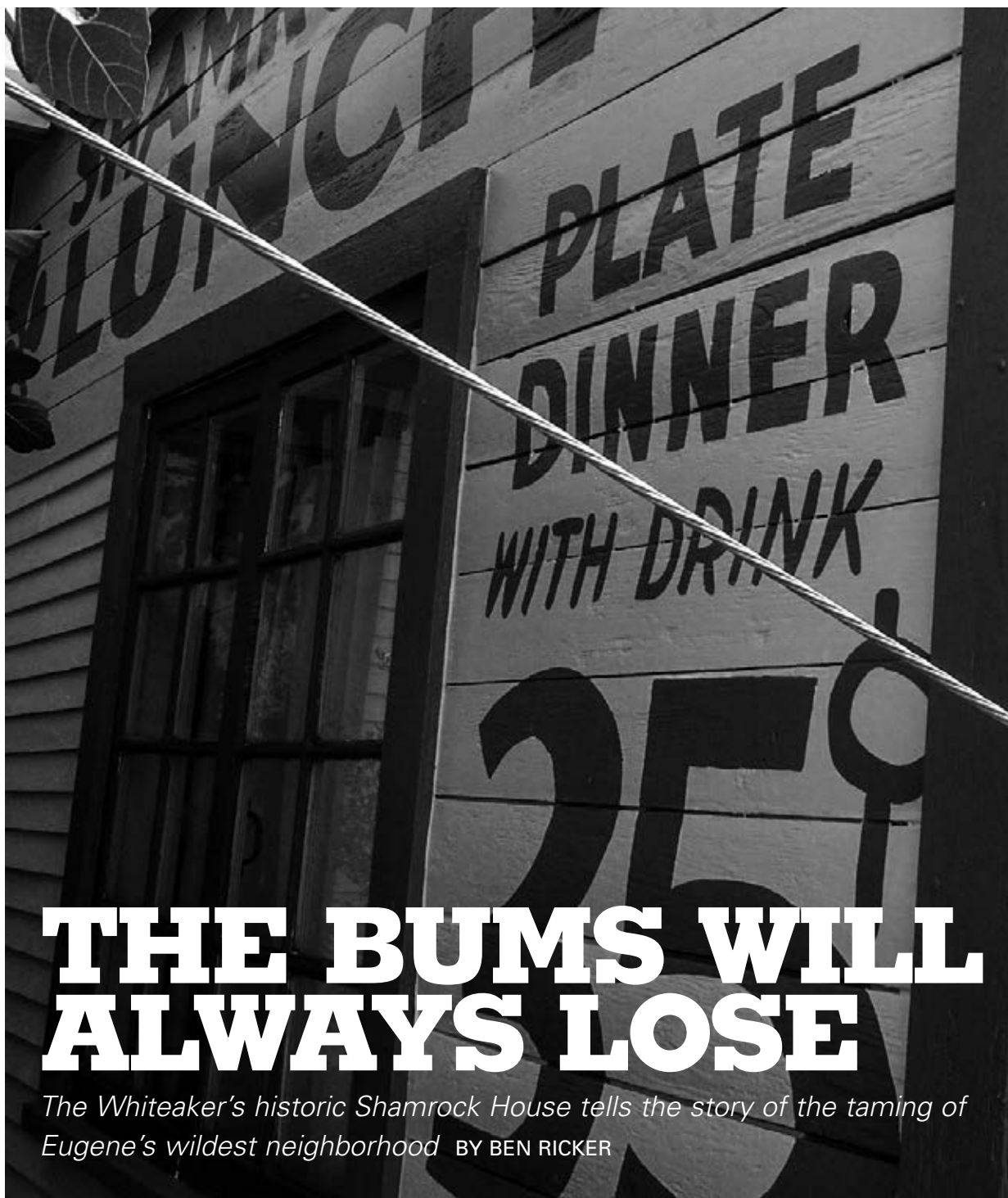




THE BUMS WILL ALWAYS LOSE

The Whiteaker's historic Shamrock House tells the story of the taming of Eugene's wildest neighborhood BY BEN RICKER

PHOTO BY MICAH GRIFFIN

At one end, the blue-and-white Tacovore calavera grins down upon tattooed neo-yuppies lined up to swill cocktails and scarf quasi-Mexican style grub. Follow the acrid scent of fermenting mash north to where the brilliant Ninkasi marquee lights up the sidewalk. Late-model cars stamped with Lexus and Mercedes logos pepper the side streets along the way. On a Saturday evening, Eugeneans from all corners of the city crisscross the northern stretch of Blair Boulevard, comparing lengthy waiting lists at boutique restaurants.

Crime is down. Rents are up. The war is over; the bums lost.

And little evidence stands to testify that the Whiteaker's cheerful main drag was once fiercely defended territory shared by an odd coalition of gutter punks, home bums, activists, artists and anarchists who delighted in locking horns with cops, city commissioners and real estate developers.

Even by Eugene standards, the Whiteaker is fringy and rebellious, says local author and former *Green Anarchy* editor John Zerzan. "It's always had more oddballs, people that went their own way. It's always been a nonconformist place. The Whiteaker has always been a pain in the neck for the city."

The Jesco Club recovery center stands tall on Blair, as does the Community Alliance of Lane County. Ambling burnouts may vex the "tourists," but nothing reflects the neighborhood's decades-long facelift so crisply as the house at the corner of 3rd Avenue and Van Buren.

