

## TOMMY STEVENSON



### AT LARGE

# Gone, but not forgotten

**T**he first time I ever laid eyes on The Chukker, the venerable, nearly 50-year-old bar and cultural institution that closed its doors for good last weekend with a big blowout that lasted well after sunup, I knew next to nothing about Tuscaloosa.

It was about 1975. I found myself walking down Sixth Street from the old Tucaloosa News building and spied several Harley choppers sitting on the sidewalk in front of a nondescript and somewhat ratty store front emblazoned with "THE CHUKKER" in homemade wooden lettering. "Boy," I thought to myself, "that looks like a door *I'd* never open."

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Little did I know that a year or so later, after I started working for The News, that I'd be spending many a night (perhaps *too* many a night) hanging out there, enjoying the libations (back then only beer was sold) and the camaraderie. At the time, the bar was up front, right inside the door, and the only music was a jukebox with a limited, but eclectic repertoire that included everything from Patsy Cline to Lou Reed (appropriately, "Crazy" and "Take a Walk on the Wild Side").

Other than the beer, the main attraction was the conversation, and rarely did a night pass that the big old round table in the middle of the main room wasn't alive with spirited banter from an assortment of eccentrics, including blue-collar workers, students, professors, bikers, gays, itinerant musicians, lawyers and the odd journalist or two. In short, "The Chukker Nation" (a term I have always found a bit pretentious, if not elitist, but one that has stuck nonetheless).

And I'm sure, as a relative newcomer, both 28 years ago and up to last call Saturday morning, I hadn't made myself comfortable very long before some regular complained, "Ah, The Chukker ain't what it used to be — you should have been here in the good old days."

Such, I imagine, is the lament in many a similar cultural icon (The Chukker, opened in 1956, billed itself as the "oldest continuous bar in the state," a claim that probably could be challenged by some waterfront dive in Mobile), where those who have been around the longest romanticize the past — and their youth.

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About 20 years ago, after the bar had been expanded to include liquor, new pool and foosball tables, a second room, a courtyard and a stage for live music, the club began to have "Chukker Nation Reunions," usually on a Friday or Saturday around the Christmas holidays, so that people visiting or coming home from out of town could attend. I made most of them, although since I quit drinking going on a year now, I hadn't been through that intimidating door much recently, except to hear live music.

But I and about 400 other people did make the last reunion last weekend, although I left early — around 3:30 a.m. Saturday, when there were two bands still to play.

People attended from as far away as California, New York, Spain and even Auburn, and I met tons of old friends, saw a lot of the current regulars and made the acquaintance of several of the legendary old timers.

The demise of The Chukker came, of course, because of the new Tuscaloosa city ordinance that mandates a 2 a.m. closing time Tuesday-Friday, and in so doing disenfranchised the club's core constituency, those who work and party late. (I remember once a couple of years ago arriving at 2 a.m., leaving at 5 and realizing that there were more people there when I left than when I got there).

Back when they started the annual reunions, there was always something of a culture clash as the elder Chukker nationals mingled with perplexed current habitués. Back then, I would turn to the then-regulars and assure them not to worry. They, too, could come back in 10 or 15 years and complain that "The Chukker ain't what it used to be."

Well, no more.