

A NO-HOLDS BAR

Playboy called it “The Most Despicable Bar in America,” but it has been a beacon for Alaska fishermen.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

As legend tells it, there were lines of cocaine from one end of the bar to the other. The place — the Elbow Room, in Dutch Harbor, Alaska — was so packed, people would pass out and never fall down, and a man could get his ear bitten off in some of the roughest brawls ever witnessed.

“Back in the old days, it was something else,” says Spike Walker, author of “Coming Back Alive” and other books, who patronized the place in the seventies and eighties, when he fished the North Pacific. “There would be 150 boats in port, 1,000 deckhands and 1,000 cannery workers, all waiting to get inside that bar. There was only one cop in town, and you couldn’t find him if your life depended on it.”

It was a place for young and tough fishermen to meet and greet, where skip-pers hired and fired their crews. A place so famous that Jimmy Buffet, Richard Gere, and politicians have had to see it for themselves.

Today the Elbow Room is known to fishermen from Japan to Russia to the Lower 48 states. But it started innocently enough in 1966, when Larry Shaishnikoff and Carl Moller decided that they’d like to open a bar to make a little extra money. They found some vacant property along the Unalaska shoreline — an abandoned military bar, the Blue Fox Cocktail Lounge — slapped down \$600 for the place and got to work.

The old lounge, boarded up since the end of World War II, still had its tables and bar intact, and military paraphernalia filled every corner. The family hauled, among other things, helmets and bayonets to the dump, and opened the doors for business to the 300 residents of Unalaska.

“It was a nice, quiet little bar for the lo-

cal, a nice addition to the town,” explains Bill Shaishnikoff, Larry Shaishnikoff’s son and Carl Moller’s nephew. “And then king crab was discovered.”

The king crab fishery in the 1970s made Unalaska a boomtown. And as fishermen from the United States, Russia, Norway, Japan, Philippines, Iceland and the Aleutians gathered at the only bar in town, the standing-room-only Elbow Room became the town’s legendary center.

“It was the last great stand for hard-working, spirited people, people who were looking for their rainbow’s end,” Walker says. “Fishermen were celebrating life in that bar because there was a sense of foreboding about what was waiting for them outside of it. It was a constant life and death struggle for the crews.”

“But when I was there, it was the best time in the world to be alive.”

Larry Shaishnikoff is a lifelong Unalaska resident famous for his generosity and kindness. Before opening the Elbow Room, he did a little of everything in the town — he worked as an agent at the airport, ran the theater, and acted as postmaster. He tended the bar for its first few years with Moller, and then hired bartenders to free himself up to run his new 68-foot crab boat, the Peggy Rose, which he still fishes.

“My dad would go out to these communities — Akutan, Atka, Pribilof — and fish off their shores. He’d bring groceries, a special bottle of scotch for the town elders. He wouldn’t take any money,” Bill



JENNIFER KARUZA



THE EXTERIOR has been painted many colors over the years, but inside the Elbow Room, fishermen painted the town red.

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Shaishnikoff says. “He was just something, giving of himself like that. He has an aura

about him, and he’s built a reputation. He didn’t even try to; it’s just the way he is.”

When the Elbow Room opened, Unalaska was a small, tight-knit native community with only a couple of families living on the Dutch Harbor side, and the bridge that now connects the two communities didn’t exist. With the arrival of king crab came new people, and the Elbow Room is where they went. Cops parked outside the bar at all hours, and the tiny town boasted 26 taxicab services.

By the mid-1970s, the Elbow Room was the primary stopping point for the hundreds of crab boats and fishermen. Fishermen hitting shore ordered three beers at a time to beat the crowds. Young men looking for jobs could find them here.

It became the habit of patrons to keep at least one eye on the ground — fishermen reaching into their pockets to pull out

wads of money would inadvertently drop some, where it would get kicked around for some lucky guy to pick up. Shaishnikoff laughs as he remembers how people tried their best to avoid getting caught in the middle of a fight — because they knew there was no room to run even if they wanted to.

“It was a guy’s life up there,” he says. “Drunken fishermen, tough fishermen, strong, young Norwegians and Philip-pines. There were tough son-of-a-gun women in there, smokin’ and spittin’, mouths as bad as the guys, but there were great girls, too. If you took your girlfriend in there, you couldn’t be offended by someone pinchin’ her butt. It didn’t matter what they were wearing or what they looked like — the old saying was, ‘They’re all queens at closing time.’”

“If there was one selling dope or something, she was everybody’s best friend, she could do no wrong,” he adds. “Everybody wanted her favor and would do anything to get it. I think a lot of marriages came out of there. Lust and love and everything else, and pretty soon, here they are getting married.”

With fishermen making \$60,000-\$70,000 per crab season, money roared through the joint, drugs were readily available and fists flew.

Even dogs got involved. “There were

WILL MERMAIDS CLUB REEL IN FISHERMEN?

For years, the Elbow Room was the only game in town for fishermen seeking social activity. Now, however, there’s a new entertainment option that’s opened just down the street from the famous bar.

Pickets erupted at Unalaska in January after Mermaids, a strip club, opened to titillate fishermen and processors in the Bering Sea fishing port.

