

I'll take boro history for \$1,000, Alex

by Mark Lord, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, December 15, 2016 10:30 am

Three local historians put their reputations on the line as contestants in an evening of fun and games on Tuesday in the first ever “Queens Jeopardy!” competition.

Neir’s Tavern in Woodhaven, which opened its doors in 1829 and is considered the oldest continuously operating bar in New York City, proved the ideal setting, its walls lined with photographs and documents that would be any history buff’s delight.

Based on the long-running television quiz show, the format was familiar to everyone who crowded into the cozy dining area at the rear of the neighborhood staple: players were given answers to topics arranged by category and expected to supply appropriate questions.

Prior to taking their places, Jason Antos, author of multiple books about the borough, including looks at Flushing,

Jackson Heights and Shea Stadium; Carl Ballenas, president of the Friends of Maple Grove Cemetery, an organization dedicated to promoting its rich history; and Kevin Walsh, webmaster behind the website “Forgotten New York,” reflected on their chances of winning the competition.

“I think it’s going to be fun and we’ll see what happens. I have a lot of respect for the other two gentlemen,” Antos said.

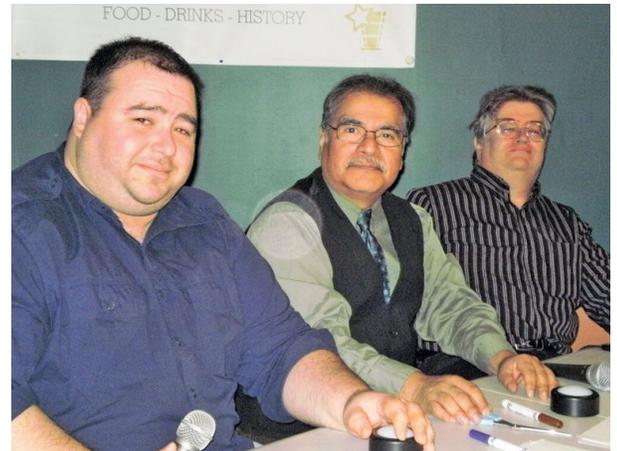
Ballenas planned “to have a good time,” but added, “Don’t bet on me!”

Seemingly most confident was Walsh, who had once tried out for the actual “Jeopardy!” show, though he never made it on the air. He said he was feeling relaxed and was hopeful of a victory Tuesday night.

The game got underway, with Edward Wendell, executive director of the Woodhaven Cultural and Historical Society, filling Alex Trebek’s shoes as host, the players’ not-always-cooperative buzzers close at hand. The electronic board revealed categories including “Big Streets” (which they had to place), “Queens Voices” (centered around famous local musical artists) and “Name That Face” (which had to be identified).

Antos drew first blood with his response to the answer, “Main Street,” correctly questioning, “What is Flushing?” Most of the other points (which replaced the monetary figures on the TV version), rest assured, were harder to come by.

Among the faces up for identification were actress Fran Drescher of “The Nanny” fame, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and Gwen Ifill, the journalist who passed away last month, all of whom were born in the borough.



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Historians Jason Antos, left, Carl Ballenas and Kevin Walsh duked it out at “Queens Jeopardy!” at Neir’s Tavern in Woodhaven.

The players' knowledge was also tested on such far-reaching topics as the Queens Borough president who ended his life in 1986, Donald Manes, and the singer who left his heart out west but was born and raised in Astoria, Tony Bennett.

After the first round, Walsh held a commanding lead, with 2,000 points, followed by Ballenas, with 1,000. Antos was in the hole, at -900. But things have a way of turning around pretty quickly in the second round, or Double Jeopardy, as they would on this occasion.

Going into the Final Jeopardy question, in which the contestants were allowed to wager up to their entire number of points, Antos held a slight lead with 5,300 points over Walsh, who had 5,000. Ballenas was within striking distance at 3,200.

The category was the 1964 World's Fair. The answer: In 1965, this Broadway producer declined a request to take over the World's Fair, stating, "I'd rather be hit by a baseball bat."

None of the three could come up with the correct question, "Who was Billy Rose?"

Antos, who bet most conservatively, ended up the winner, taking home a bag of Christmas candy as well as a handmade scarf for his efforts. All three contestants also received baseball-style caps, presented by Natalie Milbrodt, president of the Queens Memory Project, a collaboration between Queens College and the Queens Library dedicated to the oral preservation of the histories of the borough's residents.

Loycent Gordon, owner of Neir's for the past seven years, was happy to have the three historians on hand for the event, saying each had previously appeared at the establishment for various presentations.

"It was only right to get them together for a friendly competition," Gordon said.

Wendell was similarly pleased with the evening, saying, "Anything we can do to get people interested in the borough is a plus."