

The Chukker's patrons to say last goodbyes

By **CARLA JEAN WHITLEY**
Staff Reporter

Thursday afternoons find most bars in the calm before the weekend storm. But this Thursday, Tuscaloosa resident Jean Crowell paid her first visit to Tuscaloosa's oldest bar, The Chukker.

Crowell was armed with a camera and a smile as she snapped pictures in the bar.



CW/ Lizzie Heard

ABOVE: Traci Tannehill serves up some drinks to patrons at The Chukker.
ABOVE, BOTTOM: The drinks specials and anything going on at The Chukker goes on this glow in the dark board. The Chukker has been open since 1956, but tonight it will close its doors forever.

"These are for my daughter," she explained. "She probably won't make it [to The Chukker] tomorrow."

Crowell's daughter, Amanda, frequented The Chukker during her years at the

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University. The Friday night event that Crowell mentioned is tonight's R.I.P. Halloween party. When the party ceases in the wee hours of Saturday morning, so too will The Chukker.

After nearly 50 years of business, the historic bar intends to go out in style. At 10 p.m., Sweat Bee will take the stage as the first band in a lineup that includes bands that have frequented the venue in years past. Sweat Bee, along with Club Wig, Model Citizen, The Woggles, Last Gunslinger and D.C. Moon, were chosen as representatives of different eras of the bar, co-owner Brooks Cloud said.

The Chukker originally welcomed Tuscaloosa residents inside its walls in 1956. Though the bar has changed hands numerous times, the stories patrons tell ring with the same themes: the bar's unusual clientele and welcoming atmosphere.

Cloud and his co-owner Will Harris met at The Chukker during their college years. Cloud first visited the bar as a place to go after the other bars closed, but later frequented the weekly foosball tournaments.

The foundation of his friendship with Harris was laid over the foosball table and continued as they worked together on *The Strip*, an alternative newspaper in Tuscaloosa.

Harris was in negotiations to buy The Chukker with Ludovic Goubet, the bar's previous owner, before Goubet closed the business in 2001. Those discussions failed to lead to anything, but Harris and Cloud later purchased the bar in foreclosure.

After \$80,000 worth of renovation and restoration, the business partners re-opened the establishment in May 2002.

They never recouped their expenses.

"It's one of those 'oh, well' kind of things," Cloud said.

Much of the financial situation may be due to the Tuscaloosa City Council's decision earlier this year to prohibit alcohol sales after 1:45 a.m., Cloud explained. The owners' initial reaction

when the ordinance was proposed was that it would put them out of business, he said.

"I was right," Cloud said.

Cloud and Harris weren't quick to give up hope, though. After the ordinance passed March 1, the pair began to rethink their business model. But then July saw them slammed by another piece of news from the city.

The Council voted to demolish a number of buildings in downtown Tuscaloosa, including The Chukker's home at 2121 Sixth St. The plan to rejuvenate downtown finalized the future of the bar, Cloud said.

"If the ordinance was the only thing, we probably would've attempted to evolve into something that would work... but moving doesn't make sense," he said.

The Chukker's last month has been filled with stories similar to Crowell's. Couples have posed for pictures in front of the bar's front door. Patrons have reflected on their memories of the bar. Employees, too, have been quick to share their stories.

"It's this karma; it's this really good feeling," manager Hilary Evans said.

Evans traded stories with one long-time visitor, Stephen Robbins, as she worked Thursday afternoon. The two laughed as they discussed a rumor that dates back more than a decade to one of the many previous owners.

"Mr. Bill [Gipson] didn't

want fraternity parties tearing stuff up," Robbins said.

"He was comfortable with the crowd that was coming," Evans added.

"So they started a rumor that it was a gay bar," Robbins concluded.

Or so the story goes. Evans continued to reminisce, recalling the reactions she would receive when she said that she was on her way to The Chukker. Indeed, statements from many patrons and employees suggest a bar that has been home to people from all walks of life.

"Everyone's pretty open," Cloud said. "It's a group of people that understand the idea of community better than most people in this city. ... You could be gay, I could be black, there's a female over there and someone who's mentally handicapped ... and nobody would care. ... That's the main heart of the bar."

After tonight, members of that community will be forced to relocate, though not without the opportunity to take a piece of Chukker history as they go. A memorabilia auction is scheduled for 2 p.m. Sunday.

Along with artwork, old posters and photos, an unopened bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon will be raffled. Artist William Alford deep sand-carved the bottle to commemorate the "last beer sold" at the historic bar.

In the time that remains, patrons will continue to say

their last goodbyes. Robbins took time Thursday to bid farewell to his old haunt.

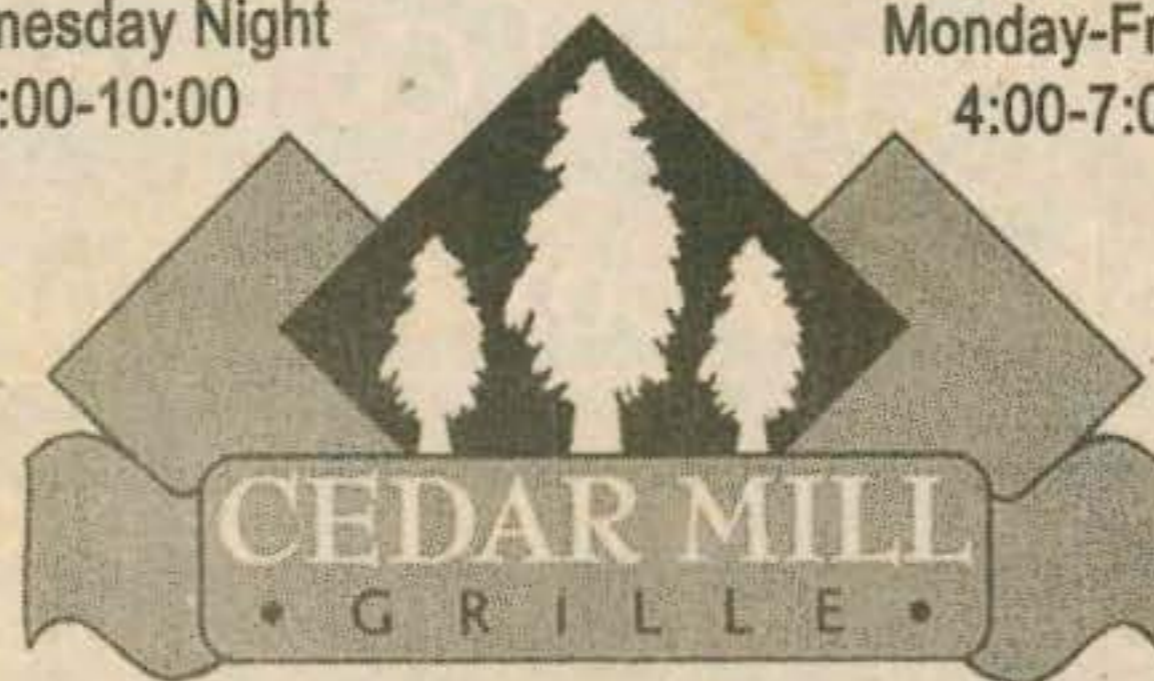
Budweiser in hand, he said, "By golly, I'm gonna drink a final beer at The Chukker."

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