

'Redneck' bar in mind of patron

By Mark Young

"How'd you like to have that son of a bitch smashed over your head?"—Lodge bar patron to photographer Jim Williams, carrying a camera.

The "redneck bar" ranks with the dumb jock and the crazed philosophy professor as one of the last great collegiate myths.

Stories of brutal stupidity and inbred bigotry clash with tales of how kind-hearted and funny the common man is in his natural environment. It seems strange, though, that most of these stories are told in the traditional college hangouts downtown. If these bars are so good, why don't students go there themselves? Hell: do these bars even exist?

Driven by these questions, I set out to find the one bar in the Lincoln area which I could file away as Redneck. I wanted a bar where, in the words of *Esquire* columnist Harry Crewes, "The smoke was so thick you could cut it up and make work shirts out of it." The kind of bar you'd be embarrassed to take a woman to. What I wanted was a home away from home.

If anyone can be considered an "expert" on rednecks it is James Lee, literature professor at North Texas State University in Denton. Lee has studied rednecks and their folklore for over 20 years.

A redneck originally was a poor Southern farmer who did his own field work and acquired a sunburn on the

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back of his neck, Lee said. Later the term came to apply to all Southerners with "Archie Bunker" ideas, he said. Today it has been broadened even more.

In a telephone interview Lee laid down the guidelines for a real redneck bar.

"When you walk in, the music should tip you off," he said. "If it's Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson you're in with pseudo-rednecks. If it's Porter Wagner or Dolly Parton you're in a redneck bar."

The beehive hairdo never went out of style among redneck women, Lee said, and the great redneck bars in Texas sell only beer.

Other less famous, local "experts" talked of the inability of redneck bartenders to mix drinks and the frequency of fights (both male and female) in bars like the Taylor (Nebr.) Dance Hall. Unfortunately, all the experts said, there are no redneck bars in, or around, Lincoln. Or at least, none they have ever heard of.

So, there was nothing left for me to do but to find some on my own.

"Come to Council Bluffs on a Saturday night I'll take you to a place where we'll see some sights called the Palace."

—Taken from the "Palace Bar Boogie" by Johnny Id and the Latent Libido Band, a short-lived local band. Why not?

Down the road from the Joker, a teen hangout in Council Bluffs, a tiny, white building with a small, unlit sign slouches in a mute testimony for urban renewal. Inside the Palace the working class rif-raf of Council Bluffs

gathers to drink and dance. On any weekend evening, old men, fat women with bandaged limbs and low-rent bikers polka and twist to the perverse musical miscegenation of Lowell and the Westerners.

Lowell, a faded country singer from Florida, sings the standard Country-Western numbers from the '50s. His band works and drinks hard but they never seem to find a common key. It doesn't matter; their job isn't to play good music, but music with a strong beat. The kind of music that allows fast, free-form dancing which saps aggressiveness and induces states of pleasantly befuddled exhaustion.

Despite the dark surroundings and the grim-looking patrons, the Palace is a friendly bar. The waitress remembers you, Lowell wants to jam and the bikers want your roommate to join their club. No one seems pathologically aggressive or at all wise—just very drunk.

The Palace is a city redneck bar. Its customers are factory workers and dime-store clerks. The men take pride in their short hair and strong arms. The women smoke too much and laugh a little too loudly. A nice enough place, but hardly the stuff from which legends arise.

Perhaps the classic examples of this genre exist only in the small town, where the rednecks first arose. With this in mind, two companions were shanghaied, and a trip into the wild hills of Saunders county was undertaken.

In the small town of Raymond, the Ding-a-Ling forced us to stop. From the outside it looked promising, a white frame building with wrought-iron bars on the windows. On the walls of the entryway auction notices and dance-band advertisements were posted.

Inside, a good country song about rednecks, trucks and beer was playing. Nailed to the wall, a notice ordered parents to keep their children at the table—perhaps a sign to the reverse would be more effective. The Los Angeles Rams were playing on TV, although no one was watching.

Perfect redneck, except for eight shaggy-headed youths seated at one end of the bar. The Ding-a-Ling isn't redneck: it's community, a place where little kids and their parents and farm boy hippies can stare at the TV or at each other, trying to think of something to do.

We drank up and headed north for Memphis. Memphis looks more like a movie set than an actual town. A handful of houses and an elevator cluster on the side of a hill near a stream. Outside of town, the government built a dam. Why? I don't know. But it's there, and the lake behind it draws boaters and fishermen to the town's two bars.

The bars, Don's and Beer Lunch, are a contrast in time. Don's is a cement block structure, filled with loaves of bread and a fishing tackle, that was built after the lake's arrival. Beer Lunch probably pre-dates Wounded Knee (the original one).

Inside Don's three or four families were drinking and eating supper. A drunk screamed at his children while his wife played pool. The waiter, a slender man wearing a blue sweater and slacks looked like he belonged in a salon rather than a saloon.

Inside Beer Lunch, the woman who owns the place and a grizzled old man sat watching a Rock Hudson movie. A radio from the '20s and a row of dusty knickknacks lined the bar.

The old man stared at us for awhile and then mumbled at the TV. "What?" I said.



Pool sharks they might not be, but patrons of the so-called "redneck" bar such as this one like their billiards.

"That dam leaks, you know. If you got a big boat you ain't gonna get it in."

"Don't own a boat."

"That's good, cause the dam leaks. What was the price of corn today?"

With the Beer Lunch Bar we knew we were on the right track. A quiet country bar, with friendly, down-to-earth people. It is, unfortunately, too good a bar to be labeled redneck. It's in a class all its own.

Flushed with the by-products of the afternoon, we careened back to Lincoln. Rumor had it that several likely bars were within our own fair city after all, such as the Stockade, the Tack Room and the Outpost, but looming ominously over them all was the Lodge Tavern.

The Lodge made me very nervous. A rather large and surly friend of mine had suggested it, adding, "It's real red, I almost got the shit kicked out of me there." Great, just what I need—a brawl.

The Lodge bar on O St. is as close as I want to come to a real red bar, if it is indeed one.

Unlike the Palace, the Lodge has an air of despondent boredom which hits the moment you walk in. The dour waitress, the toothless bartender and the customers all look as though they'd rather be somewhere else and are angry about being anywhere at all. Bare lightbulbs, a football game on the tube and a pool table; no entertainment in this funhouse.

The trouble started after Jim took the pictures. A 6 ft., 200-lb. redneck whose picture had been taken lumbered over to the table and growled.

"You always click at people in bars?" Things looked bad. This cro-magnon and his friends could easily cause a very nasty scene. Luckily, Jim's cool, polite evasion confused the poor schmuck, and he wandered away muttering, "Nice kid, nice kid, real nice kid."

We left, and if I go back in, I'm taking my camshaft and elements of the 5th Panzer division along for company. After all, drinking and fighting are compatible social activities.

The redneck bar exists mainly in the minds of those who seek them, I concluded. Like the whooping crane, the hiding places of the redneck are frequently reported but seldom verified. Besides, on the way back to town I saw a girl who looked like Tatum O'Neil selling maps to the Redneck Bar Country.

*Fellow students who spent their childhoods in rural Nebraska dance halls.



Gary and Carol at the Lodge Tavern, 2135 O St. "This is the last Friday night we'll be able to go out like this. Next week Gary has to start working Saturday mornings."

Photos by Steve Duncan