

Blue

Moon



A Blue Moon illuminates the Nob Hill intersection of NW 21st and Glisan. Since 1985 the comfortable and engaging space has shone like an unusual beacon, attracting folks from all corners of the community. The Moon, it seems, has always been on the horizon, but it has cycled through many phases. From the hardcore biker days of the early 1980s, to the long run of the Silver Moon, and even back to the pioneer days when the site was first settled by former slaves from Kentucky, the Blue Moon has taken over 150 years to crest.

Long before this was a commercial area, even before streets were cut through, there stood proudly on this spot the home of Andrew and Sarah Johnston. The Johnstons were former slaves who came to Oregon sometime in the late 1860s, hoping to make a new life for themselves. The politics of Oregon at the time clearly reflected an anti-black sentiment, and legislation severely restricted African Americans' abilities to make contracts, buy property and marry anyone outside of their race. Despite these obstacles the Johnstons took the remarkable step of acquiring a small lot—the future Blue Moon site—in 1879. The couple moved in three years later placing them among the first black homeowners in Portland. Sadly, not long after the move Andrew Johnston died in an accident. The widowed Sarah continued on, doing domestic work, built a second house on the lot as a rental and eventually met a new companion in Joseph Wisdom. The Wisdom household endured here until Sarah's passing in 1910. By the time of her death Nob Hill had developed into a formally designed and predominantly white neighborhood.

Soon after Sarah's death, a commercial building was raised on the corner lot. The space

Charlie himself raced through the place on his motorcycle, wildy shooting a gun...

became home to several notable early Northwest Portland businesses, including the White Palace Grocery, Durst Thriftway and a wine dealer called Greystone Cellars. In the post WWII era the space housed several variety stores such as F.A. Rogers 5-10-15 Cents store and the M & I Variety store. Then, in 1973, a well-established neighborhood tavern—the original Moon—left its old location and moved into the corner building.

The original *Silver Moon* tavern ascended a few doors down from here in 1933. Supposedly the second “beer parlor” licensed in Portland following Prohibition, the Silver Moon was a fruitful venture for Fred Vranizan and his friend Joe Didak. The two ran the place successfully for 15 years until finally going their own ways.

The Silver Moon continued, however, and in the '50s was taken over by an old sailor, Bill Rice. He acquired the bar as a means to leave his career at sea, but the sea followed him and the little watering hole became quite popular with Rice's old crowd. Through 1968, the Moon was a favorite hangout for sailors and longshoreman to drink some beer, brawl or gamble. Betting on pool was common and dog racing forms were kept behind the bar. A bookie came by twice a day to take bets for the day's greyhound races. In those days the Moon never did have a liquor license, but by all accounts, whiskey



The turn-of-the-century stove was added after the fire in 2000.

flowed pretty liberally.

Rice never became accustomed to life on land and in 1968 the Moon was sold once more. Gus and Sophia Lilles, both Greek immigrants, ushered in a different, cheery atmosphere at the 35-year-old tavern. An extensive food menu replaced the dog racing forms, art was hung and the place redecorated. The two were happy with the business they built, but when a fire damaged the Moon in 1973, they were forced to move. Fortunately, the Lilles found a great spot just a few doors down at the corner of NW 21st and Glisan.

The Lilles settled nicely into the future Blue Moon spot, adding more food and drink options and most important, live music. Bands played here on a makeshift plywood stage, often to a full house. It was one of the first bars in Portland to get a cabaret permit and the bar was a very popular venue in the '70s and early '80s. Bands like the Sleazy Pieces, Brown Sugar, Carl Smith & the Natural Gas Company and the Cowboy Angels played here regularly.

Eventually, the neighborhood's turn to a rougher atmosphere frustrated the Greek couple, and in March of '83 the Moon changed hands again. Good Time Charlie's, as it was christened, was a raucous, hardcore biker bar. It was a notoriously wild establishment and for a stint the former Moon burned bright. Of course, the Good Times couldn't last forever, and in the spring of '84, the doors were closed. Legend has it that on the last day, Charlie himself raced through the place on his motorcycle, wildly shooting a gun and trampling anything in his path!

That seemed like the end of the old Moon's cycle; for months, the building at 21st and Glisan sat empty. Sometimes though, things take an unexpected turn and in 1985 the Moon rose once more, this time in a blue mood. From the time it reopened as McMenamins Blue Moon, the place quickly became a sentimental favorite in the neighborhood. It was McMenamins' fifth pub and, as such, was one of the first places to serve our handcrafted ales. The concept of a McMenamins Marching Band was born here. Three artists—Joe Cotter, Lyle Hehn and Scott Young—who went on to do many inspired creations at Edgefield, the Crystal Ballroom and

other locations, did some of their first work for McMenamins at the Moon. The Moon was also a notable stop on the original, more raw version of the Cosmic Bus Tour, a pub crawl on wheels.

For 15 years, the Blue Moon thrived at this busy corner, a popular spot with a special appeal for the neighborhood and beyond. It seemed the Moon's new cycle would go on uninterrupted when, in September 2000, the place was gutted by fire. The damage was extensive, but so is the Moon's resolve; the smoke had barely cleared when plans to rebuild were laid on the table. You can't improve on the original, and with that in mind the Moon was renovated to recreate the comfortable and engaging feel of the old Moon. Of course, the opportunity was grabbed to introduce some fun new elements, such as the accordion doors, a classic wood stove and a whole new gallery of art. The Blue Moon rose anew in February 2001.

The Blue Moon's story stretches back some 150 years and is filled with characters and episodes that still have us shaking our heads. From runaway slaves to unruly sailors, and from rowdy bikers to the friends and family who are welcome today, this spot has always attracted folks of all sorts. This neighborhood tavern is a moonlit reflection of life at NW 21st and Glisan—life that continues in full force today!



The venerable Blue Moon.