The club debuted in a defunct restaurant a short walk from the Elbow Room and practically in the shadow of the town’s historical Russian Orthodox church. As protesters marched through snowy streets with signs saying, “Don’t degrade our town,” and “Protect our children,” the Unalaska City Council mulled ways to restrict the club.

Owner Kostas Manolakakis opened the non-alcohol club with about a dozen exotic dancers he recruited to the far-flung Aleutian port. He initially charged patrons a \$20 cover, which was later reduced to \$10. He could not be reached for comment.

“I’m sure it’s the fishermen who frequent Unalaska that he’s targeting,” says Paul Larsen, a city councilman who works for

a company that ships frozen fish out of Unalaska and adjoining Dutch Harbor. “We can’t just outright ban it. We’d probably be looking at a lawsuit if we did that.”

Mermaids opened Jan. 4, just before the huge winter pollock and snow crab seasons. Those fisheries draw thousands of fishermen and packing plant workers to town and help make Unalaska-Dutch Harbor the nation’s top-volume fishing port.

Unalaska once had a rowdy reputation, but law and order came with the buildup of permanent shore plants and a resident work force, locals say. It’s really a fairly conservative place, and that’s what makes Mermaids a hot topic.

Larsen says he thinks the novelty will fade and most fishermen will keep their money in their pockets. “Most of us don’t feel the place is going to succeed,” he says.

— Wesley Loy



JIM FAUJIN

PICKETERS PROTEST the arrival of Mermaids, a strip club targeting fishermen and processors.

brawls I couldn't believe," says Shaishnikoff, who was sometimes left in charge of the family-owned bar as a teenager.

"It would happen at a drop of a hat. There were dogs frequenting the bar — malamute huskies, German shepherds — they'd come in, lie down and sleep, and then another would come in and we'd have a dogfight. It was like, 'Don't kick my dog, I'll kick you!'"

"Next thing you know, there's four people all being thrown outside, a big free-for-all. Most people didn't pay attention — these guys got thrown out, the door was locked, and the party went on as usual."

As fond as Walker's memories are, there was, he says, a "downside" for those who got carried away by the sweet bird of youth and landed with alcohol and drug problems. "There is a price," he says. "We have to turn and face ourselves at some point."

Bill Shaishnikoff, who now works in Juneau as a longliner fleet manager for the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Community Development Association, doesn't believe that rowdiness alone is what made the Elbow Room famous. There was also camaraderie. "Basically good people came in there, and everybody shared, like a big family," he explains. "There were people from Seattle you barely knew, and next thing you know you're sitting down hav-

ing a great time with them. It was 90 percent fun. Fights broke out and things happened, but they do in all bars. It was just magnified, amped up — people were rich, and everybody had money. Nobody was broke in that town. If they were, they were lazy."

There's a small dance floor and spot for the live bands to play, and photographs of smiling locals and fishermen from years gone by fill one entire wall. Larry Shaishnikoff has painted the exterior of the small, innocent-looking Elbow Room often through the years, and in many different colors — including green, barn red and sky blue; last year it was purple. One year, he had the bar painted the same color as his crab boat.

The Shaishnikoff family house, located just across the street from the bar, is also usually painted the same color as the Elbow Room. At the sound of the bartender's call, the elder Shaishnikoffs would lean out the window to accept the 'whiskey water' room service.

After the crab boom ended in the mid-1980s, many of the greenhorns who had journeyed the 1,000 miles west of Kodiak to the Aleutians, looking to get in on the action, stayed in the community and contributed to its continuing development. They bought houses, became city council members, and contributed to the infrastructure of the town.

JORG SCHMEISSER, Chad Smith and George Schile sit before the Elbow Room's wall of photos.



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When Carl Moller passed away about 10 years ago, he left his share of the bar to his five children, and so the family's fishing and Elbow Room legacy continues with its second and third generations. Bill Shaishnikoff's two sons fly each summer from Juneau to Dutch Harbor, where they'll dash into the bar, say hello to Grandpa Larry and sit down to a hotdog before the patriarch puts them to work.

With the addition of IFQs, the elimination of the halibut derbies and the downward spiral of the king crab, Shaishnikoff speculates that the great thunder of the Elbow Room is probably a thing of past.

"For 20 years it was just an amazing place to be. The money just roared through there, booze was available, it was the only place in the world like it. But over the years, it came to a halt; the old times are over. I don't think it will be that way again, the way it was the first time. I like going in there, reminiscing, visiting with the old-timers. It's been wonderful."

The Elbow Room may be making a return to the local, quieter bar of its first few years, but it has made an indelible mark in the history of fishermen and fishing, of Alaska and of the world. It continues to be spoken of with awe, wonder and fear across the continents. It is mentioned in almost every book and article written about the king crab boom of the 1970s. Mention Unalaska or Dutch Harbor, and the Elbow Room is raised in the same breath. The bar even made the pages of *Playboy*.

"Oh, we thought it was great," Shaishnikoff laughs. "That was our claim to fame. We were in *Playboy* magazine as the 'Most Despicable Bar in America.' Dad got a chuckle out of it. People came in droves to check out this despicable bar and wound up being part of the show." **NF**

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