

New Siberia

INSIDE THE STORM doors of a business with no shingle, underneath the distressed-denimed seat of a knowledgeable New Yorker, and within an incognito wooden crate dolloped with cushions to pass quietly for furniture lies a dislodged toilet bowl, a symbol of distress, controversy, and, to its master, ultimate victory. Hauled halfway around the globe, this clandestine toilet bowl has logged more flight hours than most of the world's six billion people. The bowl, invested with figural significance, will likely never again know the thankless toil of its peers, for now it is peerless. "If Siberia became a religion," the toilet bowl's master, Tracy Westmoreland, chanced to remark, "that would be the icon."

Now, understand that Westmoreland, 44, is playfully understating his case. The bar he's helmed for the past four and a half years, Siberia, is already a religion. Snugly nestled in the tattooed bosom of the 50th St. 1/9 station, Siberia cultivated the devotion of hipster New York (Luscious Jackson, if they still count), famous New York (Conan O'Brien, the Coen Brothers), literary New York (*Kitchen Confidential* author Tony Bourdain, Jane Pratt), well connected New York (Hillary). The worshipful followed a code of honor: No sailor language (though sailors are welcome) and no hitting on women. Patrons sipped drinks from plastic cups, since the rumble of the subway's upset stomach could shatter glass. When it seemed that Siberia would shut its metal gate forever, nearly a month ago, its patrons rent its tiles from the floor and stripped its walls to their elements, seizing totemic pieces of what would no longer be the longed-for bar.

And like that old-time religion, Siberia crushed to earth rises again, unheralded, under the watchful aegis of Port Authority. No sign announces Siberia's new location—it's 356 1/2 W. 40th St., right off 9th Ave.—but believers in redemption and chrysalis will recognize the bar's noble crest, a Social Realist man bringing the wrath of a heavy stone hammer down upon the ground before him.

To hear Westmoreland tell the story of his bar's phoenix flight, we need to pay attention to the hammer-wielder and the toilet bowl. The space in the train station used to belong to the Riese Organization, who leased it to Westmoreland for Siberia's operation. When Riese's master lease agreement with the Rockefeller Group, a Mitsubishi-owned development corporation, ended, the Group sought to redevelop the property. So began months and months of eviction notices, court-ordered extensions and high-profile battles between Westmoreland and the Rockefeller Group. Along the way, the building superintendent removed one of Siberia's three toilet bowls—it was on the fritz—and the Group was less than amused at Westmoreland's pleas for reinstatement. The displaced bowl galvanized the bar's patrons, which included members of the city's press. Westmoreland reports that Siberia public events began showing up on the *Associated Press Daybook*, which helps assignment editors find noteworthy events on little notice.

Despite favorable media coverage and

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final occupancy extension expired June 4. By the time that date rolled around, however, Westmoreland and the toilet bowl were in Tokyo, chained together outside Mitsubishi's corporate headquarters. "We figured we'd get their attention," he recalls. "I thought, there's no way they're going to arrest me. But they were smart, and didn't." Westmoreland brought his buddy Tom Shannehan and another friend, a filmmaker who committed the entire exchange to celluloid. (A documentary is forthcoming.) Security didn't know what to make of a six-foot, 260-lb. *gaijin* attached to a toilet.

"Sometimes I dragged it around, sometimes I sat on it—like *The Thinker*," Westmoreland says. "Security's trying to get rid of me. I'm complying, going around in circles like in a comedy... I said, I'm not here to have a fight, I'm here to tell you the Rockefeller Group is doing bad things."

Out to speak with Westmoreland came "an older guy, maybe 55, 60" years old, whom the barkeep identified only as "the number-two guy at Mitsubishi Estates, globally." The company representative was a kindly man who spoke English well. "He comes out and asks, 'With whom am I speaking?' I pulled out a Siberia card"—bearing that planet-smashing icon—"and there was no way he read it that fast, but he saw the logo and said, 'Ahhhhhhh, Mr. Westmoreland, we are very aware of you.'"

