THE EDDIE'S CLUB PORTRAITS CONSIDERED

by Aaron Teasdale

At the corner of space and time, the walls stare back at you. Hidden deep in a Montana college town you'll find a bar that poet Dave Thomas calls a "planetary junction." It's known today as Charlie B's, though it went by other names in former lives. There is no sign on the century-old, brick building to announce its presence. You have to know it's here.

Open the heavy wooden door, walk inside, and you enter a continuum where the walls have eyes and past and present intertwine in a boozy helix. There are living images from faded days here, framed black-and-white portraits of face after face on every wall, portals to an ever-lengthening past. The town outside is known as Missoula, there is a university here, mountains soar from its fringes, and a river runs through it.

If you're of a certain age, you may have known this place for many years, like one knows an old home or some other foundational thing that anchors you in time's cosmic river. Perhaps, like this writer, you first came here and saw these portraits as a young migrant to this town. Or you were passing through on the way to some other destination on this spinning planet and were shown here by someone who knew. However you arrive, you notice the images—everyone notices the images—lining the walls on all sides, a gallery of souls encompassing the space around you.

There's nothing glossy here. Some, lovingly or disparagingly, might call it a dive bar. You may hear murmurings about the portraits on the walls and where they came from. People will tell you this was once a brothel and the portraits are johns. Others will say Charlie, the bar's owner, made them.

Every year that passes, fewer people know the truth of things. Many stories have been told here, many have been written, and many have been born. This is no ordinary bar. These are no ordinary pictures.

For most of its history, Missoula was a railroad and logging town. The Northern Pacific Railway bisected the northern reach of the city and the Milwaukee Road railroad ran along the southern bank of the Clark Fork River, where its cold, singing waters pour through Missoula's heart. Downtown's multistory brick buildings—labor halls, train stations, bars, hotels, and working-people's apartments—mushroomed between the two rail lines. The mountains and wild country surrounding the city were thick with trees, and many men quick with saws found work here. A half dozen working sawmills buzzed throughout the city.

In this post-frontier, somewhat civilized milieu, a bull-riding cowboy named Eddie Batchelder opened a bar in the early 1960s at 428 North Higgins Avenue, in the core of downtown, calling it Eddie's Club. His workingman's watering hole attracted other cowboys and a slew of downtrodden, blue-collar sorts looking for succor and a humble place to sit. Batchelder sold the bar in 1964, and it soon ended up in the caring hands of Tony Piccinini, a big-hearted Italian who ran the place as a kind of community center and sometime bank for those in need.

Warm and welcoming, Piccinini kept $1,000 on hand to cash pensioners' checks, with their money often kept in the bar's safe to be returned as needed. Many patrons came to Eddie's every day, and the bar became the drop-off point for food stamps, cheese, and dried staples for the old-timers who were living off veteran's benefits and other assistance. Piccinini even gave loans to regulars at no interest, with just a note left in the till or safe. No hardened capitalist, he often dismissed the debts, waving his hand and simply saying, "Forget it."

"Tony Piccinini was a mellow old bar person," said Doug Bleeker, an Eddie's regular who went on to bartend there for six years. He explained that Piccinini bonded with these men because he, too, scraped for what he had in life. "He ran numbers for the gamblers, worked in the whorehouses, he worked from the ground up, he was old-school. He liked the people who came in."

The wizened men who made up the early Eddie's regulars had lived through trying times during the wrenching scarcity of the Great Depression, and endured unimaginable violence in the battlefields of World War I and World War II. For the span of their lives they worked with their hands and bodies. They hewed with crosscut saws, wrenched railroad steam engines, and drove pack trains into high mountains. As the world changed, the less wrinkled among them became adept with chainsaws and diesel engines, while others retired and spent their days at Eddie's Club with other aging men who knew something had passed them by. Many lived in poverty, their work no longer foundational to their lives or a framework for their identity. Now they simply wanted a place to rest and find some kind of community.

