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Tony Cesare: Moose Love

Drafts and stories at the hippest bar in town.

By [Tony Cesare](#) [Email the author](#) | November 7, 2011

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Have you ever stepped off the Metra train at the Downers Grove [Main Street station](#) or been strolling along downtown after date night dinner and had your curiosity piqued as you glanced up at the imposing brick building just North of the tracks with the letters LOYAL ORDER OF MOOSE pin-mounted to the façade in bold all caps? I have.

True story.

Stepping off the train one August evening with a neighbor back in 2004 we found ourselves with no wives to report home to (Bunco night) and so I suggested [Ballydoyle](#) and a pint of Guinness. My neighbor had another idea.

"Let's go to the Moose Lodge," he said.

"The Moose lodge?," I replied, eyebrows raised. "Are you serious? The big scary building kiddie corner from that other big scary building that has the church and the yoga place? Dude, you can't just walk in there, it's members only. You need to know the secret handshake or wear a velvet hat with antlers or something. You can't just stroll in there!"

We went in.

I had always been curious about what went on beyond the frosted glass. From the outside it always struck me as a time capsule to a long gone Americana, a retro temple dedicated to war stories and Aqua Velva. I had visions of Barney and Fred sitting at a wooden table under a dim fluorescent bulb, splitting a pitcher of Hamm's Beer and bitching about Mr Slate (*Break up that stone? Let him get off his ass and break up his own G%\$#@! stone! Too afraid to get his hands dirty!*). Truth was, I was just as curious as my neighbor.

The space was everything I had imagined. A well-worn pool table sagged just to the right of the front door and all I could think was "if only it could talk the stories it could tell." There were dark hallways leading off the main room from which you could make out the gray silhouettes of folding chairs, tables and crock pots.

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The main room was cavernous, built as solid as a bomb shelter encased in lead. The lights cast dim shadows around a small bar surrounded by the elder statesmen of the community, slumped over cold drafts and ashtrays. Every expression suggested a willingness to engage in an argument over politics or lawn care at a moments notice.

Blue-collar chic, a workingman's Nirvana. It was perfect.

We sat at the bar and ordered drinks. A grizzled old veteran of many a Tuesday night glanced up from his beer.

"Are you guys members?"

Ugh, saw this one coming.

"No!" My neighbor cheerfully explained. "Why?"

The older gentleman shifted upright in his stool. "You can't drink here unless you're a MEMBER! You can't just \$#@! walk IN HERE."

I set my beer down and shifted my weight toward the door. No way I was mixing it up with Ralph Kramden at the Moose lodge five blocks from home. How the hell would I explain that to the wife? My neighbor was unfazed.

"Well, how do you become a member?" he asked.

Ralph clenched his fists and pulled himself up from his stool.

"You gotta be sponsored by a MEMBER!" he growled.

"Are you a member?" my neighbor asked.

"G-Dam right I am, 19 years!"

"Great! Will you sponsor me?"

Ralph slowly sat back down on his barstool. "Yeah, sure!" he said.

He bought a round and introduced us around. He turned out to be an amazing guy with an amazing catalog of stories about growing up in Downers Grove during the 1950s (suffice to say the presence of a wine bar in town makes many a member shake his head). I was hustled at 9-ball, five bucks a rack by a man who was old enough to be my grandfather's pediatrician and by closing I had lost the equivalent of a car payment. Another member bought me a shot of Wild Turkey, mocked my messenger bag (*hey, is that your purse?!?*) and pulled up his flannel to show off the scar from a recent surgery. Everyone at the bar cheered.

Try re-creating THAT evening at [Another Round](#).

In the years since that introduction, I've had the pleasure of attending many a fish-fry and fundraiser within those brick walls, and I've met an incredible cross-section of our community. How is that possible, you may ask? Well, you see, something very strange has happened at the Moose Lodge in Downers Grove, something wonderful and unexpected.

It became the hippest place in town to drink a two-buck draft.

During the last 10 years, membership has almost tripled to more than 1,000, among them such notable names as former Mayor Ron Sandack and many other Village Board and commission members. I'm always amused when the discussion turns political (and it ALWAYS does ...) on the pixels of Patchdom. Truth is, if you *really* wanted to know what's happening in local politics or community happenings, then you need to find a sponsor and pull up to the bar at the Moose, or join what is arguably the hottest bags league in town. You'll hear it all. Some of it might even be true.

Quite by accident (certainly not by design) the Moose Lodge has retained its retro charm (and a few wisps of mustiness) without alienating a younger crowd, the exact kind of members that sustain a lodge like this one. You couldn't invent a place with the hipster-cred of the Moose Lodge; it's the real thing. Just like Marie's Riptide Lounge in Bucktown, it has a charm that can't be manufactured, imitated or copied.

Blast Mos Def from the jukebox and the ghosts of generations of former members will emerge from the shadows and change the tune. Have you ever seen a ghost with Brylcreem? It's not pretty.

Jokes aside, it's important to note that this isn't just some dive bar, some convenient place to stumble home from on a Tuesday night. Moose International is a service organization "dedicated to caring for young and old, bringing communities closer together and celebrating life." Mooseheart (located on the north side of Aurora), is "a home for children and teens in need, from infancy through high school. Dedicated in 1913 by the Moose fraternal organization, Mooseheart cares for youth whose families are unable, for a wide variety of reasons, to care for them."

