

Lords of an Underground Empire

The Old Plantation is the hottest bar in town. But only after surviving arson, harassment, and sabotage.

BY DAVID BAUER | PUBLISHED IN D MAGAZINE JUNE 1979



January, 1976: The two men stood in the dim light and surveyed their new domain. The place was looking good. It was late Saturday night and construction was right on schedule. The bars were nearly complete, all the equipment installed; the big dance floor was laid in the disco. Tomorrow they would put down the carpet and begin fine-tuning the place for their grand opening, just five days away. The two men had high hopes for their new nightclub here on Cedar Springs. It was going to be, they felt, the best gay bar in Dallas, the liveliest disco around. There was an established competitor just blocks away, but they were confident. The new Old Plantation would be a hit. They took one last look around, smiled at each other, and left.

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same place. Around them were ashes and blackened rubble. The place had burned to the ground. The fire marshal's inspectors subsequently ruled it arson. It had definitely been a torch job, and a highly professional one at that. The thing had gone up so fast, had been so hot, that the huge steel support beams had melted into a twisted wreck. The two men stared silently. Each knew this was often a brutal business. In the nightclub trade – particularly, it seemed, in the gay bar business – one was forever flirting with extinction. Now, the worst had happened. They had no choice: They turned, kicked through the ashes, and went back to work.

May, 1979: The two men sit close together at the bar, their elbows planted on the counter. They haven't seen each other in a while and they have much to talk about. They make an unlikely pair. The older man is big, a fat man really, with a burly neck, heavy jowls, thin hair combed straight back. His eyes are magnified behind thick-lensed glasses in pinched frames too small for his face. He wears baggy trousers and a rumpled short-sleeved cotton- sport shirt. He mouths contentedly on a large cigar and downs his Canadian Club and soda at a steady pace. His young companion, much younger, is a wisp of a man, almost frail, dark hair falling in a long sweep over his forehead. He wears tight blue jeans and a smart striped knit shirt. He fidgets with a bar straw and sips occasionally at his whiskey sour, orange slice and cherry clinging to the glass rim.

Their conversation is warm but intense; it's as if they're unaware of the chaos around them, the teeming activity at the bar. It's as if they're deaf to the thudding music and blind to the staccato lights, the swirling mass on the dance floor, the general frenzy of this jammed disco.

But, in fact, they see and hear it all better than anyone. They own the place. That noisy swirl is making them a fortune. The Old Plantation, on a new site, has risen from the ashes; the two men, the owners, have pushed it to the forefront of the Dallas disco scene. They are Frank and Charley. It's as odd a business partnership as can be imagined, and enormously successful.

The pale stucco of the building, broken only by a few dull green doors, is undistinguished. By day, one could drive this stretch of Harwood Street a hundred times without paying any attention to it, without ever noticing those letters, OP, next to one of the doors. There's little reason to be looking at anything in this lifeless neighborhood on the northern rim of downtown Dallas. And if it's dead by day it certainly wouldn't be expected to have life by night. But every night after 10 p.m., in one of the city's great geographical incongruities, the Old Plantation bursts alive. It's the most successful discotheque in Dallas. It was among the first to catch the disco wave and has ridden it further than anyone. On a weekend night, more than a thousand people squeeze through its doors. It was built for, and caters to, the gay community, but straights have discovered it in increasing numbers.

Frank and Charley and their OP are riding high; the pair now own a dozen other bars in Dallas, Houston, El Paso, and Tampa, Florida, three of them christened Old Plantation. Two more OP's are planned for Atlanta and Jacksonville. It's a budding empire. But things haven't always been so good for Frank and Charley; the Old Plantation's life has been nearly snuffed more than once – by arson, by sabotage, by police harassment, by legal hassles, by cutthroat competition. Frank and Charley consider themselves

damn lucky to be where they are. Twelve years ago, Frank was selling used cars in El Paso; Charley was selling corny dogs in the Cotton Bowl.

Frank Caven was born in Philadelphia in 1920. For a man destined for the bar business, he had two things going for him: He was Irish and he grew up in Atlantic City. Before he entered the bar business, Caven's life was selling cars. After one insignificant year of business college, he bought a service station in Philadelphia, started repairing used cars and selling them. For the next 28 years, Frank Caven was a car salesman – he sold Hudsons in Philly, Kaisers in Atlantic City, and Fords in New York. On a visit to El Paso in 1955, he noticed the pedestrian soldiers of huge Fort Bliss, figured he could sell them used cars, and set up shop in Texas. Ten years later, a G.I., one of thousands who had bought a Caven car, came to him with a proposition: If Frank (who had state residency) would secure a liquor license, the G.I. would put up the money to start a bar in El Paso. Frank agreed. The G. I. ran out of money and Frank bought him out; he opened the place and named it Gold-finger. It was packed every night. That was fifty bars ago.

