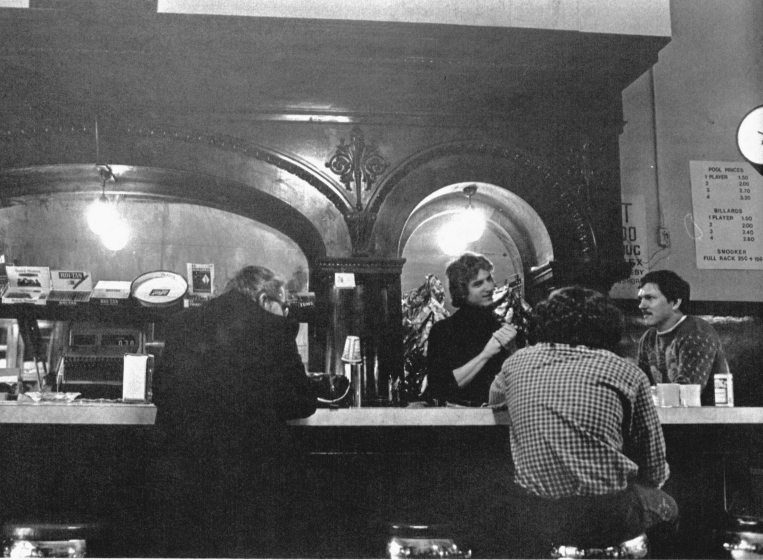
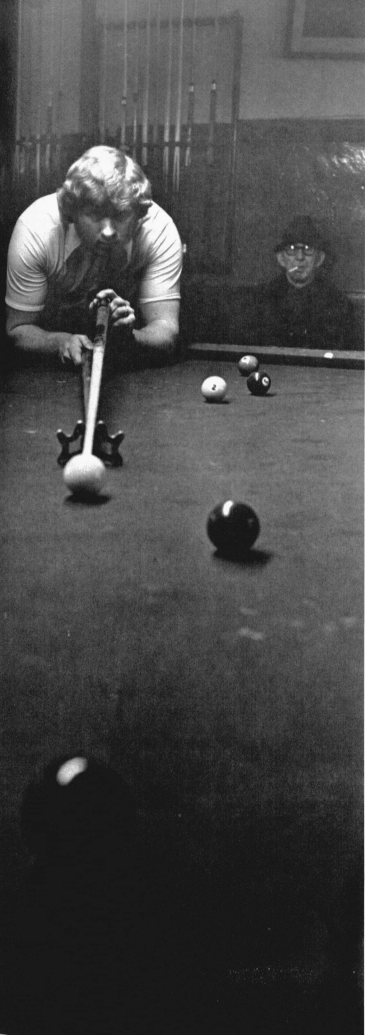


# Club La Booche



One trademark of Club La Booche is the huge mirrored back bar, which came from a tavern in Moberly, Mo. Gene Herrman, below, has served beer, sandwiches and conversation before that bar for nearly 15 years. Pool is what Booche's is all about. Don Bedford concentrates on a shot, right.





# Club La Booche

By Dave Holman

**UNDERSTAND, NOW,** that I don't guarantee this story completely. Booche's pool hall is something of a legend in Columbia, and legends are not always true. But if they aren't, they should be.

One of the oldest businesses in Columbia, Booche's sits where it has for years on south Ninth Street next to the vacant Hall Theater, and ironically, next to the new Columbia Billiard Center. Many Columbia businesses have come and gone catering to current tastes. Booche's caters to simplicity, friendship and the male mystique. It stands like a rock, slightly eroded, in a sea of changing social values.

Once it was famous across Missouri as a gentleman's billiard parlor. Booche's takes its name from one "Booche" or "Boots" Venable, depending upon whose memory you consult. "Booche" was the brother of George Venable, conductor of Mizzou's marching band in the '20s. "Booche" opened the original billiard parlor sometime about the turn of the century. When he sold the business to the Morris brothers in 1925, it was located across the street from the present site, upstairs in the old Virginia Building.

Three cushion billiards and English billiards, or line call shot, were the popular games then, and Booche's was the most elegant place to play outside of Kansas City and St. Louis. There were 22 tables and all ivory balls. Gentleman students and local

businessmen waited in line to play. Even at 10 p.m. it was not unusual to see 35 people waiting for tables.