Standing for more than 100 years, the Shamrock House has witnessed the area's recent transformation from bedraggled working class neighborhood into what many locals describe as a "tourist attraction." So, too, has the Shamrock been repurposed time and again to fit the changing times.

Today, chef Ashley Hawkins runs an upscale, farm-to-table restaurant out of the Shamrock called Grit Kitchen and Wine. But less than 25 years ago, the place was a shabby rental property. It wasn't much to look at, but around it swirled a rising counterculture movement that came to a head at a time when Eugene was known for uproar and commotion. In 2000, it became an anarchist meeting place that attracted subversives and agitators from across the country.

Filmmaker Tim Lewis remembers paying \$150 a month to rent one of the Shamrock's three bedrooms for a short time in 1991. The Whiteaker Lewis remembers had no luxury sedans parked along the curb. Vandalized consistently, trendy restaurants struggled to do business. Developers bold enough to wade into such hostile territory often met with resistance from the Culture Defense League (CDL).

Conceived probably at Icky's Teahouse, the punk hangout less than two blocks from the Shamrock, the CDL fought a bare-knuckle class war to preserve a way of life threatened by money-driven real estate types. Lewis says the CDL posted fliers around the neighborhood encouraging residents to litter and shoplift in order to keep property values low. It's rumored they sprinkled drug paraphernalia in the streets to scare off squeamish profiteers. And when work crews installed fences around a new construction site, they often returned the next morning to find them torn down, likely the handy work of CDL guerillas.

"They were fighting to protect the culture, which was poor-people culture, anarchist culture and punk culture," Lewis says. "They didn't want to see the place gentrified. They didn't want their rents going up."

Cheryl and Catherine Reinhart, owners of The Sweet Life Patisserie, purchased the building in '93 with plans to open a bakery there. According to Cheryl Reinhart, the building was in rough shape and needed too much work to bring it up to snuff. Lewis moved back into the Shamrock after he and

Cheryl Reinhart began dating. They lived there together until 2000, and opened the Shamrock House Info Shop after moving out. By then, Icky's had closed; Lewis hoped the info shop would buoy the Whiteaker's counterculture ethic in Icky's absence.

And for two years, it did.

"It was fun. It was a great time," Lewis says. "We thought we were gonna create change. It's a big machine. It's got to crack somewhere; why not here, we thought."

Anyone was free to meander into the Shamrock, pluck a zine from the library shelves, lend a hand in the garden or pull up a seat around the backyard bonfire and chew the fat. The shop became a focal point of anarchist activity at a time when Eugene was known across the country as an extremist flashpoint.

Many Americans were introduced to Eugene in the fall of '99, after tens of thousands of anti-globalization demonstrators flooded the streets outside the Paramount Theatre and the Washington Convention Center in Seattle to shut down the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference. The term "black bloc" entered the lexicon when a mob of masked anarchists, clothed all in black, ran amok after police in riot gear brutalized peaceful protestors with clubs and tear gas.

One week, 157 wrongful arrests and \$20 million in property damage later, disgraced Seattle police chief Norm Stamper said trouble-making anarchists trucked in from Eugene had raided his city. Eugene mayor Jim Torrey corroborated, calling Eugene the "anarchist capitol of the United States."

Major press outfits across the country scrambled the jets after seeing news footage of the street fight between black bloc anarchists and riot police. Reporters from *Spin* magazine and *60 Minutes* ventured into the Whiteaker to help Middle America come to terms with the anti-capitalist/anti-Western Civilization movement gaining steam in the Pacific Northwest.

Considering the awesome momentum and notoriety they'd achieved, it's hard to say with any certainty why the "Battle in Seattle" turned out to be the high-water mark for Whiteaker radicals.

It may have been law enforcement's doing. Along with the press spotlight came herds of cops and, according to Zerzan, many anarchists fled once the police beefed-up surveillance in the Whiteaker. At its worst, 18 different law enforcement jurisdictions patrolled there, he says. "Cops were everywhere."

Lewis remembers the cops; he's been arrested more times than he cares to count. But he doesn't recall anyone feeling particularly threatened by them. If anything, the ramped-up police presence encouraged Whiteaker anarchists; they took it as a sign they were on the right track, Lewis says. He theorizes, instead, that self-seriousness and infighting spoiled things.

Mixed together, you had progressive reformists, Earth First!ers and black bloc anarchists, as well as splinter groups who fundamentally disagreed with one another. Lewis says the language became so politically correct that it was difficult to hold a conversation without deeply offending at least some constituents. To make matters worse, the accepted jargon seemed to change overnight. Lewis argues the "self-righteous fuckers" sidelined themselves.

"Suddenly nobody could laugh," Lewis says. "Nobody had a sense of humor anymore. Things got way too fucking serious. It imploded the whole scene. It got to the point where I'd much rather be hanging out with the cops."

The info shop closed after two years, and Cheryl Reinhart sold the building. The Shamrock reverted to housing until Hawkins purchased it to open Grit. Fold back the fig leaves that crowd out Grit's north-facing wall to find a hand-painted sign dating back to the '30s, which reads "Plate dinner with drink 35¢." Before opening Grit in 2013, the Florida-born chef worked hard to restore and preserve the site's historic guts.

As a result, Grit's folksy charm is intimate and rustic, not unlike that of neighboring eateries — Japanese bistro Izakaya Meiji, the Pizza Research Institute and Papa's Soul Food Kitchen, to name a few.

To the "bums," however, the Shamrock might look less like a symbol of cultural preservation than another sign of so-called cultural renaissance, a force constantly pressing them out of the neighborhood they call home. ■