

O Street Oasis



Frequenters of Iguana's enjoy its artistic and lively atmosphere

This is the second in a series of 12 stories exploring the history of the O Street bars. The strip — which begins at 14th and O streets and runs down to Ninth and O streets — has served as a major gathering place for University of Nebraska-Lincoln student for the past 70 years.

By Jason Hardy

Staff writer

When it comes to picking a favorite bar there is one thing almost everybody looks for — atmosphere.

Without atmosphere, there is no character, and a place without character is about as generic and popular as plain labeled beer.

For many college students, the concept of character is usually measured by the "lived in" feel of a place. But Jodi Luth and Becky Smith say character doesn't have to mean sucking down swill at a local dive.

As the owners of Iguana's and its adjoining Lizard Lounge, 1426 O St., Luth and Smith take great pride in the character and atmosphere of their establishment.

And while it's something they've worked on for almost 10 years, they say the true character of Iguana's and the Lizard Lounge began in the early 1900s and only has grown with each passing owner.

"Where everyone got the notion that college bars have to be dumps is beyond me," Luth said, while casually sitting in one of the elevated booths adjacent to the Lizard Lounge's bar.

To her right is a smooth and sturdy black shelf supporting two antique lamps. Behind the lamps is an exposed red brick wall.

"With a college crowd, you've got to have the latest music, art and even colors, so we're always remodeling and making changes," she said. "That's probably why we've lasted all these years — why we've had lines for nine years."

While Iguana's and the Lizard Lounge currently boast some of the most attractive decor of the downtown bar scene, the walls weren't always adorned with art and nostalgic accessories.

When Luth and Smith purchased the space in 1991 that currently houses Iguana's, it was an army recruiting center.

Once they got on their feet, they had the money to purchase the space directly to the east of Iguana's, which was then Harman's Camera Center, and created the Lizard Lounge.

But until the '90s, the building played host to a number of different businesses, including, but not limited to, Lincoln Office equipment, a lumber yard and the Eureka Hotel, which was also rumored to be a brothel.

Appropriately enough, around 1905 the building also was a brewery. The original wood floor is still intact in the Lizard Lounge.

Of course, 95 years ago the floor that now houses a pool table was actually a place for dri-

vers to back up horse-drawn wagons to the brewery's docks and load kegs.

While waiting, the horses often urinated, which explains the discolored portions of the Lizard Lounge's prized wood floor.

It doesn't get much more "lived-in" than that, but somehow Luth and Smith have managed to create an impressively classy ambiance.

"There are some standard things you always want to do in a club," said Smith, motioning toward the space between tables and the overall flow of the enormous room. "But we also wanted to keep as much of the old feel in the building as we could."

With 7,000 square feet of space, Iguana's and the Lizard Lounge have the largest capacity of all the bars on the strip. With such a large space, Luth and Smith work hard to create an open feeling without the emptiness of a large hall.

It's done by decorating the walls with antique mirrors and art by both local and national artists, while leaving ample room to navigate around the room's variety of tables.

It's an impressive display, and one Luth said

wouldn't exist without the help of her staff and the people in the community who've contributed to the bar. Not only that, she's aware that ambiance can only go so far.

"To us, service is everything," she said. "When you come out with your entertainment dollar you should get good service. Some of our staff has been here for five or six years."

She is quick to point out the marks staff and university students have left.

Above the pool area on the Iguana's side is an enormous, prehistoric-looking fake lizard skeleton that a former University of Nebraska-Lincoln student artist made.

The columns flanking the Lizard Lounge's bar were painted colorfully by a former bartender, and the tile mosaic on the floor surrounding the bar also was created by a former bartender.

The contributions are so many that it's impossible to recognize them all, especially because it won't be long before things are changed again.

