

McMENAMINS TAVERN

The creaky door announces your entrance into a near century of neighborhood history. Tall ceilings, well-worn hard wood floors and period artwork mingle with psychedelic posters, a bejeweled John Wayne, and decorative chalkboards. With its uneven walls and sinking base, the building itself speaks of decades past, but the artistic ambiance and irreverent style flashes a wink at years to come. Relax, look around, this is McMenamins Tavern and Pool! Enjoy a pint and be part of the continuum that goes back all the way to when an adventurous Bavarian brewer and saloon man named Anton Gansneder built the place.

Allegedly erected on a base of sawdust, Gansneder's original 1909 construction featured four-street level storefronts and a number of second-story lodging rooms. The pool hall that occupied the northernmost storefront was not a big place; two to four pool tables and a bar were likely the only furnishings of note. Food offerings were little to none, but surely lots of drinks passed over the bar. Even during Prohibition patrons had options; bootleggers were regulars at the pool hall and often alternated between nine-ball and booze-orders.

...bootleggers were regulars at the pool hall and often alternated between nine-ball and booze-orders.

The little bar on NW 23rd—eventually known as the Northwest Tavern & Pool—reflected

the composition of the neighborhood it served. This rugged area of Northwest Portland was known then as Slab Town, a name derived from the area's several lumber mills and the massive amounts of slab wood they produced. It was a vital working class enclave where a large number of the men worked for the nearby mills or the streetcar maintenance facility at 24th and Savier. The neighborhood developed a distinct Eastern European flavor from the many Slavic natives that settled here soon after the turn of the century. Indeed, since

the Tavern's opening in 1909 until the mid 60s virtually all of its proprietors were of Eastern European descent.

In the 1930s, Dick Sinovic's uncle managed the pool hall. On a recent visit to the Tavern Dick recalled that even though he and his buddies weren't of legal age, Uncle Tony let them come into the bar on Saturdays or after church on Sundays. His uncle knew the boys were mostly interested in playing pool, but they got a glimpse of the grown-up world of Tavern life in the process.

By the mid-1940s the area was booming, its streets choked with peddlers, streetcars, and an increasing number of automobiles. Portland was baseball crazy in those days, and Vaughn Street Baseball Park was just three blocks from the Tavern. The Park was home to the Pacific Coast League Portland Beavers and on game day hundreds of people flooded the neighborhood to root them to victory. The Marshall Street Ice Arena, home to the city's professional hockey team, the Buckaroos, was just a few blocks in the other direction. To be sure, the Tavern was a favorite post game watering hole for baseball and hockey fans alike.



The view South down Thurman St. c.1920. The Tavern stands just around the corner, out of the frame, on NW 23rd Ave.

This Northwest neighborhood evolved greatly over the most recent half-century. The once familiar landmarks began to disappear, the mills relocated and the baseball stadium and ice arena were demolished. New construction and freeways dramatically altered the prevailing traffic and living patterns, and economic factors transformed the very character of the neighborhood. Throughout, the popular little Tavern quietly weathered the changes.

In 1965, the Tavern's last Eastern European proprietor—Tony Vidulich—sold the place after a 16-year tenure. Following his departure, the aging neighborhood hangout assumed a rougher, Old West Persona. During this time, when the Tavern's name changed to The Hangman's Tree and then the Chug-a-Mug, the old walls witnessed frequent fights and heavy drinking. A panoramic mural of a frontier hanging toughened the décor, and the front windows were simply painted over. In the evenings, plywood was placed over the pool tables so that topless entertainers could dance on the makeshift stages. All these changes not only attracted a different crowd, but apparently a more sizeable one. During this period, the pool hall expanded into the storefront immediately south of the original space.

In 1984 the venerable watering hole took on a colorful new life as one of McMenamins' pioneer establishments. The scene of frequent good times and festive celebration, the Tavern quickly became known as a hip, party pub. Live music was common, and some notable Northwest artists displayed their work here. At the memorable "Alequake 86" sculpture, screen prints and other artwork shared the focus with great northwest ales.

Regulars swear by the Tavern's magnetism and many have been inspired by their surroundings. In fact, local playwright and ex-Tavern fixture Charles Deemer recalls that many of his

bar scenes were informed by his experiences here. His 1985 book "Christmas At the Juniper Tavern" was a hit, and a sneak preview of his hyperdrama "Turkeys" was performed in the Tavern!

A great selection of beer has always been a staple of the pool hall, but the introduction of a food menu was a well-received addition. As in decades past, friends, colleagues, and neighbors gather for good conversation, drink and now, food. Nowadays, its comfortable, unpretentious atmosphere attracts a delightful mix of "suits," shoppers, hikers and bikers down from Forest Park, and folks just off from their factory jobs.

While the pub may seem out of place among the upscale boutiques and shining new restaurants along trendy NW 23rd Avenue, it remains a well-worn reminder of the down-to-earth feel that once characterized this entire area. Through all of this, the Tavern persistently sinks and shifts deeper into its unstable sawdust foundation, a physical reminder of how it has settled into this evolving neighborhood.



The Tavern as it is today.