Year's Eve and one last night at Lefty's.

But Jim Bovis stepped to the plate.

He bought Lefty's in early 1998. His son Nick, 40, now manages the bar and restaurant. For the past 38 years Jim Bovis has owned the Gold Dust Lounge around the corner from Lefty's at 247 Powell St. During Prohibition the vaudeville house and a speakeasy that became the Gold Dust Lounge were connected by an underground tunnel.

Bovis knew the old outfielder. "Lefty used to come into my place when he wasn't here," Bovis says as Jimmy Buffett's "Why Don't We Get Drunk and Screw" plays in the background. "He drove a green Cadillac. When Lefty had it, he ran a good operation. The men customers wore suits and ties. The ladies wore hats and cloth gloves."

Night bartender Larry Lane adds, "They were talking about auctioning the place off in 1997. There's some pretty valuable memorabilia in here." If the walls could talk . . .

.....Lefty O'Doul's is framed by nearly 400 pieces of baseball memorabilia. The booty includes Lefty's bats and celebrity photographs he took himself. Like me, Lefty was an amateur photographer. There are autographed pictures of San Francisco native Joe DiMaggio and his bride Norma Jean DiMaggio (Marilyn Monroe) on a USO gig from Feb. 8, 1954.

History buffs can catch a one-of-a-kind shot of Lefty shaking hands with Japanese Emperor Hirohito, who invited O'Doul to the Imperial Palace. Lefty was instrumental in introducing baseball to Japan. The Japanese called Lefty "O-Dou-San." Last June Lefty O'Doul became the first and only American to be inducted into the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame (located just right of Gate 21 in the Tokyo Dome in Tokyo).

General Douglas MacArthur referred to O'Doul's role in Japan's 1949 post-war recovery as "the greatest piece of diplomacy ever." The occupation forces weren't thrilled about being in Japan, and the Japanese weren't happy having Americans hang around. Lefty was the manager of the Pacific Coast League San Francisco Seals in 1949. He brought his minor leaguers through a morale-boosting barnstorming tour of Japan, where they were greeted by MacArthur.

Lefty's ties with the Japanese went as far back as 1931, when he toured the country with an all-star team that included Lou Gehrig, Lefty Grove and Mickey Cochrane. An autographed picture of that squad hangs near a television set behind the south end of the bar. A year later O'Doul returned to Japan with Chicago White Sox pitcher Ted Lyons and notorious catcher (and part-time spy) Moe Berg to coach players from assorted Tokyo universities.

The jovial Lane has been a bartender at Lefty's since 1980. Lane reminds me of Johnny Carson's old staff writer Pat McCormick. "I've had about 20 people tell me this reminds them of a place in New York called the Blarney Stone," Lane says during his early night shift. "Considering that Lefty played for all three New York teams Yankees, Brooklyn Dodgers, New York Giants, when he opened this, he

probably patterned it after that."

Bovis has done nothing to change the bar. He abides by the motto on the menu: "Doing something right since 1958." Well, Bovis did add breakfast, so Lefty's now opens at 7 a.m. The house specialty, the "Home Run Breakfast" (two pancakes, eggs, bacon).

Bovis, 71, was born near Delphi in Greece. He traveled through Grand Rapids, Minn., and Sioux City, Iowa, holding odd jobs before landing in San Francisco in 1957. Bovis managed the Yankee Doodle Lounge on Powell Street before buying the Gold Dust in 1965. Once Bovis met Lefty, he became a baseball fan.

Lane, 57, adds, "You don't really have an alternative with baseball. A lot of visiting teams stay across the street at the St. Francis Hotel like they did a long time ago. When the Giants played at the Stick Candlestick Park, they stayed out by the airport."

With the new Pacific Bell Park close to downtown, teams stay near Lefty's. Even the Lefty O'Doul Bridge crosses over McCovey's Cove and the China Basin leading into Pac Bell Park. Lane says, "It's great fun for customers when there's seven guys sitting at the bar and five of them have World Series rings."

The Cubs have obviously not been to Lefty O'Doul's.

New York Mets manager (and former Oakland A's manager) Art Howe recently dropped in with his wife. And certain members of the Arizona Diamondbacks have found Lefty's. "Ex-Cub Mark Grace is great," Lane says. "He's entertaining. He's a party all by himself. Seasoned veterans are great fun. Occasionally you get a rookie with an attitude.

"Overall, we get a nice balance. It's 50 percent locals, and others are from around the world, which make it interesting. It's a safe place. I've only kicked six or seven guys out of here in 23 years, which is unheard of."

How has Lane become so attached to Lefty's?

"It's a funny thing," Lane answers. "I was just talking to bartender Mike Rapp over at Capp's Corner huge salads at an affordable price at 1600 Powell St., 415-989-2589 in North Beach and we hit on that very thing. There's a good balance of clientele here. Neither one of us ever met Lefty. But we feel like we knew him."

You will, too.

The night always goes right at Lefty's, the last great sports bar in America.