Into this graying clubhouse stepped Lee Nye, Montanan, artist, photographer. Nye grew up a rebellious, railcar-hopping cowboy in Eastern Montana, who'd fallen in love with photography and spent some years in California studying his craft with the medium's masters and rubbing elbows with Jack Kerouac and the Beats. A stint in Los Angeles shooting commercial photography left him amply rewarded financially, but spiritually hollow.

So he made his way back to the honest toil and gritty grandeur of his home state to study with lauded artists Rudy Autio and Theodore Waddell at the University of Montana, and commit himself to creative purity. In 1965, he stepped behind the bar at Eddie's to underwrite his artistic explorations, returning to the drink-slinging labor he'd performed in Butte, Montana, and New Orleans as a younger man.

Earthy and gregarious, it didn't take long for the photographer to bond with the bar's elders. These were the kind of hard-laboring, plainspoken men he'd grown up around, a world away from the smooth-talking phonies of California. Suffering post-traumatic stresses and a suite of psychic bruises in an era when men were expected to bottle their emotions, many of the scarred souls smothered their sorrows in alcohol. What they needed more than anything were friends and camaraderie. They found both at Eddie's, where Nye soon became a caretaker.

The bartender looked after the old hands and dispensed health advice along with cold draughts. One afternoon, Linda Helding and a friend dropped by Eddie's while applying for jobs, done up and dressed in skirts. Seeing the sunny young women, Nye recruited them to visit the hospital and buoy the spirits of one of the bar's old regulars. He loaned patrons money, employed them for odd jobs, and hired taxis to bring them home after long days at the bar. He was a pallbearer at the funeral of more than one regular when their time inevitably came to join the great majority.

"He truly cared about people and he cared about people who had no champion," said his widow Jean Belangie-Nye.

In those days, the old-timers arrived at Eddie's in the early morning to drink coffee, play pinochle and rummy, and shoot the bull with other old men who had no other place to go. In some of his handwritten notes from the time, Nye described the scene: "Early morning is reminiscent of old days when men gathered around a potbelly stove...and joshed one another and told lies."

One of the regulars at Eddie's was a tall, stoic logger named Paul Johnson who wore a black, wide-brimmed hat low on his head that pushed his ears down and curled them in a peculiar way, as if he were trying to better catch sound waves. One day in 1965, Piccinini suggested to Nye he bring his camera and take Johnson's picture so they could put it on the wall. Nye enthusiastically agreed, and in that moment a photography project like no other was born.

After taking Johnson's portrait, Nye began taking photographs of other timeworn men, and a few women, from the bar. Bringing a charcoal-colored sheet of fine-waled corduroy and his Rollieflex 2 1/4 medium-format came, he'd pick out a few people, never the scarless ones with uncomplicated stares, but the ones with stories creased in their faces. He'd bring them through the back door of Eddie's, which occupied the ground floor of the three-story Belmont Hotel, into an alley between the bar and the brick building of Missoula Laundry and Dry Cleaners, always in the morning when the rays of the slanting sun didn't penetrate the narrow urban canyon of his "studio."

After affixing the corduroy backdrop, he sat his subjects on the steps of the fire escape leading down from the Belmont's second floor, which offered artist studios and housing for pensioners and others of limited means. He pushed the film hard to 3200 or 4000 ASA and held the camera on a strap around his neck, letting it balance against his chest. Then he'd chat with his subject, take their mind off the camera, crack jokes, talk about their time on the railroad, or, if it was the man known as Sarge, ask about battles and wartime. When the moment was right and the subject was relaxed, he'd press the quiet shutter. There was no warning, and most subjects did not realize when the pictures were taken.

The last thing Nye wanted was posed portraits, where the facade emerges and people's true selves retreat behind a conjured mask. He wanted images that were honest. Perhaps it's fitting then that these photographs—of these men, at this time—were created in an overlooked alley of aged, grimy pavement.

"You think all this occurs in the camera; it happens there, but it isn't from the camera," Nye once explained. "The Eddie's Club portraits formed and formed and formed with every beer I drew for these guys, or every discussion we had, all the BS that went into those. This is a bar where people visit, drink, get acquainted, their second home, get lost, get found, all kinds of things happen there."

