

JANE
SELF



The Chukker before it was a nation

The vast majority of people who showed up for the Chukker's grand re-opening earlier this month were celebrating the return of a great music venue in town.

But not all of us.

Some of the gray and balding heads that popped in remembered the Chukker from the days before there was a "Chukker Nation," when the bar was only half its current size — and before most of the celebrants were even born.

When I discovered the Chukker in the early 1970s, it was the happening place to be, and it had nothing to do with loud music. It was where people knew they could find stimulating conversations with like-minded folks over a few beers. It was a favorite watering hole for many graduate students, college professors and local folks interested in liberal politics — or at least tolerant of diverse opinions.

Depending on the time of night and mood of partakers, the talk would vary. I remember well the night of Aug. 8, 1974 — the night Nixon gave his resignation speech. There was a lot of analyzing, debating and celebrating going on that night. And maybe a little raucous behavior.

The bar ran along the left side of the narrow room as you came through the front door. Small tables lined each side of the building, and a kitchen was at the rear of the **Chukker**.

In those days, Bob Callahan was the owner. Sometimes, a few of us cronies would not be quite ready to call it a night when closing time arrived, so he would just lock the doors and let us stay. If he got tired of hanging out with us, he'd leave us behind with instructions to lock up when we left. What a trusting soul he was. And we never ripped him off.

My modus operandi was to get all my school work done for the day — I was in graduate school — then go to the **Chukker** several nights a week about 11 p.m. to find my buddies. With a few exceptions, most anyone I was interested in spending time with would be there.

We'd chat, drink, catch up, and a few of us would end up serenading anyone brave enough to stick around with what we thought was beautiful harmonizing. In hindsight, it probably sounded more like alley cats brawling — but we thought it was great.

One of my old drinking pals also was in town this month for the grand reopening. His **Chukker** days go back further than mine.

His first time in the **Chukker** was in 1960 when he was an underage college student. The place had opened three years earlier as a candle-lit piano bar. In those days, white tablecloths covered the tables and waiters wore waist-length white jackets. They served delicious steaks and 25-cent beer.

It was a safe haven for intellectuals — writers, poets, musicians, scholars — and homosexuals. Later in the 1960s, small combos would set up in a corner on weekend nights and entertain the customers — who could still carry on conversations if they wanted.

This friend tended bar for Bill Thompson in 1963-64.

"I was paid three beers, choice of steak dinner and \$1 per hour," he said. "It was really a special place in those first seven or eight years."

Remembering the weekend entertainment, he said the **Chukker** was the closest thing to New Orleans atmosphere this side of Lake Pontchartrain in those early days.

After I completed graduate school and moved away, I rarely returned to the **Chukker**.

But when I moved back here in 1998, I attended a **Chukker** reunion. It was not the same.

Long gone was the **Chukker** I once knew and loved. And this recent reopening didn't bring any of it back. So with fingers plugged into our ears and shouting at each other over the music, my friend and I commiserated our loss — at the bar.