

JEFF HOROWITZ: They say there's a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning. Usually, it's a figure of speech. But to get from Saturday night to Sunday morning in Saint Anthony, you just walk across the street. The sign on the road into town says 77 people live here. The census says 90. In any case, it's small. The first thing you're likely to spot in town is the spire of Saint Anthony's church. But on a winter Saturday night, the church sits yellow and lifeless at the end of the graveyard. The nighttime action in Saint Anthony is 100 yards away in a building with a somewhat lower profile, Schiffler's bar.

Irv Schiffler has been behind the bar for 45 years. He's not positive, but he thinks he may have the oldest liquor license in the state. He and his father kept the bar running all these years while the rest of main street Saint Anthony disintegrated.

IRV SCHIFFLER: There used to be a blacksmith that's closed. And that's where we used to be a grocery store and a creamery. And everything's closed up, just a bar.

JEFF HOROWITZ: It's safe to say Schiffler's is important to the town. The streetlights stay lit thanks to Irv's liquor license and property taxes.

IRV SCIFFLER: We're here all alone. And there's a lot of towns like us. So I do a lot of driving around and see a lot of towns. And that's all there is, is a bar left. Everything's closed up. The bar seemed to survive.

JEFF HOROWITZ: On big nights like this, the bar is a binding force. It keeps people tied to Saint Anthony, keeping the community alive. Take Al Zeiss.

AL ZEISS: 73 years young.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Al says he was born in a log house just down the road. He made his fortune in construction, travels around the globe, and flies his own plane. He keeps a home in the twin cities, but on the weekends, he says, he's right back here with the best people in the world.

AL ZEISS: I just look here tonight. These local, these are real people here. They're not-- you're not going to BS any of these people and give them a bunch of-- they're real people. They work hard. I mean, look at their clothes, and look at their hands.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Schiffler's bar benefits as an honorary member of many extended families. A bartender says people tend to gather in their clans. Many huddle with their wives, their cousins, their brothers. They continue to come here because their parents, their uncles, and their aunts came here. Randy Clausen lives in town and works for the telephone Co-op. He calls on a local phrase to describe this family phenomenon.

RANDY CLAUSEN: It's Stearns County Syndrome. Now we see it as a joke.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Years ago, the term Stearns County syndrome carried connotations of inbreeding, but now it's truly a joke. Locals use it to poke fun at their own close networks of extended families. A local bar like Schiffler's in Saint Anthony becomes a family gathering place and thrives on family tradition. Irv Schiffler chalks up some of his staying power to his own family legacy.

IRV SCHIFFLER: The Schiffler name has been here forever, and my dad was a really great guy. And a lot of people know him. And I think it's more like we're bringing people in because they know us. And we try and treat people fair because the bar business is pretty rough right now.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Family is important for regulars like Bonnie Berscheid. She lives a few miles away now, but has been coming to Schiffler since her father brought her here as a little girl.

BONNIE BERSCHIED: You know everybody here. See, I'd never go to a bar in Melrose because I don't know anybody or Albany.

SPEAKER 1: You want that right to it. I can see--

BONNIE BERSCHIED: You don't seem to get the cops out here as easy.

JEFF HOROWITZ: And fewer cops on isolated county roads mean fewer DUIs. Other patrons also say small town bars are attractive because they can have a few drinks, and it's unlikely they'll be pulled over on the way home. But Irv Schiffler says part of why business has been down in recent years is that deputies now patrol the countryside more than they used to. So some folks spend less time out drinking and less money at bars like Schiffler's. Still the last couple of months have brought a slight boost.

IRV SCHIFFLER: My dad always told me that when there's a wire, business is going to be very good. We're noticing that right now that our business went up since the World Trade Center got bombed.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Since September 11, people have sought out places to feel at home and they found them not just in bars, but in churches around Minnesota as well. In Saint Anthony, the church is the one other place where community asserts itself. On Sunday morning, it comes alive. The parking lot is overflowing onto the surrounding streets. Upstairs, the pews are packed for mass. People chatter loudly on their way in though mass, of course, is not a great place to socialize. But in the basement, there's a church breakfast going on, a big one, the kind that happens just a few times a year.

SPEAKER 2: It's dark outside.

JEFF HOROWITZ: There are fewer than 100 people in town, but 408 members of the parish. Looking around, it seems as if just about all of them must have passed through the breakfast line this morning.

SPEAKER 3: Yeah, we got baptized here, right. Say, as long as I've been going 62 years, I suppose, I could say. Right, right.

JEFF HOROWITZ: Jim Ramaker and Bob Rademacher sit behind a table at the entrance. Both are dairy farmers on the outskirts of St. Anthony. Bob's a bachelor farmer like you'd expect to find in this town that claims inspiration for Lake Wobegon. Like many folks, he's been coming here as long as he can remember.

BOB RADEMACHER: It's get more busy where people don't have the time to associate with each other, except for events like this here going on today with the breakfast.

JEFF HOROWITZ: There's a familiar face behind the big griddle of hash browns across the room. It's Randy Clawson, one of the guys from the bar, Saturday night

RANDY CLAWSON: Church plays a pretty important role, I guess, in keeping the community, the small community like Saint Anthony together. Some of the bigger communities, they have more events probably going on. But here about the only community events is the church.

JEFF HOROWITZ: They built the first church here 130 years ago, only five years after the first settlers arrived. People returned week after week for different reasons than they go to Schiffler's bar, of course. But like the bar, the church pulls in people from miles around who find a sense of place in Saint Anthony. For Ruth Lynn, working hard in the kitchen, the church is the community.

RUTH LYNN: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Without it, there wouldn't be a Saint Anthony, seriously. And we're really struggling to keep it going, too. There's talk of it folding.

JEFF HOROWITZ: That talk has to do with church consolidation. The Saint Anthony parish may be vibrant and active, but community may be devout. But like much of rural Minnesota, this region suffers from a shortage of priests. Saint Anthony already shares its priest with two neighboring communities. A new plan by the Saint Cloud diocese calls for more consolidation. Saint Anthony is not due to be phased out, but Ruth worries Saint Anthony would be a very different place if there are big changes in the usual church services that bring people together.

RUTH LYNN: I would hate to think. I don't think the town itself would fold, but the fellowship and the neighbors and--

JEFF HOROWITZ: Saint Anthony is special because it's so typical. Even in larger towns, the local bar and the local church are often at the center of things. Over the years, it seemed shopping, eating, and working can evidently be done somewhere else. But so far, the church and the bar remain main street's survivors. After all, they depend on family and familiarity as much as on drinks and donations. And family and familiarity are two things you can't always get in the big city. Jeff Horowitz, Minnesota Public Radio, Saint Anthony.

[JOHN MELLENCAMP, "SMALL TOWN"] Well, I was born in a small town

And I live in a small town

Probably die in a small town

Oh, those small communities

All my friends are so small town

My parents live in the same small town

My job is so small town

Provides little opportunity, hey

Educated in a small town

Taught to feel Jesus in a small town

Used to daydream in that small town

Another boring romantic, that's me

But I've seen it all in a small town
Had myself a ball in a small town
Married an LA doll and brought her to this small town
Now she's small town just like me
No, I cannot forget from where it is that I come from
I cannot forget the people who love me
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town
And people just let me be just what I want to be
Got nothing against a big town
Still hayseed enough to say, look, who's in the big town
But my bed is in small town
Oh, that's good enough for me
I was born in a small town
And I can breathe in a small town
Gonna die in a small town
Oh, and that's probably where they'll bury me, yeah
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah