

**November 14 is Party Night at
THE BEAR DEN**

in Soldotna

**PLAN NOW TO COME
Chell O. and Maxine Bear, Prop.**

The Cheechako News – October 30, 1959

THE BEAR DEN

Soldotna, Alaska

WE HAVE —

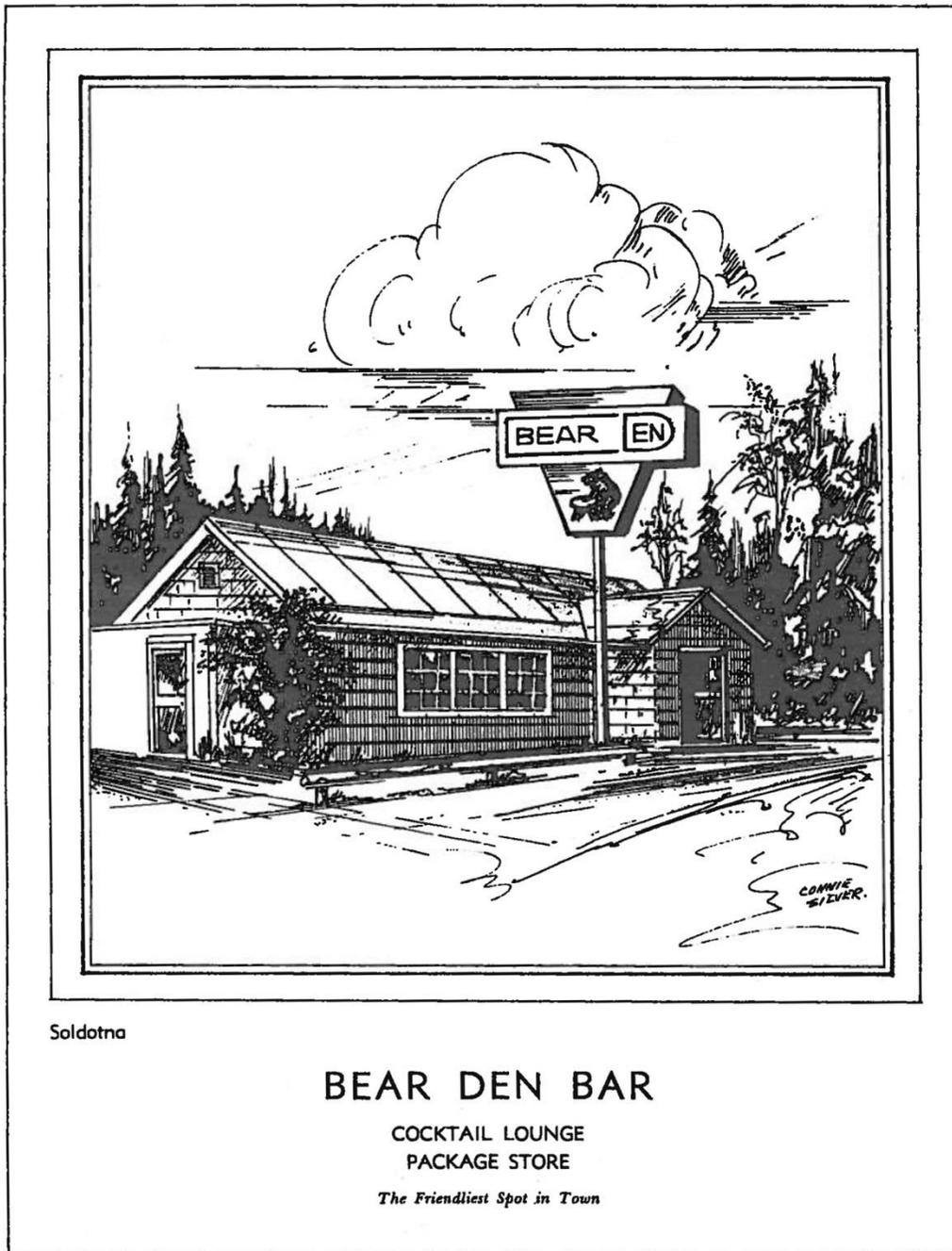
- **THE BIGGEST BARTENDER**
- **THE HAPPIEST HOSTESS**
- **THE WETTEST WHISKEY**

OF ANY PLACE IN TOWN

Come in and see for yourself. If you can't
come—Send a Friend

CHELL O. & MAXINE BEAR

The Cheechako News – November 25, 1959



Soldotna

BEAR DEN BAR

COCKTAIL LOUNGE
PACKAGE STORE

The Friendliest Spot in Town

From *Alaska Highway Sketches* by Connie Silver - 1962.