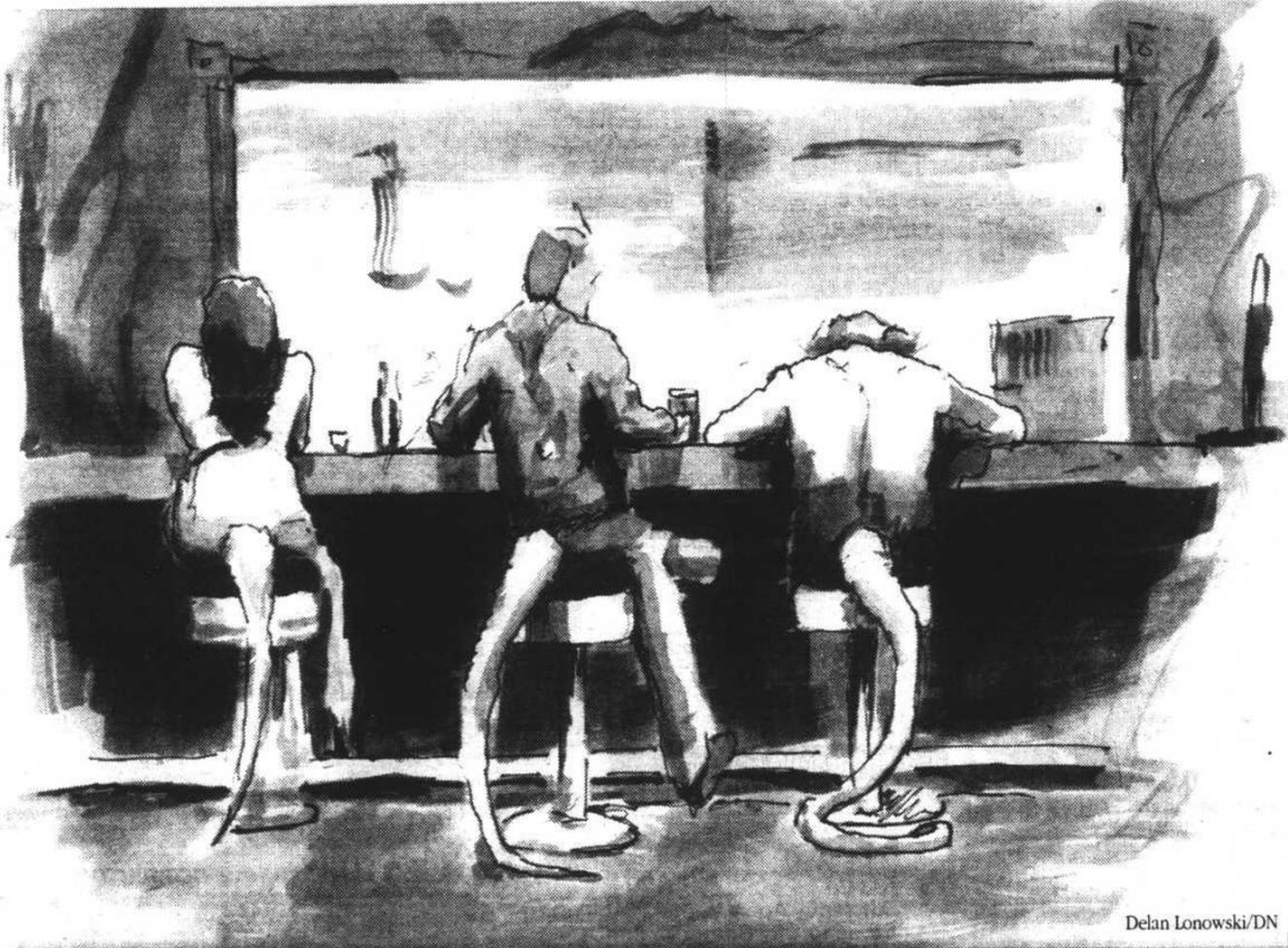
"In two months, this will all be totally remodeled," Luth says standing near the center

"With a college crowd, you've got to have the latest music, art and even colors, so we're always remodeling and making changes."

Jodi Luth
Iguana's owner

of Iguana's. "I think this will be the fourth time we've done it."

And if the building's past is any indication of its future, this renovation won't be the last.



Delan Lonowski/DN

Glass work becomes part of Joslyn collection

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exhibition of Chihuly's work, along with acquiring such a fantastic piece for the Joslyn's permanent collection.

"This exhibit is a coalescing of different desires," she said. "We've been interested in identifying an artist to do a permanent installation in the new atrium area and, looking at the many challenges of the space, Chihuly's name came up early as an artist who'd be well-suited for the task, because his work is tremendously visually exciting."

"One way to expand that for our

public was to get him to come here, so this seemed like the perfect coming-together of opportunities."

Many glass blowers have known the work of Chihuly for years. The artist's work has undoubtedly been cited as being very influential in the glass-blowing world.

Mark Labrecht of Artisan Access, a glass gallery and studio with the only glass-blowing hot shop in Omaha, said Chihuly's influence on the medium of glass blowing is very visible.

"He's taking glass blowing and using it architecturally," Labrecht said. "It's presented glass blowing in a

whole new fashion. He makes pieces a part of the building. He doesn't just take something and set in on a table to be adorned, it's part of the whole experience of the building."

Much of Chihuly's contribution to increasing the artistic status of glass blowing is derived from the fact that he was co-founder of the Pilchuck Glass School, an institution in Washington that has had a profound impact on glasswork artists worldwide. Also, because of injuries to his shoulder and the loss of vision in his left eye in the late 1970s, Chihuly was no longer able to blow glass by himself, so he employs a

"His work really thrives on the perfect lighting conditions and we went to great extremes to provide those conditions."

Janet Farber

associate curator for 20th century art at Joslyn Museum

large number of helpers who, in turn, learn from his instruction.

"If you talk to anybody who's somebody in glass blowing right now they've worked with Dale in some

capacity in the past," Labrecht said. "So I think what he's done is to encourage everybody to the fact that glass blowing is out there."

People want it and they love it."