In these pictures, the trust and camaraderie the men

and women felt with Nye is written in their countenance. He knows them, is one of them, and they are themselves in these portraits. Nye wasn't interested in simple images of faces, flesh draped on bone. He wanted to capture spirits, and that was only possible if his spirit and theirs had in some way communed.

"There's more to the subjects of course than I could ever have learned, but I believe that knowing them is where the portrait begins," he said. "These people that I did at Eddie's Club, they're dimensional, they're endless."

For the next eight years, from 1965 to 1973, Nye did this—tending bar at Eddie's and creating images of its patrons in the alley. His effort resulted in a portrait series unlike any other. These were not celebrities or politicians. These were not the people in glossy magazines. Though in time, there were writers of some renown, because Eddie's was changing.

A new crowd began showing up around 1965. The American counterculture was evolving from beatniks to hippies, psychoactive drugs were percolating through the youth, and with each passing year there was evermore hair. The University of Montana, across the river from downtown and Eddie's Club, was spilling forth with hirsute young people seeking an escape from the hypocritical strictures of mainstream society and an antidote to its insincere polish. They found it at Eddie's.

"We were a little offended when the hippies wandered in," admitted Bleeker, the bartender. "Us big bullshitters sat telling our stories and they'd come and listen. We turned and glared at 'em. They kept hanging around. We got used to them."

Captivated by its unpolished authenticity, young longhairs began filtering in to the working-class bar. "My friends and I started coming here 'cause it was the one place in town you could come with long hair and not get your ass immediately kicked," said Missoula poet Dave Thomas. "And the beer was cheap."

Because Piccinini and Nye were kind men who treated everyone with respect, and because Piccinini had a strict rule prohibiting fighting, the bar became a safe space for the youth many in society dismissed as "freaks." Piccinini liked seeing young people come in to his place. It helped that they weren't broke.

"The regulars, the old mill workers and loggers and whatever, complained about the longhairs," said Bleeker. "Piccinini said, 'they don't write me bad checks, they don't have a bar tab they won't pay…so if you don't like it, you get out.' Well, the old-timers stayed and it was so neat 'cause the younger people loved them. They'd sit and talk with them, buy them drinks."

Bleeker continued, "One fellow they called 'Sarge,' he was a lieutenant general in the war, he'd tell the young people, 'sit down, shut up, and listen, you'll learn something,' and he'd sit and tell them stories and they'd buy him drinks."

"The scene was a symbiosis," Bleeker said. "So many of these folks were nice, decent people—eccentrics, oddballs, aging beatniks, unique people—and they didn't fit in the redneck bars or the sports bars. They got hassled. So they came in here and found a sanctuary and it became home."

Perhaps the old-timers and longhairs, across the generational chasm, realized they shared something in common. Whether they were broken veterans living above the bar, or young hippies avoiding rednecks, this was a collection of people with no place else to go. They weren't the only ones.

Women weren't common in bars in those days, but Eddie's was an exception. It became known as a place for colorful women. "Bars were always men's places. Eddie's, a lady could go in and have as much fun as anybody," said Rosie D'Orazi, the daughter of John D'Orazi (page 45).

"We went there because we could act any way we felt," she continued. "Didn't have to curl our hair, buy a new ski jacket. It was okay to have runs in your socks—if you had any socks."

Meanwhile, Nye was forging ties in the university's art and writing departments, where he was taking classes in his unending quest to explore the world of creativity (in 1975, at the age of 50, he earned a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree). With Nye behind the bar, artists felt welcome, and Eddie's began attracting a creative and literary crowd. Art students poured in and Nye's friends and mentors from the university, Waddell and Autio, were regulars. Local legend Jay Rummel (page 77), whose woodblock prints of psychedelic folk art decorate many Missoula businesses today, including Charlie B's, could often be found there.