**THOSE WERE THE DAYS** of “the Noble Experiment.” The huge mirrored back bar, imported from a defunct tavern in Moberly, stood there in waxed-wood glory, but there were no beer taps or clanking bottles to take one’s mind off the long wait, only a cigar counter and shoe shine stand. Women were turned away at the door, except on those occasions when the great billiard champions came to give exhibitions. Then a “lady” might be admitted with an escort.

Booche’s also sponsored week-long English billiard tournaments. In 1925, Ewell Anthony won the Class A championship with 55 consecutive balls. His prize was a railroad ticket to Lawrence and a ticket to the Missouri-Kansas football game.

Booche’s became what it is today in 1930. Billiards had begun to fade in popularity and snooker was the game then. The Morrisises moved the pool hall from the Virginia Building. Half the tables went up to the Huddle on Conley Street and the rest, to Booche’s present location. The big back bar came, too, and still dominates the pool hall today.

There have been several owners and some minor changes since then. Ed Barnhart bought the place from Earl Morris in 1957. He sold it to the Beisemeyer brothers and one other partner over in Boonville in 1973. Attorney Dave Bear III and Dennis Harper, of Harpo’s bar and the Harvest Moon restaurant, bought the place in 1975. Harper and Bear, both Mizzou alumni, are not making money from Booche’s, but it isn’t costing them anything either, so for now they are content to leave it pretty much as it has been for the past 45 years.

And for the past 45 years Booche’s has been a home away from home for Columbia’s men, both students and townspeople. Since Prohibition ended (many men still refer to that as if it happened last week), you can go there for a cold beer and lunch while you watch your friends shooting pool. A lot of business transactions have been consummated at Booche’s. It is also a place to go to forget about business. It is a safe place to sneak away from the wife for a while. She might be upset that you waste your time there, but she can be sure you aren’t fooling around with other women. Booche’s is a meeting place for all sorts of men. Class distinctions are checked at the door. Doctors, merchants, bus drivers, grave dig-

gers, lawyers, students, faculty—all types of people—forget their differences, or settle them on the flat green dueling fields with the fluorescent lights hanging over the center.

Sometime in the not so distant past they started calling the place Club la Booche. The sign over the bar lends a slight touch of class, and the pun on the French word for mouth (*la bouche*) could hardly be more appropriate. Conversation is the mainstay of Club la Booche. It ranges from politics to the weather to gossip to good-natured verbal abuse to baldfaced lies. In many pool halls and men’s hangouts, exercise of the mouth often leads to exercise of the fists, but it rarely happens at Booche’s. Troublemakers, like women, are not welcome. The quick retort and the creative insult are art forms at Booche’s, and one learns not to take offense. One also learns when to *ferme la bouche*.

The greatest comfort at Club la Booche is the slowness of change, but some changes are inevitable. Leland Adkins, a Columbia cab driver, was one of Booche’s great talkers. Admirers of the art claim that a little more education could have made Leland another Mark Twain. Leland is dead now, probably shooting billiards with Twain these days. If so, you can bet there’s one hell of a funny conversation going on.

**THEY USED TO KEEP** a big boiled ham standing on the counter and you could get a ham sandwich custom-sliced. No more. The health department said it wasn’t sanitary, and it cost too much to comply with the standards. So the ham went out along with the hard boiled eggs. See, the eggs can’t sit out on the counter any more either, and nobody thinks to buy them when they are hidden in the refrigerator. Booche’s still serves the best cheeseburger in town. Country ham, pre-sliced and refrigerated before frying, has replaced the boiled ham.

But, generally things remain the same at Booche’s. Even wars make little difference. Ray Brady came home from WWII, kissed his mother and headed straight for Booche’s to see who was there. He walked in the door and Earl Morris came running around the end of the bar. “Gee, Earl’s really going to give me a warm welcome home,” Brady thought. Morris waved a yellow piece of cash register tape in Brady’s face. “Dammit, Ray,” Earl said, “you went off and left 65¢ on the hook!”

Brady paid up and knew he was home again. □