

IMNAHA TAVERN

It's a lifestyle

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

While the forested and snow-capped Wallowa Mountains and the city of Joseph may get all the tourist glory, Imnaha has its own special landscape to offer. But one of its most iconic landmarks isn't part of the truly natural, canyon landscape. Imnaha wouldn't be Imnaha without The Imnaha Tavern.

One of the oldest continually running businesses in Wallowa County, founded in 1904, recently changed hands, with Cody Mawhinney and Brooke Van Sickle taking over the tavern/restaurant/grocery store from Dave and Sally Tanzey last October. With their feet underneath them and the business running smoothly, the couple took time from one of their busy days to talk to the Chieftain about their adventures as new business owners.

Asked how he enjoys his new role as tavern owner, Mawhinney replied: "It's like cowboying. It's a lifestyle."

Hailing from Baker City, Mawhinney eventually managed an Oregon Department of Transportation crew stationed between Island City and Elgin.

His partner, Van Sickle, is from Washington and has a background in restaurant management and bartending as well as heavy equipment operation.

At the moment, Mawhinney takes care of the behind-the-scenes management such as ordering, building spreadsheets, paying bills etc, while Van Sickle maintains a presence on the floor.

"We're working on a system to manage the place right now," Mawhinney said.

The first time he stepped in the Imnaha Tavern, Mawhinney knew he wanted to own the place. "I noticed the western playing



Steve Tool/Chieftain

AT YOUR SERVICE — New Imnaha Tavern owners Brooke Van Sickle and Cody Mawhinney are ready to welcome anyone into the sacred space of the Imnaha Store and Tavern in Imnaha. The couple purchased the business last October. While they plan to expand its inventory, they intend to keep its legendary friendly atmosphere intact.

(on the TV), and that's a rule," he said. "I walked in, and it was exactly my kind of place."

He's keeping the tradition. Westerns play until 5 p.m. and stay on unless someone requests other programming.

"Except during football season," Van Sickle piped in with a laugh. "I told Cody when we first met that I wanted to own a funky little store that was like a cafe, a local meeting place where people can play music or put up artwork and sell it."

Mawhinney began talks to acquire the business about a year ago. He said after that it was all about figuring out money and how to make it work.

"There's a lot of moving parts to figure out," he said. It's not

your average tavern/restaurant store."

"It's an information center," Van Sickle. "If someone hits a deer they bring it here, it's a veterinary center ..."

The couple said it hasn't been difficult transitioning to business owners.

"It's been exciting and fun — everything about it," Mawhinney said. "There hasn't been a day where I woke up and didn't want to work."

The couple hasn't made a lot of visible changes to the store, yet. Money spent goes behind the scenes, such as the recent purchase of a new restaurant dishwasher and utilizing only one stockroom, along with streamlining the food production process

and ordering new outerwear with a newly-designed logo.

One noticeable change is a veteran's wall in the tavern. Veterans can sign their names and branch of service and receive a free beverage, including beer, for their efforts.

"We're both patriotic, and it's the easiest and simplest way to thank our vets," Mawhinney said. "I'm really excited for that wall. Someday, people will come in here and it'll be black with signatures."

The couple also ordered a new taps and had new tap lines put in. They've also added more groceries and other store inventory to help locals get through the week until they can get to town. Creating an ordering system is one of the couple's biggest challenges.

"It's easy to sell stuff that peo-

ple forget to bring camping, but this place is a local hub, so we ask people what they need so we can order for them." The business gets deliveries about twice a week and the two visit the metropolis of Enterprise for other items twice a week.

"It gets awkward after a while," Mawhinney said with a laugh. "It's like 'Aw, jeez, there's a lot of people up here.'" One of the couple's favorite things about Imnaha is the lack of cellphone service.

They have noticed more uplanders making the trip down to the tavern for taco night and to play pool. The couple is having a new pool table made, and pool will be free.

"I'm really excited about the table," Mawhinney said. "It's not worth the money to spend extra on a coin-operated table."

Something new the couple is offering is live music. Two bands have already made the Imnaha journey and Mawhinney promises music at least once a month. The tavern was packed at both events. Thursday night bingo and a family-style dinner is another option the couple is considering.

"Our goal is to keep things cheap," Mawhinney said. Menu additions are also on the horizon.

"We still have our chicken gizzards," Van Sickle said. "Those are a favorite."

The business employs five people including three full-time employees. It is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., but can stay open until 11:30 p.m. on music nights. It is only closed on Christmas, New Year's and Thanksgiving.

The couple's favorite thing about owning the bar is the people, particularly the locals.

"We want to keep a friendly atmosphere," Mawhinney said. "That's one thing the locals were worried about, although I've known some of them awhile. We're not changing the place — we're here because we like it."

"It's like a big family out here," Van Sickle added.



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