In 1969, Caven came to Dallas to see about investing in an automobile agency. Instead, he saw something else. In El Paso, he had become involved both professionally and privately in the gay scene; in Dallas he noticed there were only three gay bars, only one of which served liquor. Feeling sure the market would support a gay dance bar, he said goodbye to the car business and, after two months of searching, discovered a foundering bar, The Gilded Cage, in a large old house on Rawlins Street in the heart of Oak

Lawn. He bought the lease. In January 1970, the Bayou Club opened its doors. Word spread throughout the gay community, but success wasn't instant. Then, two months after the Bayou opened, a letter appeared in the widely read "Action Line" column in the *Times Herald*. The letter writer explained that he had happened to wander into a bar on Rawlins Street where, to his surprise, he had seen "men dancing with men." He wanted to know whether that was legal. "That," says Caven, "was like \$10,000 worth of free publicity." The tide was turned; the Bayou boomed. Says Caven, in one of his pet bar owner's phrases, "From then on, it was wall-to-wall bodies."

He opened one other bar in Dallas at the time, a place called the King of Clubs on Field Street. Caven recalls all of his bars with a kind of fatherly pride. "The King of Clubs was an interesting place. It was a Y-shaped building; one side was for men and the other side for women. The men's side was generally calm, but the women's side used to attract a lot of stewardesses. Occasionally a Tight would break out between the Braniff stewardesses and the American stewardesses." He shakes his head and chuckles. "Those were the worst, meanest bar fights I've ever seen."

The King of Clubs wasn't around for too long. As with most of his early bar ventures, Caven was as apt to sell as he was to buy. It was all a game of timing. After two years of success with The Bayou Club, Caven decided to sell, to a man named Dennis Sisk, who operated the place for about six months; then, with his partner Tony Catherine, Sisk moved to a much larger and more extravagant location on Pearl Street, and the bar became the Bayou Landing. It was Dallas' first gay disco showplace and it took off.

Suddenly overshadowed by his competitors in the gay trade, Caven looked in another direction. He went into partnership with a young rock 'n' roll entrepreneur from Austin named Bill Simonson and backed Simonson's idea to transform the old Rawlins Street building into a "boogie and blues" club, refurbished in the rough cedar look that was catching on, and aimed at the straight crowd. In March 1973, Mother Blues was born. The lines stretched around the block; it was an immediate and immense success.

A restless businessman, Caven eventually sold out his interest in Mother Blues to Simonson and opened a disco on Lemmon Avenue called the Mark Twain. The Mark Twain didn't fare too well; the successful Bayou Landing, a direct descendant of Caven's own Bayou Club, had a stranglehold on the gay disco scene and Caven couldn't break it. He and his staff struggled to make the Mark Twain go. One of the staff was a young barback by the name of Charley Hott. Charley washed glasses by night and by day studied accounting at UTA. The product of a middle-class family in Arlington, Charley had a strong work ethic and a fascination with money. He planned to become a tax lawyer. Frank Caven became acquainted with the young barboy and learned of his bent for accounting. If there was one thing Caven hated about the bar business, it was keeping the books. He invited Charley to come in on Sunday afternoons and pay some bills, work the payroll. For the frugal and ambitious dishwasher, it meant a few extra bucks. Today, he wears a diamond ring and drives a new black Cadillac.

In 1974, with his new assistant Charley Hott looking on from the books, Caven sold the Mark Twain to Bill Simonson who relocated Mother Blues there. Continuing their game of musical bars, Caven

moved back into the old Rawlins Street house. Caven had always admired the old house; it reminded him of southern gentility, of an old mansion down on the bayou. He decided this time to call the place the Old Plantation. Caven aimed the Old Plantation at the older, moneyed gay crowd – 25 and over, businessmen, professionals. There was dancing, but it was more of a mingling bar. Caven, once again, found a crease in the market. The OP, as its regulars fondly dubbed it, began to skim the cream off the top of the Bayou Landing's clientele.

