

The Columbus Dispatch

COUNTERCULTURE WATERING HOLE

Larry's: 'Center of the universe' closing

Bar has catered to an eclectic crowd on N. High Street since before Prohibition

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Larry's is the stuff of legend, a weathered bohemian watering hole where Bob Dylan supposedly once spent the night in an upstairs apartment, a bowling alley used to draw patrons to the basement, and finger-snapping poetry nights attracted Monday crowds for a quarter-century.

"It used to be the center of the universe," said Mike Hummel, a Columbus rock musician who has frequented the Ohio State University-area bar since the 1970s and was once known as "the mayor of Larry's."

No longer.

Time has caught up with Larry's: At the close of business tonight, the family-owned establishment -- one of the first High Street outposts to serve suds after Prohibition -- will shut its doors for good.

Fewer customers and greater costs for everything from property taxes to alcohol forced the owners' hands.

"What I always liked about this bar was not changing it," said Jon Paoletti, 53, who with his wife, Linda, has operated Larry's since 1998.

"But we've run out of money to continue doing this."

A Mexican restaurant, Paoletti said, will lease the space from them, adding to the area's fast-casual options of the same ilk (including Cazuela's Grill, Jimmy Guaco's, La Bamba, Taco Bell and Chipotle).



COURTNEY

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Larry's bar on N. High Street closes tonight after decades of culture and counterculture interacting within its walls.



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Word of the bar's closing caught some regular patrons off-guard yesterday.

Canaan Faulkner, a Columbus rock bassist who used to perform at the bar, was planning to attend a poetry slam at Larry's on Monday.

He'll look elsewhere now, he said, but no place will be quite the same.

"It was great to be able to fall into a booth and have a drink and a conversation there," Faulkner said.

"Every city's got to have that bar. Where is that bar in Columbus now?"

Area merchants and others, though, said they'd sensed in recent years that the 85-year-old establishment -- a countercultural beacon in a sea of new campus-area development -- was in trouble.

Rick Ohanian said he designed a patio for Larry's -- an amenity the Paolettis wanted to add to attract new patrons as well as regulars put off by the 2006 city-imposed smoking ban.

The city approved a zoning permit for the patio last summer, but the Paolettis didn't begin construction within the one-year time limit, Ohanian said, and they didn't return his calls about the project.

Jimmy Barouxis, manager of nearby Buckeye Donuts and a longtime neighbor of Larry's, said he offered the Paolettis \$1.3 million last summer to purchase the bar. He planned to keep the original name and aesthetics, he said, but add a food menu and make minor cosmetic improvements.

The couple accepted, Barouxis said, but several weeks later refused to sign legal papers. When they asked for \$1.75 million, the deal fell through, he said.

In its heyday, Larry's was a haven for savvy graduate students and intellectuals (who were known to keep unruly undergrads away by spreading rumors that the place was a gay bar).

It originated as the Lawrence Grill, which moved from Downtown to 2040 N. High St. in 1923. Owned by Lawrence and Mary Paoletti, grandparents of Jon, the fancy Italian restaurant featured white tablecloths and ornate latticework.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, alcohol entered the equation. Lawrence Paoletti's son Larry, as a college student, began working in the kitchen several years later.

As World War II ended and soldiers, including Larry, flooded back to campus, the fancy decor was removed and the place, wearing its current name, became more bar than bistro.

For a brief period in the 1950s, Larry's was a fraternity bar, although the clientele didn't always agree with the Paolettis' open-minded views on their patronage -- long before societal norms began to shift, crowds of various races and sexual orientations mingled there regularly.

Later, it attracted Vietnam War protesters and artistic types, an eclectic gathering place where noted folk singer Phil Ochs is rumored to have played his first gig and Louis Armstrong once visited.

"You could go table to table and at one table there'd be a table of architects next to a table of journalists next to a table of poets," said Ron House, a local musician and former co-owner of Used Kids Records, on N. High Street. "After about six beers, I could converse with all of them on equal terms."

The dusky interior is known for its wooden tables with hand-carved graffiti, a corkboard peppered with a rainbow of fliers and a well-known jukebox whose selections (hand-picked by Paoletti) ranged from the

Velvet Underground to Modest Mouse.

Larry died in 1999 at age 77.

Despite the bar's rich history, the Larry's spirit had faded somewhat, said Eddie Pfau, a Columbus lawyer who rented a room above the bar in the 1990s while attending law school at Capital University.

The Paolettis, he said, were like family to him -- which is why he helped the couple clean up their 14 apartment units so they could raise rents to generate extra income.

With the couple continuing to struggle to make ends meet, though, the bar's demise didn't surprise him.

"It's so sad," Pfau said. "It was a wonderful institution. I knew the day would come."

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