Rockefeller Group spokesman Vince Silvestri confirmed that Westmoreland indeed journeyed to Mitsubishi headquarters, but could not identify "the number two guy at Mitsubishi Estates, globally." Silvestri says that the Group is "examining our options" for the now-vacated Siberia space. Asked if he would ever drop down to the new 40th St. Siberia for a drink, Silvestri diplomatically stated that "the matter is closed." Meanwhile, Westmoreland says one of the Group's attorneys used to be a Siberia regular.

As for the new space: past the heavy, intimidating doors lies a whole new Siberia, with two floors, a huge, comfortable, full-nostril-breath space. On a recent Monday people drank up, chatted with polite vocabularies and didn't bother each other. Bartender Ungie parked his enviable white Vespa next to the bathroom and the photo booth, adjacent to the couches and touching against a crate with a cushion on top of it. Downstairs is a space to summon the envy of every rock club ever to have existed, with a makeshift stage and bare, ancient red brick walls. Westmoreland says attendees can expect the occasional bout of "performance art" down here, a threadbare space his friend Bourdain perfectly christened "the Gulag."

"Everything's working out fine," Westmoreland says of the relocated Siberia. "If you go home and see your mother, sister and brothers, and they move to a new house, are you going to feel any different toward them? It's about the people, not the space. When [the faithful] come to the new Siberia, they're home."

"The problem is letting people know" the place still exists, he admits. Although thirsty people venturing into the 50th St. 1/9

he looks like Quentin Crisp." Westmoreland's judgment is unequivocal, the finality of justice. "Meathead." Same goes for dudes who bother women in search of a relaxing, boozy evening: "Usually guys who go to talk to women are guys who never get over."

Although nothing is final, Gulag inmates might not be counting trees with Solzhenitsyn for much longer. Westmoreland says he's been having discussions with Rockefeller Center and the MTA to see about moving Siberia to that storied plot of midtown real estate.

SPENCER ACKERMAN

SIBERIA VS. ROCKEFELLER

CORPORATE GREEDHEADS WANT TO EVICT TIMES SQUARE'S LAST REAL BAR

By Jordan Heller Photograph by Brendan Tobin

"I NEVER THOUGHT TIMES SQUARE COULD BE SO SAFE," EXCLAIMS A GLEEFUL tourist from Iowa, almost prancing down Broadway in a Planet Hollywood t-shirt. He turns to his wife and graciously intones the name Giuliani, as if to say, "Thanks for getting rid of all the riff-raff." Translation: "Thanks for getting rid of all the New Yorkers."

The "riff-raff," however, are not gone. They've only moved out of sight—underground, literally, to the confines of Siberia Bar (named for the dwelling's past as a KG3 drop-off point for spies) nestled in the downtown 1/9 subway station at 50th and Broadway. For fear that the weeds will grow back, the powers-that-be have returned to remove the roots. The Rockefeller Group Development Corporation (RGDC) is attempting to push out what many believe to be the best dive bar in all of Manhattan. Politically, Siberia is the last holdout against the Disneyfication of midtown; and historically, it's the last remnant of the old Times Square.

"This is like the opposite of the Houlihanization of Manhattan," claims Larry McShane, a writer for the Associated Press and a Siberia regular. "All there is is Houlihan's and TGIF, and this is a real bar with real people and a real owner, who'll buy you a real drink anytime you come in here." McShane is careful not to speak in the past tense, not yet ready to eulogize his beloved hangout, which for almost a year now, has been battling with the RGDC—owned by Mitsubishi, a multi-national corporation.

"'We don't like your people.' Basically, we don't like your style—get out."