The Bayou Landing, for almost three years a booming success, was beginning to have troubles of its own. The operation had expanded to Houston and the Bayou Landing there was faltering. Caven and Hott saw the Houston market as a ripe one, made a deal to purchase the Bayou Landing from Sisk and Caterine, remodeled the place, and, in November 1975, reopened under the name of the Old Plantation. The OP-Houston caught on immediately and hasn't slowed since.

In Dallas, the owners of the Bayou Landing were experiencing legal difficulties. Dennis Sisk was busted on high level drug distribution charges (he is today still a fugitive under a \$1 million bond) and Tony Caterine was arrested, indicted, and imprisoned on charges of credit card fraud. The Bayou Landing continued to operate, but under a dark cloud.

The Old Plantation on Rawlins, meanwhile, was forced to move when the owners of the building decided to tear it down. Frank and Charley went in search of much larger quarters; the new OP would be serious disco – big floor, big big sound, big lights – catching the wave that was rising out of New York and LA. It

would, they figured, take up the slack left by the sagging Bayou Landing. They found their spot on Cedar Springs. All went well until that Saturday night when someone burned it down. No indictments were ever made.

But Frank Caven's years in the bar business had, more than anything else, taught him resiliency. An incredible ten days after the fire, he and Charley opened a "temporary OP" on Denton Drive. Quarters were cramped, trimmings minimal, the air conditioning inadequate; but, amazingly, it was another "wall-to-wall bodies" triumph. While their clientele danced, Frank and Charley beat the streets for a suitable location for a permanent OP. On Harwood Street, near Ross Avenue, they found a spacious old parking garage. The downtown location was a risky proposition, but Caven and Hott didn't hesitate. The building was perfect. Besides, they knew their clientele. They weren't dealing with the whims of convenience of the Greenville Avenue crowd. The gay community was long accustomed to the underground style of offbeat locations; if the place was good, the gays would find it.

Construction began under round-the-clock security. There would be no repeat of the Cedar Springs burnout. People in the trade say there is no one who can put a bar together faster than Frank Caven and this was a supreme challenge. Standing near-constant vigil, trading sleep shifts with Charley, directing his crew, sawing his own boards, nailing his own nails, Caven whipped the place together from scratch in 45 days. An hour before the gala grand opening, he was still putting light fixtures in the wall. As the festivities began, Frank went home and went to bed.

The Old Plantation on Harwood was a huge success from the beginning. “Whoever burnt me out,” says Caven, “did me a big favor. The original location wouldn’t have been big enough.” Tight security was maintained. Some weeks after the opening, a man fell through a false ceiling in the building. Guards apprehended him; strapped to his leg was a plastic detergent bottle filled with gasoline. On the hot night of July 4th that summer, a sniper perched in a nearby building shot out the air conditioning units on the roof of the OP. A few weeks later, a security guard caught two men drilling holes in the roof; the FBI investigated and found them to be known arsonists. But the OP survived.

There have been other problems. For a time, DPD vice-control head D. L. Burgess led a series of harassment raids on the OP. Burgess sought to crack down on the club, citing a city ordinance which prohibits dancing after 2 a.m. and the OP was his target. The OP filed suit against the City of Dallas over the ordinance and was granted a temporary injunction; technically the Old Plantation is still the only club in Dallas with legal dancing after hours. Gay observers were amused during legal proceedings when Burgess cited “prostitution” as his primary reason for cracking down on the OP. The lawsuit is still pending, but with the departure of Burgess, the harassment has ceased. The OP has maintained generally good relations with the police, who make spot checks regularly; the beat cops will occasionally stop in, chat with the bartenders, and take in the sights. The OP’s own security keeps the place in check; there have been few serious incidents.

Frank Caven and Charley Hott wouldn’t have it any other way. Their operating philosophy is based on order. “This,” they are fond of saying, “is strictly a business.” That business has become a

big one. Between them, the two now own 14 bars. Each bar is a separate corporation, and in each they have a varying percentage investment. (The clubs in Florida, in fact, are wholly owned by Caven; Hott prefers to concentrate in Texas: “Frank is like an octopus,” says Charley. “He can be in a hundred places at once. I’m more like an old mother hen guarding her nest. And my nest is Dallas.”) Of the 14 clubs, half are large discos. Most of the discos, like the OP-Dallas, have begun to attract more and more of a mixed crowd – gays and straights alike. The predominance is still gay, but, particularly on weekends, the mix is moving toward 50-50. One of their discos, the Mark Twain in Tampa, is a straight bar, the only straight bar in their domain, but every bit as successful as the others. On weekends and Monday nights (10c drink night), the Mark Twain is as hot as any disco its size in the country; there isn’t a straight disco in Dallas that compares with it.

