

Cultural Convergence

Young, old alike find Vet's Club nostalgic.

Tap any local on the shoulder and ask him where the best drinks in town are poured, and undoubtedly the answer will be the vet's club. Eugene's not-so-best-kept-secret, the Veteran's Memorial Building has an almost speakeasy persona and is quietly known as home to the lowest-priced, highest-powered cocktails in Lane County.

It's a reputation the vet's club lives up to, although the management is sensitive to this distinction and prefers not to make an issue of it.

The club, built in 1947 and located at 1626 Willamette St., originally was designed as a meeting ground for returning World War II veterans. Like other vet's clubs around the country, it was a place where vets could rehash old war stories and plan social and philanthropic activities for its members.

The club remains a haven for its 1,200 members, but things have changed since the late 1940s. The club's restaurant and lounge (once a bottle club where you brought your own booze) were opened to the public in 1955 after Oregon adopted less stringent liquor laws. Along with the change in liquor laws came a change in the lounge itself — the only remodeling ever done on the building. The lounge was converted to a conventional bar and was expanded to accommodate more patrons.

The upstairs, however, remains off-limits to non-members and serves as a conference place for the club's shareholder meetings.

The building itself is sheer Americana, with its stately pillars and white-washed exterior lending it a colonial appearance. Inside, the hardwood floors and wall paneling of similar ilk keep the decor consistent, but the interior retains a somewhat military barracks-like presence. Heating ducts hang exposed along the lounge ceiling, and mounted military emblems line the rear of the bar.

The vet's club's star attraction, of course, is its lounge. On any given Friday or Saturday night, a diverse group can be found dancing to the melodies of the Country Squires, a four-piece band that plays circa WWII-era tunes. The band has been performing at the club every weekend for 15 years.

Mike and Fern West, age 64 and 70 respectively, are self-described regulars. Fern, a Eugene resident for about 30 years, has been coming to the club since 1953. Her husband, a relative newcomer to Eugene, is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a WWII vet, and part of the VFW-sponsored Senior Softies Softball team. He has lived here for six years and has been showing up at the club for a scant five.

Both expressed their near-love relationship with the club. Fern's sentiment for the lounge is especially dear.

"I come here for the memories, yes the memories — that's important, don't you think? There weren't a lot of bars in town back in the '50s so that's why I started coming here. And the drinks are real good, even though they have raised the price from 90 cents to a dollar," Fern says, as the band plays her favorite song, "In Ol' Shanty Town."

"This place hasn't changed in 40 years," she says, "and it has always been dear to vets. It's been popular with everybody else since they opened it up to the public, too — I even see political top bananas come in here and drink all the time."

Both note they initially were disturbed by the younger crowd.

"I used to come here when no young people showed up, but now I realize I used to come here when I was younger, so I've gotten over it," Fern admits.

"It's no big deal to see youngsters here," Mike says. "All people should be able to come. Besides, they (students) help finance the club — they help keep this place in business."

Lingering over his brandy mixed with raspberry syrup, Mike reflects a bit and notes he likes the vet's club because it's a place where he can identify with other vets.



Photo by John Giustina

"I can come here to be relaxed and talk about the same things with vets who have been through similar experiences. It doesn't matter what war they were in," Mike says.

Rodney Johnson, a 41-year-old Vietnam veteran, speaks enthusiastically about the club. He has been a regular for seven years.

"The people who work here treat me well. When I go out I wanna feel comfortable, and in this place, I do. I like the people who come here, especially the younger people," Johnson says.

Johnson shows no hesitation to say why he continues to frequent the club. "Oh, the drinks! I'll tell you what, this place pours the best drinks in town...no wait a minute, the whole damn state — this place pours the best drinks in the whole damn state!"

Lynette Williams, a 22-year-old history and Spanish major at the University, has similar sentiments.

"They have cheap booze here," Williams says with a smile. "I come here for the nostalgia, too. This band is great

— this is just a great bar.

"It's also not a pick-up bar. On a Friday night, I won't go to, say, Guido's, because it's a meat joint. Here you can meet and talk with people without being hit on," she says after thinking for a minute.

"As far as the older folks who come here goes, I don't mind them at all. My dad is 65, and my mom is 55, so I get along with the older people here just great," she adds.

— MICHAEL DRUMMOND

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