

Greater Yellowstone: Inside & Out June, 2005

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The Lander Bar & Hotel

by Tony Malmberg

When I stepped into the Lander Bar & Hotel for the first time in 1978, Mike Turbovich greeted me with a warm “Hello, neighbor!” Each new arrival got the same greeting, whether they were a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) student just off a semester course, a roughneck on days off, or a cowboy like me settlin’ the South Pass trail dust. The breadth of Mike’s smile pulled his lips and eyes into slits, as if invisible hands were stretching his hide across his cheeks and back to his ears. His spotless white shirt set off a black-string bolo tie, downplayed by an open collar. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows and a clean white bar rag seemed like an extension of his hand.

The big brick building was constructed in 1907, but Mike’s Serbian parents didn’t buy the place until around 1930. Mike was in his early 20s when his father quit the Thermopolis coal mines to run this bar, located across the street from the train depot. It must have been wild when the cowboys got their paychecks after trailing herds to the railroad.

Mike’s stories conjured hoop-skirted ladies and honky-tonk music in the dark and dusty back room. He claimed his parents ran a whorehouse upstairs, and our gazes often snuck yearningly toward the staircase sweeping the back wall.

We could see Lander’s own Stub Farlow leap from his image on the Wyoming license plates to spur the legendary bucking horse, Steamboat, through the saloon’s front door. And even though this big brick building wasn’t here when Butch Cassidy frequented Lander to visit his schoolteacher girlfriend, we imagined the couple strolling the boardwalk out front.

In the fall of 1979, I stood with the ranchers at one end of the bar while roughnecks leaned on the other end, and Atlantic City iron-ore miners sat around a table in the corner. Most of Mike’s patrons worked the trenches of western Wyoming’s natural resource economy. Some scruffy kids fresh out of the mountains and a NOLS climbing course played pool.

A Budweiser was \$.80 in ’79 and a Walkers-ditch was more water than Walkers. The jukebox vacillated between Johnny Cash singing of trains, prison, and “A Boy Named Sue,” and Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon.” It wasn’t quite the Old West anymore, but the frontier was still a common theme with Mike’s regulars. Most of us wore cowboy boots and hats, and we all had that burr of restless independence under our saddles.

Times were good. The miners owned homes and horses for team roping on weekends and elk hunting in the fall. Roughnecks followed the rigs in brand new 4X4 trucks, and grinning ranchers slugged and pushed one another, tipping shots of whiskey to calf sales of more than a dollar a pound for the first time, ever.

A couple of ranchers argued about whether they should ship calves to our local Riverton Auction or truck them halfway across the state to Torrington. My neighbor Bill, a tough-wiry rancher with an infectious laugh and a mischievous sparkle in his eye, asserted his mantra of community: “Buy at home, sell at home, stay at home, and some day you will have a home.”

Then, the cattle market broke, the oil fields dried up and the mine closed. Work at a Nevada barite mill paid my child support and provided a couple of square meals a day, until the green grass of spring called me home.

On my return, boarded storefronts greeted me like a blank stare.

“Hello, neighbor!” Mike called in his usual jovial manner. The jukebox was dark and only a few patrons slumped over the bar.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Went looking for work, son. Nevada mostly.”

I slid a quarter in the pool table, “How ya been, Don?”

My neighbor stooped gingerly over the table, aiming his cue to break. “Like a sharecropper,” he said.

We didn’t have to wait in line at the pool table for several years.

But as the 1980s faded, the Chinooks brought change gusting down the Wind River Mountain slopes. All along Main Street, boards came down and paint went up. Old timers smirked as a health-food store, a boutique, and two espresso shops opened. Barn-like houses suddenly jutted from ridge tops where before there was only sky, and hayfields sprouted subdivisions.

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Clean people wearing leather and youngsters who drove Toyotas and Subarus came into Mike's. One night the bar was hopping. Waylon's agonizing songs about cowboys being broke, drunk and divorced had changed to a song about a guy with his hat...on, and his boots...dusty, and his saddle...worn. It seemed the hard decade of the 80s had left only a few symbols to remember the cowboy by. As the roar escalated to a frenzy, Mike suddenly kicked us all out. "I've had enough!" he yelled. "Get out, everybody get out."

Some of the locals didn't want change. Mike? He retired and sold out.

The rumor was that some ski patrol guys from Jackson Hole bought it. We figured it would turn into a yuppie bar. They dusted the place, and put in new windows and doors. The dark back room became light. The paraphernalia that had always been hanging around the bar, like an old sheep hook, a draft-horse collar and several pairs of well-worn boots, metamorphosed from clutter into a theme. The new was made to look old—but clean. They even built a sort of shrine to Mike in one corner, with a picture of that stretch-faced smile and clean white shirt captioned by his greeting, "Hello, neighbor!" It wasn't bad.

A few years later, my brother came home from his east-coast job to visit. "What's changed in Lander?" he asked. I took him to the Lander Bar, the town's barometer.

He saw cowboys and Indians, NOLS kids as before but also older rock-jocks who had returned to call Lander's mountains their home. There were granola crunchers and carnivores, leather-clad bikers and spandexed cyclists, scientists and administrators, some yogis and even the district judge. But the cliques "neighborhoods" of old had quietly intermingled into a diverse community. Those of us who stuck it out knew it takes more than rugged independence to survive a frontier. It takes people seeing past different looks while looking in the same direction to come through changing times. Some call it the "eco-bar," but to me "the cowboy" was still the common thread in this crowd. The time of the lone ranger had passed though; toughness meant tolerance in this new West. My brother and I ordered a designer "beer beyond Budweiser" and clinked our pints to old times and the missing faces.

But a lot of the old faces remained. By honoring our traditions, the Lander Bar's new owners eased our nervousness as they subtly welcomed the changing town. Without stopping to think, it's hard to remember when the clientele changed, like it's hard to remember when the pool table went from two bits to six. Now the back room glows from the flames of the Gannett Grill, where burgers share menu space with hummus and there's even a sandwich named the Turbovichwich.

Eventually, Jim Mitchell bought out his partners in the Lander Bar and expanded the menu to include fine evening fare by creating the Cowfish restaurant next-door. My wife, Andrea, loves good beer so we went to check out the award-winning Snake River micro-brews fermented on site. I was excited to find they had locally grown beef to go with the locally brewed beer.

We finally met Jim. I had seen him around before but I always assumed he was a busboy or kitchen help, because he was either cooking burgers or cleaning tables at the Gannett. Our cowboy ethic appreciates those who work the trenches, and Jim's unassuming demeanor and quiet manner put us at ease. Andrea and I complimented him on taking the initiative to serve locally grown beef at his new Cowfish restaurant. We told him about our Twin Creek Ranch's "Beyond Organic Beef" (BOB). Jim asked what that meant.

We explained that our customers want their beef to grow naturally from the landscape they live on. Our cattle spend their lives on the high sagebrush steppe, with open space, clean air, mountain spring water, and fresh grass to make beef that is natural, high in nutrition and great tasting.

"So what do you think," we asked, "will you serve our burger at the Gannett Grill?"

Jim was excited, "Sure, let's do this!" BOB burgers have been on the Gannett Grill's menu since the fall of 2003. Cowfish serves an occasional special of BOB beef too. Local beef for a local market—who'd of thought?

For more than a century, cattle feeders came from far places to buy Lander Valley cattle. Now, thanks to these newcomers, we can raise our beef on the native mountain grass just as our pioneer ancestors did but we can sell it right here at home. My neighbor Bill's mantra echoes in my mind: "Buy at home, sell at home, stay at home, and some day you will have a home."