The rest of the Caven/Hott clubs are “cruise bars” – much smaller, non-disco, totally gay. The cruise bars, like those lining Fitzhugh Avenue, are somewhat more clandestine; it’s here that the gay community seeks social refuge from the “mix” that is moving in on the discos. (“I was having dinner the other night with two gay attorneys,” says Hott, “and they told me they wouldn’t go to the OP anymore for fear of running into clients, straight clients.”) These closet professionals, along with disco-weary gays and some older gays, make up the cruise bar clientele. The Caven/Hott cruise bars are basically break-even propositions financially. It’s the discos that make the money.

The gross revenues of all the Caven/ Hott clubs combined are estimated to average a half million dollars per month, a very conservative estimate. The discos account for most of that. The

OP-Dallas alone grosses in excess of a million dollars a year. Perhaps 40 percent of the gross revenues derives from the cover charge (\$1 weekdays, \$2 weekends). “A simplistic bottom line in our business,” says Hott, “is to say that the revenues from the cover charge cancel out our overhead. That leaves the bar sales, the beer and liquor sales, as the profit margin.” In the case of the Old Plantation, that’s a hefty margin. A few years ago, the OP-Dallas was the largest single purveyor of Coors beer in Dallas-Fort Worth. When the gay boycott of Coors arose (in response to anti-homosexual remarks made by Mrs. Joseph Coors), the OP switched to Miller Lite. They now sell more Lite than anyone in the area. Liquor sales are equally stunning. The OP is certainly among the top 10 in the area in bar liquor sales, probably in the top 5. One competitor puts them at number one: “I’m sure the OP sells more alcohol than the next two biggest bars combined.”

There’s no doubt that if there were a category for “liquor sales per hour,” the OP would win hands down. Perhaps the only bar in Texas that could compete on that basis is the OP-Houston. The Old Plantation is really only in full swing for four hours a night, from 10 till 2. It’s phenomenal how much alcohol is served in such a short time. It happens because of a Caven operating key that has been critical to his success: traffic flow. With the OP-Houston, Caven adopted a layout design that has since been duplicated in all of his other discos. The set-up is simply the large dance floor ringed on three sides by bars. The idea is to make drinks readily accessible at all times from anywhere in the club. The OP-Dallas, for example, has four separate bars, one always seemingly an arm’s-length away; even on the busiest nights, a customer rarely has to wait more than 30 seconds to get a drink. “There is nothing more deadly in the nightclub business,” says Caven, “than a

bottleneck at the bar.” The layout also serves to promote a circuitous flow of traffic. The Old Plantation, even when packed, is in constant motion. “People go to bars to socialize, to avoid being lonely,” says one of Caven’s managers. “To socialize they have to pass by each other, bump into each other, look into each other’s eyes. The more passing and bumping, the more friendly it is. The more friendly it is, the longer people want to stay. The longer they stay, the more they drink. Frank understands that. That’s why Frank’s places work.”

Caven offers his own basic philosophy of disco success: “Good drinks, good sound, cleanliness, and friendliness – in that order.” The Old Plantation, backing up his words, does pour solid drinks; it also pours them cheap. “We have no choice but to keep our bar prices low,” says Hott. “It’s dictated by our market. It’s estimated that the gay population of Dallas is about 100,000. I say that’s high, but let’s say it’s true. Of that, only, say, 10 percent is an active, bar-seeking, socializing crowd. That means our direct available market is about 10,000 gays. That’s small. That’s what makes the gay bar business so closely competitive and comparative. That’s why our drinks are cheap, Elan can pour a cocktail for \$2.10. If we do that, with our competitors pouring for \$1.50, we’re lost.”

The “good sound” aspect of Caven’s philosophy is a simple one. The disco scene has caused the development of the huge super-sound system and now demands it. No self-respecting disco would be caught without an “earthquake bass.” A good sound system means a minimum investment of \$25,000. It also means a topflight disc jockey – the best now make \$100-\$150 for a short night’s work.

As for “cleanliness,” it’s a Caven fetish. “There is nothing I hate worse than a dirty bar,” he says. “I’m a bug on it. I want fresh paint, I want all light bulbs on, I want plenty of toilet paper. If I don’t see it in my own bars, I raise hell with my managers. And friendliness, friendliness at the door – well, that’s critical.”

