

Legends of the White Eagle



A prostitute killed upstairs by a jealous lover, drunken patrons shanghaied through a basement tunnel, and a waitress half-pushed, half-carried down the basement steps by an invisible, but persistent force. Such sordid lore envelopes the White Eagle Cafe & Saloon and the details become more graphic and gruesome with each telling.

At the White Eagle, the line between this world and the other—and between fact and fiction—seems to have been thoroughly and wonderfully blurred. There is more than just good story telling going on here, though. Psychics who have examined the place report a sensation of violence and death in the basement and a deep well of sadness dwelling on the second floor.

The White Eagle first nested in the rough, working class waterfront neighborhood of Albina in 1905. At the time, the area was crowded with hundreds of recent arrivals from Great Britain, Scandinavia, the Balkans, Russia, the Mediterranean and the Far East. They worked on the docks, in the Union Pacific railroad shops, or at the neighboring factories and mills built along the Willamette's east bank north of the Broadway Bridge.

When a steam whistle proclaimed the end of a shift, dirty, tired men walked three or four abreast up Russell Street and disappeared into one of a dozen bars lining that bustling thoroughfare.

A trolley line that ran up Mississippi Avenue stopped at Russell Street, practically dumping passengers at the White Eagle's front door. Upon approaching the place, conductors yelled out, "Next stop, 'Bucket of Blood,'" a nickname earned from fierce and frequent brawls that erupted in and around the saloon.

Two Polish immigrants, Barney Soboleski and William Hryszko, opened the White Eagle to offer other Polish immigrants a place of after-work recreation: pool, cigars, poker, liquor, beer. And, according to the lore, with the right connection and proper amount of money, patrons could indulge in a brothel upstairs or an opium den downstairs.

Another notorious feature of the basement was a tunnel connecting to an underground network leading to the waterfront. Legend has it that through this subterranean passageway unlucky patrons were shanghaied to fill the ranks of ships' crews.

On the White Eagle's ground level, the Polish proprietors dressed out their gentlemen's emporium handsomely with a mahogany back bar crafted in Europe in the 1800s and a tile floor laid out in a beautiful Native American pattern.

When state Prohibition brought the curtain down on (legal) drinking in 1916, the Bucket of Blood became the place for neighborhood kids to get ice cream cones. Although, so the story goes, folks wanting a good stiff pop could still get the goods down in the basement, below the “soda shop.”

Once the veil of Prohibition lifted in 1933, many of the ragged qualities of the White Eagle were smoothed over. For the next 35 years, it served faithfully a hard-working, blue-collar clientele, offering cold glasses of Oly, hearty burgers, and honest games of pool, shufflebowler, and cards. By the early '60s, the back room was usually held by a group of old cronies playing hand after hand of pangini and sucking on Irish cigars (stogies dipped in a glass of whiskey).

Then in the early '70s, rock music and long hair were introduced to the hard hat bar. Surprisingly, it worked out; everyone coexisted under the bark and watchful eye of the bartender, a gruff and stocky 30-year-old Brooklyn-born, former bookie, bouncer, and bus driver, named Tony Ferrone.

The White Eagle's first house band was an eclectic and acoustic, good time outfit called the Fly By Night Jass Band. They were young musicians who had been performing in a theatrical production at the neighboring Storefront Theater (now the Widmer Brewery). When they walked into Tony's bar with their instruments in tow and asked for a drink, Tony gave them a new gig, and thus was born a live music tradition that is now as big a part of the Eagle as its storied past.

The Fly By Nights paved the way for other stellar Portland acts to play the Russell Street landmark. White Eagle favorites of the '70s and '80s were the Pete Karnes Blooz Band, Driving Sideways, Paul DeLay, Terry Robb, Steve Bradley, Robert Cray, the Razorbacks, and the much celebrated and wildly popular Holy Modal Rounders.

Final sets at the Eagle achieved legendary status. People lined up along Russell Street at 1:30 in the morning to get in. As Billy Hults of the Fly By Night recalled, “someone had to leave before someone else could go in,” or more likely, the mercurial Tony Ferrone, would throw someone out which would allow someone new to come in.

Alcohol flowed liberally on these evenings. In fact, the Eagle, it's been said, sold more tequila than any other place in the state. It was not uncommon to see scores of shot glasses brimming with Jose Cuervo and a lemon slice lining the bar top. The most famous round served came at the end of one closing set of a Mighty Good Eatin' show early in 1974. The band thanked the enthusiastic audience by donating its night's wages—\$100—to the purchase of 125 shots of tequila, which Tony Ferrone set up along the edge of the bar for the house to enjoy.

Over the past quarter century, the White Eagle's music, checkered past, finely crafted saloon furnishings, and other worldly vibes have lured the curious, the ghost hunters, and the folks who just want to dance with a beer in hand. Among the more illustrious visitors have been actor Matt Dillon, blues harpist Charley Musselwhite, Billy Gibbons of Z Z Top, and the crew that built the Fremont Bridge. And all found themselves in good, spirited company.

And now, the legends continue...