The brawny 44-year-old sole owner of Siberia Bar, Tracy Westmoreland, is the kind of guy you would want on your side in a fight, but he's more likely to break one up than to start one. "This guy walks up to me," Westmoreland explains over a beer, "he looks like reject casting from the 'Mike Hammer' series, you know, he's got the fedora, and he says to me, 'Are you Tracy Westmoreland?' I said, 'No, my name's George, Tracy just split.' 'Well, George, you've been served,' he says, and throws these papers at me." The papers: an eviction notice stating that Westmoreland has no right to be there, that he has to leave, even though he has seven and a half more years left on his lease, and a business that's thriving.

The doors were supposed to close on Siberia October 31st of last year, the bar's four-year anniversary. "But we're still here," exclaims a defiant Westmoreland on the night of Friday, February 23, 2001, the passing of a deadline for a second eviction notice, which, at the moment, is tied up in court.

"The original [intent] was that they wanted to clear the building," explains Westmoreland, who was told that there were plans to tear it down. But after finding out that this was merely a ruse to trick him into leaving, Westmoreland decided to fight. When asked what the RGDC had to gain, Westmoreland responds, "They get rid of someone who's been paying rent here for years, who's willing to renegotiate the rent. They throw out a bar that according to Zagat two years in a row is the best dive bar in New York. They don't get anything, they get to throw us out—that's the prize."

After taking his story to the press, Westmoreland got cast as David, and the RGDC as the evil Goliath. "The press butchered them and they're mad at me," says Westmoreland, exacerbated. "Fifteen news organizations were calling up [Mitsubishi]. The only reason they kept badgering them is because they wouldn't give an answer: 'Do you own this?' 'Oh we have a relationship.' 'What is your relationship?' So basically, this guy Gerry Blume (RGDC's lead

attorney) got his pride hurt, and he wants me out. It's not about sense; it's about pride. Nobody wants this shithole."

As a shithole, one wonders how Westmoreland was able to attract the kind of crowd that normally doesn't venture above 14th Street, the kind of crowd that makes our tourist from Iowa uncomfortable. "When I was building this place," explains the charismatic owner, "I had two movies in mind—*Little Shop of Horrors* and *Field of Dreams*. You know, 'Build it and they will come.' And come they did...in droves. 'I used to hang out in the East Village,'" states Jen, a mod-clad Siberia regular bouncing up and down to the Sex Pistols emanating from the jukebox. "And the East Village is shit now. So coming here it's like 'Oh, my god!' It feels like home. It's such an amazing place."

"The first people we had in here were journalists," Westmoreland explains of Siberia's beginnings. "This one writer for *The Post* told me he heard there was a place where journalists could drink for free. He didn't believe it, so he came down and has been drinkin' here ever since." To date, there have been well over 150 articles written about Siberia, no doubt adding to the popularity of the bar and subsequently helping the fight against the RGDC, but Westmoreland swears he's not courting the press. "I had no ulterior motive." And free drinks are not only reserved for the press, it's just one of many examples of Westmoreland's

generosity and simple ambition to have "a hell of a time. Now [the RGDC is] breakin' our back, now they're out for blood."