Friendliness at the door has been an issue in times past at the Dallas Old Plantation. It stems from a basic issue among gays – whether or not this basic trend toward the mixed crowd, this influx of straights into the gay discos, is a desirable one. Many think not. There have been, in the past, stringent ID checks at the OP door, partly to cut down on the “date” clientele (a woman with a date often doesn’t carry her purse; thus, no ID). But the OP seems to have succumbed to the trend. Caven, for one, does not resist it. “The trend in discos in both New York and LA now is toward the mixed crowd, so why fight it? Besides, who am I to stand at the door and ask people what their sexual preferences are? It’s really none of my damn business.”

The gay community in Dallas is growing fast. Dallas has become one of the most attractive cities in the country for gay professionals, and its center is the World Trade Center and the huge market and fashion trade here. As the community grows, the gay entertainment complex will grow. Frank and Charley will face more and more competition. Even now they have sturdy competitors in two other gay discos: Dimension III, in the former Bayou Landing on Pearl Street, is a big operation; owned by Bob Strange, D-III, as it’s called, attracts a more consistently gay clientele than the OP, and a much larger crowd of gay women. Magnolia’s, on Cedar Springs, is the newest arrival on the scene; owned by David Eaves, Magnolia’s is much smaller than the other

two, but its impressive sound and light system have attracted a loyal crowd, somewhat mixed.

Caven and Hott, meanwhile, are not standing idle. They'll soon be opening another disco on Cedar Springs, near Magnolia's. The Village Station, as it's tentatively named, will be smaller than the OP, but more sophisticated in decor, lights, and sound. Their hope is that the OP will continue to absorb the mixed crowd and that the new place can cater more exclusively to gays. The Floridian arm of the empire is also growing. Caven has just opened an extraordinary new disco in Tampa called El Goya. Set in an old Spanish building in the old Ybor City section of Tampa, replete with Spanish tile mosaics, huge arched doorways, and wrought-iron gates, the club has five separate bars in separate rooms. Because the building is a U. S. historical landmark, all improvements on the building, in essence all costs of construction, are financed by the federal government at a mere three percent interest. Caven can't resist a chuckle at the notion of Uncle Sam's building a gay bar.

After Tampa, the empire will move on to Jacksonville; at the same time, negotiations continue on property in Atlanta; lately there's been talk of Miami; San Antonio and Austin are prime locations. Frank Caven and Charley Hott seem to know no bounds. Certainly the gay world will continue to grow and continue to provide wanting market places. But can the disco fad hold up? It has been the sudden flash of disco, not the gradual emergence of gays, that has made wealthy men of Frank and Charley. Can it last much longer? "Oh yeah," says Caven confidently. "I see at least three or four more years of peak activity. By then some new trends will be developing."

Such as? “Well, I think the next move may be to rock discotheques. By that I mean rock records on the sound system instead of disco music. A lot of people prefer to dance to rock ’n’ roll; and a lot of club owners will find it’s easier to hire a disc jockey playing the original records than to hire live bands to make a mess of them.” Hott expands the notion: “Even more likely, at least in the South, will be C&W discos. With the country and western traditions rooted in dancing and big ballrooms, it’s a natural. It will just require someone who knows the genre to adapt the process. Disco is here for a while. You can bet on it.”

Frank Caven, 58, and Charley Hott, 26, sit in one of their Tampa bars posing for photographs. “The odd couple,” whispers an amused observer. They are indeed. They seem to have nothing in common except a mutual compatibility and a nose for the bar business. That, and a love for it; they both get a genuine kick out of what they’re doing. Charley loves to make the rounds in his bars, chatting with bartenders, conjuring up new promotions and bar designs, checking out the books; he loves to travel to other cities and scout the competition, seek new bar sites. He has his own consulting company, plays the stock market avidly, and deals in real estate, “But those are my passive investments; my active investment will always be the bar business.” Frank immerses himself in his latest construction project; he can hardly finish his coffee after dinner, he’s so keyed up to get back to the construction site where he will work until after midnight. A sportsman of sorts (he used to play ice hockey and drive stock cars), he likes to fish, likes to golf, likes to dabble in the stock

market; but mostly he likes to play the bar business. They both get a kick out of it.

A newcomer arrives on the photography set.

“What’s this all about?” he asks, spying Frank and Charley under the lights.

“Frank and Charley are gonna be in a magazine,” replies one of Caven’s construction cohorts.

“What magazine?”

“Ladies Home Journal.”

Everyone gets a kick out of that.



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