Above all, Eddie's became a writer's bar. Local luminaries like James Welch, Richard Hugo (page 109), James Crumley (page 76), William Kittredge, James Lee Burke, Ed Lahey, and others were regulars, sitting at the row of tables speaking of the magic of words and how to keep a bit of that magic alive in this world. Irish poet Tony Cronin (page 37), in Missoula as a visiting professor, frequented Eddie's many nights of his two-year stay. Allen Ginsburg spent time here, as did Ken Kesey. Cactus Ed Abbey visited when he was in town. Art professors and the poet Hugo even occasionally held classes here on Friday afternoons.

Thomas, who would go on to become a beloved local poet, first came to Eddie's on the night of his 21st birthday. A few days later, he shared drinks with Cronin, one of Ireland's most acclaimed poets, and his wife, Thérèse, and stayed until closing time. And with that, Thomas became another regular at Montana's most literary bar.

The city's daily newspaper, the *Missoulian*, was headquartered across the street, and reporters, editors, and printers came over late most nights after shipping the following day's edition. At some point in the late 1960s, *Rolling Stone* magazine wrote about the little Missoula bar that had become an icon of the American West counterculture. So too, unexpectedly, did *Glamour* magazine, around the same time. Mornings were for the old-timers, afternoons were for the workers, and nights were for the youth.

Amid it all was Nye, soul of the scene. "He'd be motoring around back and forth behind the bar, always had a line of jive going," said Thomas. "He was always very interested in whatever's going on. Always going full speed. Whatever he was into, he was into 100 percent."

Nye's catalyzing effect on the Eddie's scene was partly due to his images. "The portraits were the distinguishing feature of the place," said Thomas. "Other than that, it was a dump."

The other aspect of Nye's magnetic effect was the man himself. Animated, profane, and full of life, Nye created a safe, dynamic space of open ground for wayward and artistic souls to congregate.

"I'll always remember him standing behind the bar at the old Eddie's Club," said Crumley, the internationally recognized, lyrically gritty detective novelist. "He was just a force of nature, one whose energy and talent were irrepressible and irreplaceable."

Crumley's novel *The Wrong Case* is a whodunit that takes place almost entirely within Missoula. Eddie's Club and Nye—renamed Mahoney's and Leo respectively in the book—play central roles in the tale. Crumley describes the photographer and his portraits this way:

"His eye found…the dignity and pride in the battered faces of his patrons. He caught them in brave laughter and elegant sad loss and then hung the portraits on the walls of his bar, as if to remind us of hope, remind us that we weren't social drinkers, and the gold stars in the corners of the dead were like medals."

There were even a few instances when Eddie's Club nearly resembled a crime scene from one of Crumley's stories. Consider the day a grim-faced ex-wife of one of the bar's regulars, Bill Enders (page 38) marched in with a rifle in her hands and every intention of shooting her former husband dead. Quickly stretching over the bar, Nye snatched the gun from her hands and called the police.

The odd Crumleyesque incident aside, however, Eddie's was generally a peaceful, if boisterous, place, and fighting could land you a lifetime ban. Soon the bar became so popular there was rarely room for them anyway. Bleeker explained that the peace-loving crowd, "snuffed out any fights pretty quickly."

Listen to stories from the regulars still kicking around and you realize that many of the adventures in Eddie's Club were internal. "People would come here in all kinds of psychic conditions," said Thomas, mischief in his voice. Whatever alchemy was at play, there was energy at Eddie's, and soon the little workingman's bar had become a cultural landmark, a simmering stew of literati, laborers, and bohemians.

The dark side of Eddie's, as with any bar in this world, was the alcoholism that swallowed some patrons. The sedating powers of alcohol can provide a kind of respite from life's hardness, but too many tilts of the bottle are a devouring detour. Kindhearted Tony Piccinini knew this all too well. His drinking problem grew, eroding his health, until he sold the bar in 1972. Three years later he died alone in his trailer from alcohol-related causes.

