

## The Bars of O Street

# O'Rourke's Sport

*O'Rourke's Tavern  
is a second home  
for some patrons*

**Editor's note:** Today is the ninth 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.

**By Josh Krauter**

Senior editor

It's 5 p.m. on a sunny Monday afternoon at O'Rourke's Tavern. The TV sets are tuned to a baseball game, and a plate full of free hot dogs sits on the end of the bar.

The bar's lighting is dark but not dreary, and the place is packed, but not claustrophobic.

The patrons are of different ages, but they all share a relaxed demeanor. Patrons include twentysomethings, middle-aged men and women on their way home from work and older folks just relaxing. And they're all comfortable.

Usually a few customers are playing chess or shooting pool, but not on this particular afternoon. About half are watching the ball game, the other half making conversation.

The hot dog plate is nearly

empty now.

"Hey, somebody eat this last hot dog," a bartender shouts.

"It's yours," yells back a regular, momentarily taking his eyes off the game.

This is the O'Rourke's day crowd. At night, the bar fills up with people who are a little younger and a little louder, but the atmosphere remains relatively the same.

O'Rourke's is a hometown bar for the everyday people who call 14th and O streets home, and it's always been that way, even when the bar was located across the street, said co-owner Doug McLeese.

McLeese and his partner, Dave Moreland, opened the bar on Nov. 1, 1980, and it's been going strong ever since. The pair also own Sportscasters on 70th and Adams streets. Moreland runs Sportscasters, and McLeese runs O'Rourke's.

For the first seven years of its existence, O'Rourke's was on the north side of 14th and O streets, south of the alley. Then it got some unfortunate news.

"(The city) was going to build a parking garage, and we had to move out," he said. "We

didn't have a choice. We had to move out under threat of condemnation."

This potentially negative situation worked out when the bar moved across the street to a vacant building that used to house Guarantee Clothing. It was a much bigger space than the old O'Rourke's, which worried McLeese, but he said it has worked out since the bar's reopening in 1988.

Amy McAndrews, a patron of the bar at the time of the move and a current bartender, agreed with McLeese.

"I was worried that the move would change the atmosphere - since we got bigger - but it didn't," she said.

That atmosphere has more to do with the customers and staff than flash and glitz, McLeese said.

McAndrews agrees.

"I think the main thing is that it has a really friendly spirit and a diverse crowd," she said.

O'Rourke's doesn't have live bands or elaborate gimmicks, but it does provide a down-to-earth vibe, a quality jukebox and a place for friends and neighbors to take a load off.

*"It's the people who make the bar. For a lot of our clientele, this is their living room."*

**Doug McLeese**

co-owner of O'Rourke's Tavern

O'Rourke's only gimmick is one that benefits the regulars: the pitcher cards. Whenever a pitcher is purchased, the customer gets a card. Get five cards, and the pitcher is free.

"We started that a few years ago because it was a success at Sportscasters," McLeese said. "It's a reward. It gives something back to regular customers."

Some of these regulars have been coming in for more than 10 years, McLeese said.

"It's the people who make the bar," McLeese said. "For a lot of our clientele, this is their living room."

For McLeese, these are not just words. Every time he mentions how much the customers contribute to the bar, a patron walks in and says hello, calling McLeese by his first name or teasing him about some sports

prediction or another.

Keith Landgren is one of these customers. He was a regular in the old location, and he's still a regular in the current one. He keeps an eye on the baseball game while he talks.

"They do a real good job on TV sports and draft beer, and they have a really good jukebox," he said. "I've been well-treated here over the years."

Jon Benjamin is sitting next to Landgren, also concentrating on the ball game. He's been coming to O'Rourke's for 10 years. Why does he keep coming back?

"There's true camaraderie among the patrons."

That camaraderie is evident in the faces of Sunny and Flag. They're a bit older than some of the other customers, but they're

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Melanie Falk/DN