

NEIGHBORHOOD Gazette

Berkeley Inn Turns 85 – More or Less

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By Mike McKibbin

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As dive bars go, the Berkeley Inn must be doing things right.

The Urban Dictionary describes a dive bar as “A well-worn, unglamorous bar, often serving a cheap, simple selection of drinks to a regular clientele. The term can describe anything from a comfortable-but-basic neighborhood pub to the nastiest swill-slinging hole.”

Believed to be one of the oldest bars in Denver, the Berkeley Inn, 3834 Tennyson St., opened in or around 1934 in the Berkeley neighborhood, a 4.2-square-mile unincorporated community in Adams County. Open every day from 10 a.m. until 2 a.m., it features a couple of pool tables, jukebox, several big screen TVs and live music Friday and Saturday nights.

“We’re not exactly like ‘Cheers,’ but we’re not too far away,” owner Lisa Sanchez said of the famous TV bar and series. “We get a fairly nice younger crowd, too.”

The bar may be 85 years old this year and patrons will celebrate the milestone on Sanchez’ Friday, Jan. 26, birthday. Sanchez has owned the 1,900-square-foot Berkeley Inn since 2012 and been in the bartending business for close to 30 years.

“Yes, its old and dated, but it’s clean and a fun spot to hang out,” Sanchez wrote on Yelp. “There have been several owners and they each tell a different story. One says the first license was issued in 1953, but the sign out front says 1946. Well, I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

A book, “The North Side,” notes the Berkeley Inn started serving drinks shortly after prohibition. Further obscuring the bar’s history are records of a water tap approval in 1924, while the site was platted in 1922, Sanchez noted.

Since the actual age of the bar is unclear, “I’m going to call it 85 years. It’s my bar,” she added, then smiled.

Among a few visible signs of the bar’s history is part of a mural from the 1930s, mostly obscured by the 50-foot-long bar, mirror and other bar keeping essentials.

The bar has had five owners “at most” and in the 1960s and ‘70s was notorious as a “biker club bar,” Sanchez said.

“Guns, drugs and money” were prevalent, she added. “They had people ride horses and motorcycles down the center of the bar and you can still find little cubby holes in the bar. I don’t know what’s behind them, but probably drugs and money.”

The Berkeley Inn is not on any list of historic places, but Sanchez said she would favor such a designation.

“Everything else built around the same time around here has been torn down,” she noted. “But I don’t own the building, so it’s up to the building’s owner.”

Despite its age, Sanchez said the building is in fair shape. She paid for an electrical upgrade, added two roll-up doors on both sides of the front door and made other improvements.

“We live in a time when it seems to be all about regentrification” of old neighborhoods in the Denver area, Sanchez said. “People seem to forget all about just sitting in a bar and talking to people, what that means to a neighborhood.”

Giving back to people

Sanchez holds several free events – many with gift giveaways – throughout the year, such as Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas prime rib dinners, a “trailer trash” party in the fall and this year’s combination anniversary and birthday party.

“I just want to do something for all the people who have supported me and for those who don’t have a place to be,” Sanchez said.

The Berkeley Inn is also available – often at no charge – to host birthday, anniversary and other celebratory events.

“I always believe that if you’re good to people, they’ll be good to you,” Sanchez said.

And, as you might expect for someone who serves drinks, the people are the best part of Sanchez’ job and business.

“You gotta love the people,” she said. “I’m kind of a grouch at times, but I talk to every customer and get to know their stories, their families, wives, kids and husbands. That cheers me up all the time.”

Sanchez – the sole owner – has a staff of five people and her goal is to see the Berkeley Inn survive for 100 years.

“It’s going to be a struggle in this neighborhood, with the high cost of living and not having a kitchen to cook food,” she added.

Without a commercial kitchen and no room to expand to add one, Sanchez said, the bar is limited to mostly “pub snacks.” While a small electric fryer and a pizza oven are used, they can’t cook a hamburger without a kitchen.

Parking is a struggle along Tennyson Street, Sanchez added, so she made arrangements with the nearby Javier’s Diner to use their parking lot after 4 p.m.

Within a 10-block area of the Berkeley Inn, Sanchez said there are 21 liquor-licensed businesses. That kind of oversaturation can lead to a lack of customer loyalty, she added, but said the bar has a very loyal – if shrinking – following, due to an increased cost of living.

As of the first of the year, Sanchez added 25 cents to the price of everything served at the Berkeley Inn due to rising business costs.

Above the bar hangs a nondescript green sign with white letters spelling “rollercoaster.” It is a sign from the old Elitch Gardens’ roller coaster, formerly located nearby. A sign from the Elitch Lanes bowling alley also helps memorialize some of the Berkeley area’s history.

“I think it’s important to have a local, long-term establishment like this, where people can walk in any time and just be who they are,” Sanchez said. “You don’t have to dress up to come in, you can be in your work boots and be treated the same as the guy in the business suit.”

Main Menu

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 - 👉 What’s Happening
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 - 👉 Localworks Update
 - 👉 Senior Focus
 - 👉 West Colfax Sketches
 - 👉 40 West Arts
 - 👉 Neighborhood Arts
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 - 👉 Focus on Sustainability
 - 👉 Under The Dome
 - 👉 People We Should Know
 - 👉 HEALthy Edgewater
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- 👉 Archive
- 👉 Online Issues
- 👉 Subscription
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- 👉 Advertising
- 👉 Contact