The man who bought the bar from Piccinini, Jack Seitz, was different than the beloved Italian in almost every way. A former used-car salesman, he envisioned the establishment as his ticket to a new, more glamorous life—and he wasn't going to let a bunch of old men interfere. For inexplicable reasons, he tried to turn what may have been the most profitable bar in Montana into a kind of upscale sports bar. He shut down regular's tabs, put a stop to rummy games, and threw out some old-timers and hippies who didn't conform to the new Eddie's order.

"Jack had no business in the bar business," explained Bleeker, who bartended under Seitz for several years. "He had no connection with the people—thought they were all dirty slobs. In fact, there were more educated people here per capita than any bar in Missoula. But Jack desperately wanted to be upwardly mobile and for the country club set to come in."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he had little appreciation for Nye's portraits. For his part, Nye was enraged at Sietz's treatment of the old regulars. Things came to a head one day in the spring of 1974, when Nye stormed in, threw his keys on the counter, and announced he was quitting. In a final act of protest, he removed his portraits from the walls. The loss of the pictures, what Bleeker called "the soul of the place," was a seismic change. The original spirit of Eddie's was dead.

As people filtered in to the sight of naked walls they went nuts. A rowdy crowd amassed on the sidewalk outside, gathering at tables and chairs taken from the bar in protest and drinking beer purchased from Worden's Market next door. Though drinking on the sidewalk was illegal, no police officer interfered. Other regular patrons came inside with markers and drew detailed faces of the missing portraits on the exposed wall. Finally, they started throwing glasses, covering the floor in shattered glass. "There was a riot that night," said Bleeker. "They pretty much destroyed the place."

From there, the bar took a downturn and some regulars drifted away. "Because of the lack of the pictures, the crowd deteriorated," said Bleeker. The portraits would never return to the walls of Eddie's Club.

Without the portraits, the bar was just another place. In early 1977, it closed. Meanwhile, another bar, Luke's, was created nearby and as Jim "the Wad" Waddell, Luke's founder, explained, "Steve Percival and I bought Lee Nye's amazing Eddie's Club portraits when no one wanted them and I built Luke's around them."

Luke's was a spirited biker bar, with a row of Harley's lined up out front, and live bluegrass music many nights of the week. Hunter S. Thompson once left graffiti on the bathroom wall. It inherited some of Eddie's character, with writers and bikers and a variety of counterculture types mixing amicably amid the faces of Missoula's quietly receding past.

At the same time, a young Montana bartender named Charlie Baumgartner was tipping taps at Connie's bar,

owned by his father-in-law, around the corner from the old Eddie's Club. Inspired by the original portraits, Baumgartner commissioned a new series of images of Connie's current regulars, paying Nye 35 dollars apiece for 8x10 inch prints, which were more manageable than the original 16x20s from Eddie's Club. As for the storied old bar itself, its walls were still blank, its corner of space and time abandoned. Until 1980, that is, when Baumgartner made his move. Securing a lease on the old space, he opened a new bar, Charlie B's, which soon became the earlier, bar's spiritual successor.

Many of the Eddie's crowd happily returned to their old stomping grounds. Sometime around 1990, after Luke's closed, Baumgartner purchased 65 of the original Eddie's Club portraits from Doug Curry and returned them to the walls where they'd once hung.

Meanwhile, the poet Thomas and some of the other new/old bar's regulars were passing around stoner science fiction stories by the writer Spider Robinson in the book *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*. The book's stories focus on a bar at a cosmic crossroads in the far reaches of space and time that hosts a tight-knit community of regulars who welcome time travelers, aliens, and other extraterrestrial outcasts into their far-flung tavern. Their saloon and community embody Callahan's Law, which states, "Shared pain is lessened; shared joy, increased—thus do we refute entropy."

"We thought this guy could be talking about Eddie's Club and Charlie's," explained Thomas. "It's one of those planetary junctions where people came through from all over the place. A place where you could hang out, it didn't matter who you were."

Sometime later—memories are unsurprisingly fuzzy on the exact timeline—Thomas's friend and fellow bar regular, Clay Nybo, was reading Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time*. It was Nybo who first concocted the slogan, "A Corner of Space and Time," to refer to the bar. Inspired, Thomas, Nybo, and their creatively minded cohorts promptly took up the catchphrase and from then on—on T-shirts, on a bike rack out front, and in the minds of its more spaced-out regulars—the bar became more than a little tavern in a little town in the Rocky Mountains. It was now The Corner of Space and Time.