March 31, 2010 • 9:55 am

Almanac: Toasting warm memories at BJ's — Last call for alcohol after 30-plus years

By Clark Fair

Redoubt Reporter

BEAR DEN BAR

—PACKAGE STORE—



Proprietor Chell Bear and friend.

Photos courtesy of the Kenai Peninsula College Anthropology Lab.

A *Cheechako News* advertisement for the Bear Den Bar in the early 1960s features proprietor Chell Bear and his “friend,” a black bear holding a bottle of liquor.

Starting at about noon on Sunday, Ardie Crawford and an industrious group of her friends and family gathered at BJ's Lounge in Soldotna to begin dismantling a business that Crawford had been a part of for more than 23 years.

Amid constant chatter and the rising tendrils of smoke from many cigarettes, televisions came down from wooden perches in almost every corner, neon lights were unscrewed and unplugged from the windows, and tables and chairs were shoved into clusters in the main rooms to keep them out of the way of the workers.

Along the walls stood several large mirrors, a jukebox and an old cigarette dispenser bearing an "Out of Order" sign. Piled on the tables were dartboards and signs and TV sets. Two large Smokeeters hummed away near the ceiling. Where artwork and memorabilia had been stripped from the painted walls, white silhouettes showing the original latex were outlined by yellow from decades of smoke.

Atop the long bar, with its curved ends, stood five tall stacks of glass ashtrays and an assortment of miscellaneous cords, cables and tools. Behind the bar scurried a handful of helpers, organizing, toting boxes, calling to each other, and wiping down the woodwork. In front of the bar stood a row of black bar stools, all pointed toward the drinks that would no longer be served.

The origins of the bar go back more than three decades, before Crawford came onto the scene. In fact, a bar has been standing in approximately the same spot since before Soldotna was a city — back all the way to a village in its infancy.

In Soldotna's early days, the late 1940s, there were few places for people to gather. There were no established churches, but there was a post office. However, people sought more convivial surroundings, and soon there were three drinking (and, at times, drinking and eating) establishments in the area — 4 Royle Parkers (begun as a small Ridgeway eatery in the log home of Jack and Margaret Irons), Davenport's (which became The Ace of Clubs and is now The Maverick Saloon), and a small bar/restaurant built initially by Joe Faa on a piece of land that today is the southwest corner of Kobuk Street and the Sterling Highway.



Just before the time that Chell and Maxine Bear sold the Bear Den in the mid-1960s, this is how it appeared. The front door faced the Sterling Highway, and a large sign (just out of the photo, on the right) featured the first neon used in Soldotna.

In 1949, Faa approached Jack and Dolly Farnsworth about purchasing a piece of their property, but at that time the Farnsworths had not yet received patent to their homestead, according to Dolly, so it was illegal for them to sell land. Consequently, Faa turned instead to Howard Binkley, who readily sold him the land he desired.

Faa and his wife, Mickey — who became Soldotna's second postmaster after the first one, Maxine Lee, left town — were out of the bar business in the early 1950s, selling out to Emmett Karsten and Chell Bear, who had moved his wife, Maxine, and their four children into the area in 1949 while he worked for the Alaska Road Commission. Karsten and Bear together formed the B & K Bar, but it would remain as such only briefly.

In 1952, Karsten sold his share of the bar to the Bears, and when Chell and Maxine became the sole proprietors, they changed the name of the business to the Bear Den — a name that lasted for more than 30 years.

The Bear Den, which would later sport Soldotna's first neon sign on the front right-hand corner of the building, became a gathering place. Marge Mullen, who has lived in Soldotna since the late 1940s, said that the bar was frequented by many of the men in the area — to drink, talk and sometimes look for work. People often contacted the bar if they wanted information, she said.



Chell and Maxine Bear, proprietors of the Bear Den, smiled for the camera in front of the fireplace and next to the small dance floor in their establishment.

In fact, during some of the early elections in Soldotna, voters came to the Bear Den to cast their ballots, Mullen said. On polling days, the bars had to close between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., and during that time the space was used for polling.

Of course, the main attractions at the Bear Den were good company, accommodating hosts, a variety of alcohol, and dancing.

“The windows would be open on a summer night, and the music would come pouring out,” Mullen recalled. “You could tell a lot of dancing was going on.”

Glenn Kooly, a longtime friend and classmate of the Bears’ son, Ted, also recalled fondly the atmosphere at the Bear Den.

“Back in them days, the bars didn’t close,” he said. “The door was never locked. People just walked in and out. Sometimes there wasn’t anybody in there (tending bar), and the place’d be half full.”

Around 1960, Marge Mullen’s son, Frank, was in the midst of his young career as a paperboy for *The Anchorage Times*, and he said that he would sometimes hitch up his red carrying bag and enter the Bear Den to peddle his wares. Occasionally, he would strike paydirt as inebriated customers requested papers, overpaid him, and told him to keep the change.

