

Best lil' beer house in North St. Paul

by Chris Riemenschneider
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In its 117-year history, Neumann's has survived Prohibition, a biker fight or two and even a loose giant bullfrog. So it's probably no surprise that the rustic, intimate beer saloon and rock club in downtown North St. Paul is now also defeating suburban gentrification.

Character in rock bars is as rare as Hamm's beer taps nowadays, but Neumann's still has both to offer. It's the longest-operating bar in Minnesota history. There are older saloon buildings, mind you, but no other bar in the state has operated nonstop since 1887 under the same name with the same basic concept: selling beer and keeping people entertained.

In the past year or two, the entertainment value at Neumann's has gone beyond the live bullfrogs that sit in a water tank by the front door -- a fixture for as long as anybody can remember, and for reasons nobody can really explain.

No mere relic, Neumann's has built a reputation as a happening live music venue. While other suburban bars book K.C. & the Sunshine soundalikes and Mötley Crüe cover bands, Neumann's offers mostly original rock, country and blues, often with a vintage edge.

"It reminds me of the 400 Bar in the '80s -- a small, intimate room with a real friendly scene," said local music vet Rick Hollister, who often plays suburban clubs with his great rockabilly band Jack Knife & the Sharps.

The difference at Neumann's, he said: "It's not as sanitary and generic as so many other clubs nowadays."

You know this the moment you walk in the two-story brick building. The ceiling is tin. The bar is all wood, with brass fixtures and none of those colorful, eye-candy lights used under liquor bottles at trendy new bars. Best of all, the hardwood floor looks like the North St. Paul Polars football team practices on it weekly, in cleats.

HAMM IT UP

You can soak up the bar's history in the air, or you can read it on the walls. Old newspaper articles and photos hang here and there amid Hamm's memorabilia and deer heads. In one photo, a horse-drawn carriage is parked out front on a dirt street, where a small row of Harleys is usually parked today.

Neumann's originally opened as a Hamm's "kit bar," akin to the way a car dealer today sets up shop with the help of Ford or Hyundai. The original owner was German immigrant August Neumann, who passed it along to his son Jim in 1925.

Not long after Jim took over, of course, came Prohibition. Jim stayed in business in the '30s by selling near-beer and -- according to legend, anyway -- operating a speakeasy upstairs. There's still a booby-hatch in the doorway to the upstairs offices that supports the story.

Neumann's stayed in the Neumann family until the '70s, when grandson-in-law Bill Warzeka sold it. A series of owners took over, making burgers and sandwiches a staple in the '80s but doing little in the way of upkeep.

"It had become a pretty sad, almost scary place," said Maplewood resident Kevin Pfeiffer, one of the bar's many regulars who grew up nearby.

Another regular remembered a wild night when some drunken yahoo took a bite out of one of the frogs.

"Even the frogs were scared back then," Pfeiffer joked.

THE REV-OLUTION

Today, Neumann's is owned by Kevin Campbell, a North St. Paul High graduate who made money in the '80s and '90s by running catering and concessions at rock concerts. When he took over Neumann's 10 years ago, Campbell realized the potential of "preserving a place with such a valuable history and irreplaceable character," he said.

"I remembered growing up, kids would go in there with worms or bait to feed the frogs, and they'd get a free pop for it," Campbell recalled. "I wanted it to stay that kind of place."

About three years ago, he put his rock 'n' roll past to use and started booking bands. He crammed a stage into one corner, using cases of empty beer bottles to prop it up. He also built a patio bar.

Come summertime, Neumann's is hopping nowadays. On Friday nights, the main strip of downtown North St. Paul is lined with classic hot-rods and car enthusiasts. Neumann's helps kick things off for motorheads with its Crazy Days festival the first weekend of June. The bar also still attracts a lot of motorcyclists, although one waitress aptly called

them "teddy-bear bikers."

Non-biker Peggy Sworski of Oakdale loves that Neumann's "feels like a classic, working-class Minnesota bar."

"It's not some strip-mall piece of junk," she said. "I could picture my grandpa hanging out here 50 years ago and having as much fun as I am."

Coincidentally or not, Campbell's favorite story about running Neumann's -- aside from the one about how the biggest and oldest of the frogs disappeared for a week -- is when he overheard two gray-headed gentlemen having lunch there one day.

"Turns out they were father and son, and the dad -- who was probably 80 -- said, 'I remember when my father took me here as a kid,'" said Campbell, who's working on re-opening another historic bar and grill, the former Star Cafe on the Mississippi River in Stockholm, Wis.

"Stories like that are what make a place like this."

Neumann's Bar

Where: 2531 7th Ave East
Downtown North St. Paul. From Interstate Hwy. 35E or I-35W,, take Hwy. 36 east, right on McKnight Rd., left on 7th Av.

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