Baumgartner continued commissioning Nye to create portraits of the new bar's regulars, a series known as the *Charlie B's Collection*. It would eventually grow to 225 images, with Nye adding the final portrait in the spring of 1999, the year of his death. As of this writing there are some 300 images of Nye's lining the walls of Charlie's, including both the *Eddie's Club*, and *Charlie B's Collections*. For many years, any portrait subject who died was honored with a gold star sticker placed on the glass in the lower corner of their portrait. Over time, the number of stickers grew until one day in the 1990s, with some psychic scale tilted, they were quietly removed. (In 2019, a new framed series of current regulars by another photographer featuring digital, artificially-lit, posed portraits was installed on the walls between Nye's naturalistic, natural-light, film images.)

This book features the *Eddie's Club Collection*, which includes the images from the walls of the original bar as well as additional pieces that belonged with the collection but were never hung after Nye removed the portraits. Many of these images are referred to as the *Eddie's Club Adjunct Collection* and were donated to the Missoula Art Museum by Tracy Blakeslee in 2017.

It's interesting to note that as a man with artistic ambition, Nye did not consider these images his best or most important work. There was something mundane about them, something born from the everyday sidewalks and railyards and pine forests and open-skied ranches of Montana. As he explained it, "They just happened." Perhaps, if Nye, an artist to the core, had thought of them as his life's work, he would have attempted something loftier and more innovative, as he did with other projects. Yet it's precisely this lack of pretense, this frank, back-alley honesty, that makes the portraits special. These images are the truth.

Created in a humble tavern far removed from the country's cultural hot spots, the *Eddie's Club Collection* forms a connective tissue to America's increasingly forgotten past, a window where common working men and women stare back at us from a former America built with their own corporeal labors. As the poet Thomas put it, "They transmit an awareness from one generation to the next of humanness."

Consider the story of the young man on a journey from the northeastern U.S. who walked into Charlie's one day and examined the black-and-white images lining the walls. Kaw-lija Weniger, a Charlie's and Eddie's Club regular, asked what he was looking for. The man explained he was adopted and had recently discovered his mother, who he'd never known, was from Missoula. There was a bar she used to visit where, he was told, the bartender took portraits of the patrons and mounted them on the wall. One of those portraits was of his mother. All he knew was her name was Ann.

Weniger knew her, he said, and pointed to her portrait. The young man looked at the image for a long time without saying a word, then turned to Weniger and asked if he could buy him a beer. The men sat at the bar and Weniger told all he could remember about his friend Ann. Finally, emotion thickening the air, the young man thanked him for the gift of those stories and walked out the door, back to the world outside.

My generation—people born after these images were created—first encountered these faces on the walls of Charlie's. Over the years we've watched as tourists and university-students with parents in tow stepped through the bar, perhaps unsure of the place itself, but aware the portraits were significant, something worth coming into an unscrubbed saloon to see. They look for a few minutes and walk out, leaving the rest of us to enjoy our drinks and food (from the Cajun kitchen shoehorned in back) and the ragged conviviality of the place.

My friends and I, like those who helped create this book, often enter through the back door in the alley, beneath the fire escape where Nye created these images. We pull up at the table where James Crumley once sat and regaled people with such élan and profundity it became known as The Table of Wisdom.

We watch the new generation come in, smooth skin and innocent eyes, and head for the back, the bar's outer reaches. The past captured in the images is an unknowable dream, senescence and the graying of hairs beyond their comprehension, just like Dave Thomas, perhaps, when he came here on his 21st birthday. Now Thomas is weather-worn, still here every Friday night at this planetary junction. We read his poems to find beauty and learn of this life, just as we ponder these images. We know their stories now, as we continue to write our own. We raise our glasses to Lee Nye. Time passes like the river singing outside.

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