Rest assured the money you spend within these walls ultimately goes to a greater good, which is a great excuse to have *just one more* before you leave. At a time when memberships in service organizations like this one have been steadily declining, Moose Downers Grove is thriving, and that's a credit to the community it represents and that has supported it.

Strangely enough, as much love as I have for the Moose Lodge, somehow I have never officially joined. It's not that I haven't wanted to, I've always just accompanied friends as a guest or attended events through our School District. So I thought I'd take this opportunity to ask: Any members out there willing to step to the plate on my behalf? Promise I won't play any hip-hop.

For more information on the local Moose, check them out online at www.dgmoose.org

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COMMENTS (20)

[Jay Stocki](#)

7:26am on Monday, November 7, 2011

Tony - I'll sponsor you. Great article on the Moose.

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[Tony Cesare](#)

1:04pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

Ha! My plan worked perfectly! That would be great Jay, thanks! You can email the details!

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[Lynn Hudoba](#)

8:45am on Monday, November 7, 2011

I've always wondered what goes on in there! Looks like you've got yourself a sponsor. Now you'll have to pay it forward...

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[goddess](#)

11:37am on Monday, November 7, 2011

Are women allowed as members?

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[Jay Stocki](#)

12:19pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

Yes - there is a Women of the Moose organization and women are always welcome as a guest of a member

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[pam](#)

12:27pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

Yes women are allowed.....let me know if you need a sponser..... :)

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[Cinda K. Lester](#)

12:36pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

You can add us to the list too, Jay. Although I'm not entirely sure I enjoy the thought of him bellied up to the bar drinking 2 dollar beers and playing bags all night instead of working on homework, reading time and bedtime routines for the kids..... :) We had an application from you ages ago, I think, and never did anything with it. We should catch up sometime, stranger!

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[BBS11](#)

7:31pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

Good writeup, Tony. I have had basically the same experiences you have had while playing open mic nights this summer as a guest ...and maybe those weren't ghosts wearing the Bryllcreem... Moose Lodge is the only place I've had a beer or plucked a tune with a pedal steel guitarist coming there as a regular. Can't beat that!

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[David F. Greig](#) Get the latest news, events, and deals, delivered straight to you.
9:36pm on Monday, November 7, 2011

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Lets not forget about allthe new upgrades, paint, new flooring, new kitchen and sound system and weekly menue offerings for members. It's a great place to meet up with friends for a few less expensive cold ones, toss some bags during the winter bags tourny, or just stop in for some social down time after work and getting off the train. They have a great support system/membership who have carried this place through good times and bad. Plus , Hind site plays there all the time. Great place! Thanks tony for the article.

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[Michael Pelling](#)

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[8:52am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Hindsight will be playing at the Moose Lodge on Wednesday, November 23, the day before Thanksgiving.

[Michael Pelling](#)

Flag as inappropriate

[3:42pm on Wednesday, November 9, 2011](#)

The Moose Lodge will be collecting non-perishable items for the local food pantry. If you come to see Hindsight please bring an item to donate to those less fortunate.



[Elaine Johnson](#)

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[7:20am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

You've definitely captured the vibe of the place, which I recall as the site of several Pinewood Derby races when my son was in Boy Scouts. And since we're on the subject, here's a feature about the bag leagues Patch ran last winter. <http://downersgrove.patch.com/articles/good-times-for-a-good-cause>

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[Michael Pelling](#)

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[8:18am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Tony, If Jay never gets around to sponsoring you, as Administrator of the Moose Lodge I would be glad to do that.

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[Tony Cesare](#)

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[11:26am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Awesome! Look like you'll have a new ringer on bags night! Thanks so much! You can contact me via my email.



[Kurt Wehrmeister](#)

Flag as inappropriate

[11:08am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Tony, our national Moose Magazine did a cover story on the revival at Downers Grove Lodge No. 1535 about two and a half years ago:<http://www.moosintl.org/Public/moosemagazine/MayJunJuly09/May-Jun-Jul-2009.pdf>.

Thanks very much for this piece -- Kurt Wehrmeister, Director/Communications & Public Affairs, Moose International

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[Kurt Wehrmeister](#)

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[11:09am on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Let me try that again: www.moosintl.org/Public/moosemagazine/MayJunJuly09/May-Jun-Jul-2009.pdf

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[Jim Pokin](#)

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[1:41pm on Tuesday, November 8, 2011](#)

Sounds like a great place to watch the Super Bowl.

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[Rudy Boehm](#)

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12:50pm on Wednesday, November 9, 2011

For those members with an interest in hunting, fishing, or the shooting sports, there is also a Rod and Gun Club within the lodge, which has a lot of great guys in it. We do a lot of fun activities throughout the year too.

Rudy Boehm

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[Mike Kouri](#)

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1:47pm on Wednesday, November 9, 2011

Being one of the bartenders at the Moose I can personally say the Moose is full of great people and there's always something going on. FYI, we do have a great Super Bowl party!!!!!!!

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[james st clair](#)

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8:45am on Monday, November 14, 2011

What a great article if any of you out in new Mexico stop Belen Moose Family Center. Would love visit . James St Clair Governor

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