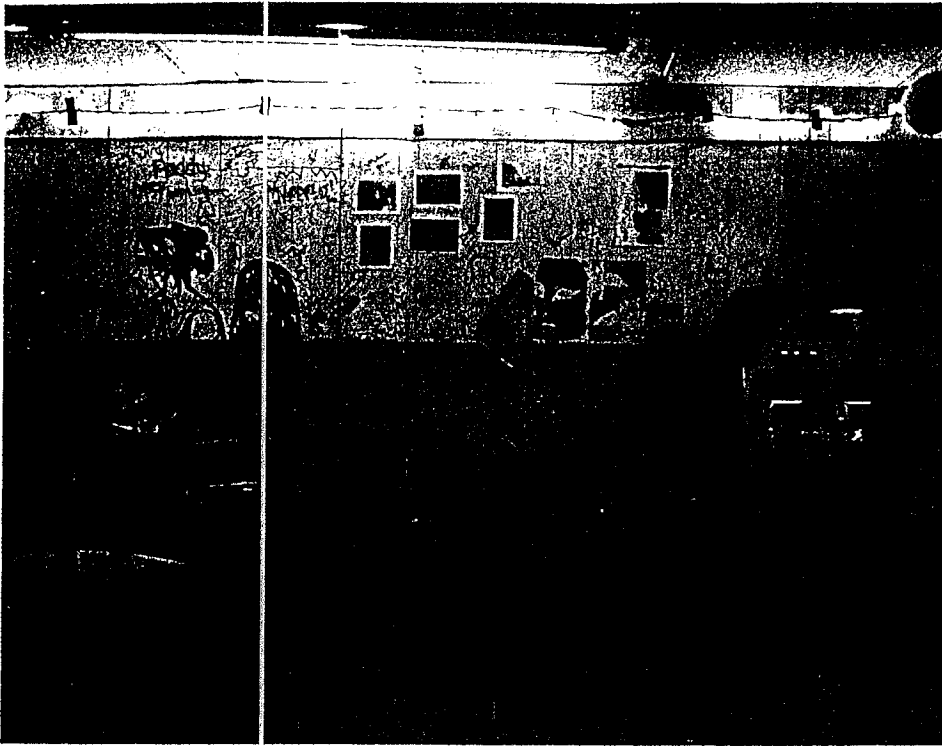
The RGDC has begun to fight dirty by turning off the heat and hot water. A toilet in the back room sits useless with a snake dangling flaccidly on a dampened floor. When maintenance came, they basically left the bathroom trashed. When Westmoreland asked them, "'What about the hot water?' they said, 'We're still workin' on the toilet.'"

When the frustrated bar owner tried to negotiate a new home for Siberia at Rockefeller Center (managed by Rockefeller Properties, a separate entity), he was told that "These people called those people and told them not to rent to me." When asked if there may be some sort of prejudice behind the actions taken by the RGDC, Westmoreland is hesitant to respond, "I don't want to give them an excuse...It's basically one guy's pride that got hurt." However, when pressed on the matter, Westmoreland expounds, "[Gerry Blume] said to me, 'we don't like your people.' Basically, we don't like your style—get out."

In the meantime, the fate of Siberia Bar hangs in the balance, and for that matter, the fate of Times Square and Manhattan as well. As rising rents and "quality of life" initiatives continue to edge the people who make New York New York to the city's periphery, the Big Apple is in danger of becoming about as stimulating as, say, New Jersey. ♦

To learn more about Siberia Bar's ongoing battle with the Rockefeller Group Development Corporation, go to Siberia Bar (212-333-4141) Wednesday nights to view *Salvation for Siberia*, a documentary on this pressing matter, at 8 and 10 p.m. Admission is free. *Salvation for Siberia* is also showing Wednesday April 5th, 10 p.m. at Clearview Cinema 239 W. 59th St. Call 212-777-7100 for tickets.

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Bunches of actors and actresses have found their way down there—though Westmoreland, who has himself starred in such Hollywood fare as *Eye of the Eagle 2*, declines to name names.

Pretty high profile for a dive bar, but, then again, Westmoreland says that when he picked up the lease on Siberia he didn't have much money, only an idea. "I don't like being fancy. So we just painted the walls black and red and white—Soviet colors—and just let people come in. It became what it is, a disreputable and run-down joint. It wasn't planned at all." He grins. "The first day I opened, it was packed. The next day, from 8:30 in the morning to 10:30 at night, not a soul. So I went out on the street, introduced myself to people, said, 'Hi, my name is Tracy. I got a bar on the subway. Come on down. I'll buy the first drink. After that, you're on your own.' Next night? *Boom.*"

The name Siberia derives from unconfirmed reports that the location once served as a KGB dead-drop for Soviet spies and their handlers. As Westmoreland tells it, he was tipped off to the site by a mysterious, and now conveniently deceased, ex-operative named Yuri. Many reporters, including some from the Soviet news agency Tass, found their way down to Siberia in search of the story and stayed, comfortable in the dark little bar with the dim red lighting, eight stools, and Westmoreland's own dirty couch shoved against the wall.