On one particular summer afternoon, Frank biked on his single-speed Schwinn up to the bar to find a group of men outdoors in the parking, busily drinking, making wagers and focusing their attention on a pair of intoxicated, shirtless men who seemed bent on some sort of competition. He recognized one of the men as a roughneck named Gareth Wright, one of the favorite sprint mushers living in the area.



Chell Bear pauses for a moment outside of the Bear Den in the 1960s.

When all of the men headed for the Kenai River a few hundred yards away, Frank followed, and there he learned that Wright and the other man planned to see who could swim across the river the fastest. In front of a raucous crowd gathered just below the Soldotna bridge, the two men performed “a little chest-thumping and testosterone delivery” and then, still wearing long pants, leaped into the river and began to swim.

The bark of Wright’s opponent, it turned out, was worse than his bite.

“He got out there about a third of the way, and then he crawled up on a rock that was sticking out of the water a couple of feet,” Frank said. “Gareth Wright kept on swimming and went right on

over to the other side. He jumped out of the river and started waving his arms and hoo-hawing and stuff, and then they ran him back to the Bear Den and started drinking again.”

Wright’s unfortunate opponent had to be rescued by some men in a small dory tied up near the bridge.

In the early to mid-1960s, a small building was constructed next to the Bear Den and was called the Burger Den. For three years or so, Walt and Effie Bremond ran an eatery there, featuring plenty of barbecue.

But the main focus was always the bar. Numerous customers remembered the Bears as generous, pleasant people who admirably performed what could at times be a demanding, stressful job. By the mid-1960s, however, Chell and Maxine had had enough and decided to sell the bar.

They sold it to Neelon and Lola Harbarger, former proprietors of the Decanter Inn in Kasilof, in about 1966, and for several years thereafter the ownership of the bar became more tumultuous.

Neelon died shortly after the purchase. Lola married Donovan Stephens, and then in December 1968 she was killed in a traffic-related accident. Stephens remarried, and he decided to sell the liquor license and business while retaining all rights to the property.



Lawrence “Mac” McGuire (standing), one of Soldotna’s earliest settlers, chats with an Anchorage visitor, while in the background Louise Merth (in white) talks with Chell and Maxine Bear in the Bear Den.

In probably 1969, Colleen Gordon took over the bar. In about 1974, the bar burned to the ground and Stephens waited several months before building a new concrete-block structure on the same spot. After the new construction was complete, Gordon ran the Bear Den for a few more months before she sold her business and liquor license to Gloria Huckabee and Valetta Smith in 1975.

Smith, who had once tended bar next door at The Ace of Clubs, said that she bought out Huckabee about a year later and ran the business herself until 1985, when she sold out to Janet Johnson, who had formerly tended bar across the highway at the Riverside House.

In 1986, Johnson sold the business and liquor license to Bob and Judy Walston, who renamed the bar after their first initials and hired Ardie Crawford to be one of their bartenders. Crawford bought out the Walstons in 1993 and ran the bar until last weekend.

Crawford, who is closing down for financial reasons, said, “I really do feel bad that I’m putting an end to it. In this economy, a bar just can’t stay open anymore by itself because of liquor laws and the economy and just everything.”

She said that the trend for survival now is an eating establishment with full beverage service, and changing BJ’s to such an establishment is a makeover she can’t afford.



She said that BJ’s’ sales have declined precipitously in the last three years, and her attempts at finding a new owner to assume her lease and buy the liquor license were met by resistance initially from Don Stephens, who died a year ago, and then by the Stephens estate.

Crawford is now preparing to transfer her liquor license to Don Jose’s restaurant, which has agreed to purchase it. Later this week, she plans to have a massive garage sale of all the furniture, equipment and accoutrements of the bar.

At about 3 a.m. last Sunday, after a raucous farewell Saturday night full of old friends, hearty drinking, storytelling, dancing and a taco bar, Crawford supervised her last call for alcohol. Then she shut off the lights and closed for business for the final time.

Filed under Almanac, entertainment, history

3 Responses to Almanac: Toasting warm memories at BJ's — Last call for alcohol after 30-plus years

Tammy Bear

July 13, 2010 at 7:07 pm

It was a nice surprise to see this article of my grandparents! I loved seeing the pictures of them too. When we came to spend summers with my dad, Billy Bear, we would of course spend time there. My sister Julie still has the original wooden Bear Den Bar sign hanging in her living room. Thanks again for the great article :)

<http://redoubtreporter.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/almanac-toasting-warm-memories-at-bj%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%94-last-call-for-alcohol-after-30-plus-years/>