

comfort ZONE

The Bars of
O
Street

Duffy's Fishbowls, Shithook keep students coming back

This is the fifth 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 students for the past 70 years.

A bar needs to provide comfort and solace for its patrons.

It needs to be a place where people can walk in, sit down, have a drink and lose themselves for a few hours.

It doesn't have to be trendy or happening, but instead it just has to provide a cozy atmosphere. Maybe add a jukebox somewhere in that mix.

These things have allowed Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St., to maintain a successful clientele for more than 60 years.

You might describe the bar as a little dingy, with dim lighting. It's a place where the bartenders don't go out of their way to kiss your ass.

On any given night, you can walk in and see a few regulars sitting at the bar or on the shiny wood table that runs down the center of the room, a couple of people shooting pool in the back and a group huddled in a corner booth sucking down a fishbowl.

You can walk into the back room to listen to the blaring music of some local artist or hear a traveling band who stopped in Lincoln to do a show.

Every other Monday, you can check out local comedy acts and, on Thursdays, you can let your rock 'n' roll passions – or nightmares – loose with the live karaoke band Shithook, which always seems to draw the same quiet souls on stage to belt out the Stones, the Beatles, Elvis or the screaming strains of Janis.

The alternative scene, which offers a wide array of talent and entertainment, was implemented by a couple of young bartenders, along with three other investors, who purchased the bar in 1986.

Its history, though, hardly begins there. And what it has become has been a long time in the making.

Duffy's was opened by John Wilhelm in 1938, just after prohibition ended.

The original bar was half the size of the main area and contained the bar fixture that is still there today.

Reg McMeen, one of the owners who took part in investing in Duffy's in 1986, said he has a sign that reads "Beer: 5 cents" that he thinks was probably displayed during this time in the bar.

In 1953, Wilhelm sold the bar to Warren Goldstein. In the 1950s, the bar, which featured a shuffle board table running down the center of the room, thrived on a variety of patrons.

Mary Goldstein, the former owner's wife, helped run the bar.

"It was a real nice place," she said.

She said the main drink sold was Hamm's, on tap, and eventually the bar began to serve liquor.

She said her husband, despite strong opposition in the community, played a big role in the push to get liquor served by the drink in Lincoln.

Regulars in the bar included those stationed at an air force base on the outskirts of Lincoln, railroad workers and a ladies' sewing circle, she said.

It also became a hangout for college kids – especially on Thursday nights.

"The young and old people got along very well," she said.

One of the bar's big draws was the shuffle board tournaments, which were held regularly.

"The lady's sewing circle could beat the pants off those young guys," she said. "And they could put down



the beer."

She said the bar special was her homemade beef stew and a sloppy joe served with a glass of beer for a dollar.

Her fondest memories are those of the regulars, whom she described as "her children," who would routinely hang out at the bar.

She said there was a group of college kids who would hang out on the weekends and called themselves "the R Street boys," because of the house they lived in on R Street.

That group comes from all over the country to get together with one another and with Mary once a year. They all return to Duffy's and take in a Husker football game, she said.

During Goldstein's ownership, the front half of the bar was extended to its current size.

In the mid-'70s, Goldstein sold the bar to Larry Cole.

Margarette Cole, Larry's wife, said the bar had a

Please see **DUFFY'S** on 11

STORY BY Josh Nicols

ART BY Melanie Falk
and Delan Lonowski