Lately, however, dive bars have been in danger of

Once home to a shoeshine parlor and a hip-hop Kung fu video emporium, Siberia has been in business just four and a half years, but already it has achieved legendary status.



Above: Inside Siberia is perhaps the best jukebox in NYC, full of the Velvet Underground and the Cramps. Below: The bar's stealth entrance is in the bowels of the 1/9 subway tunnel.

either taking on an entirely unhealthy gloss or, in Siberia's case, being permanently shuttered. The classic shot-and-short-beer joint is all but gone, given way to its very antithesis—the clean, cool SoHo-chic lounge. Such sterile dens of sin have wormed their way uptown and down, even to the once decidedly down-and-out Bowery. According to Tracy, this is the reason Siberia's landlord—the Mitsubishi/Rockefeller Group—is working assiduously to rid the subway promenade of his dive bar's presence.

"They want us out," Westmoreland growls. "Two months ago, two weeks ago, two hours ago, two minutes ago. It ain't happening."


Even so, the city marshals arrived on schedule during the second week in January. There to meet them was Father Brian Jordan, a Roman Catholic priest who sprinkled holy water all over the place and then chained himself to the bar along with Tracy, his wife, and their three kids, two boys and a girl, age seven, five, and two. Tracy tried to dissuade the two-year-old from carrying out his end of the deal, but the little boy would have none of it, linking the chains around his ankles himself.

"They're saying they want to knock the building down. But it's a lie," Tracy says. "I plan to wear them down. And, if not, I'm opening Siberia South on the island of St Martin. I can see it all now. Black, dark, great music, a dive bar to beat the bell." ■

Slink down to the Siberia bar while you still can, 250 West 50th Street, NYC, 212.333.4141.

With God on its side, everyone's favorite subway saloon fights to stay alive. But how much longer can the classic dive bar last?

TEXT Joel Rose PHOTOGRAPHY Juliana Sohn



Some 120 years ago, there were watering holes situated below street level known as diving bells. The proprietors of such establishments eschewed the tradition of glasses in favor of rubber tubes running directly from barrels stacked behind the bar, and for three cents they squirted as much demon rum straight down one's gullet as one could swallow in a single breath. Eventually *diving bell* was shortened to *dive*, and *dive* became part of the argot, part of our lexicon, and, in some towns today, part of an endangered-species list.

Perhaps the worst dive in New York City history was Armory Hall, run during the 1880s by ex-gang leader Billy McGlory. Customers entered through dingy double doors leading into a narrow, 50-foot-long, subterranean passageway painted dead black. At the end stood the bar and dance hall, where, to the sodden tones of a piano, a violin, and a cornet, a tribe of transvestite entertainers kicked up their heels and frolicked the cancan. As one writer described it, "There is a beastliness and depravity under [McGlory's] roof compared with which no chapter in the world's history is equal."

Now, if the same can be said today about the joint run by Tracy Westmoreland, that depends on whom you talk to. Westmoreland is the owner and operator of Siberia, recently crowned New York's "Best Dive Bar" by Zagats, and, like McGlory's before it, located entirely underground. At the corner of Broadway and 50th Street, down past the urine stink and the depressing grime of the 1/9 subway entrance, situated just yards from the train platform, Siberia is the only bar inside the New York City metro system. Once home to a shoeshine parlor and a hip-hop kung fu video emporium, Siberia has been in business just four and a half years, but already it has achieved legendary status.

"Everybody says it's become an institution," says Westmoreland, who stands six-foot-two and weighs 280. "To me, an institution is where crazy people go. I built it out of nothing. Now it's the most popular bar in New York City."

Despite what Westmoreland purports, Siberia does attract some crazy people with what has been described as its "unparalleled ugliness." But mostly it draws reams of journalists and assorted writers, music people, comic-book illustrators, and MTV drones.

requiem for a dive bar