

Bar Scene: 1960s vs. 1970s

The Broken Knuckle Beer Bar

By Kay Krans

Beer bars catering to kids 18-20 years old are gone from the Wisconsin landscape, but in the 1960s they were a place for young people to socialize. Second only to turning 16 and getting a driver's license was turning 18 and getting your ID card. Many of the beer drinking establishments were in the college towns of Wisconsin, but there were also some located in the rural areas of Wisconsin.

One of the main places for teenagers in Manitowish Waters to meet and socialize was the Broken Knuckle Beer Bar. The motto of the bar was: "It's just a joint." What was unique about this bar was that it was divided into two parts. On the entrance side of the building was a soda fountain and sandwich section, and on the other side was the beer bar. It was divided by a half wall with a center entrance to the bar. That made it possible for teenagers under 18 to also hang out at the "Knuckle." It was very clean and neat with a red cement floor and an old-fashioned soda fountain. All the tables and counters were bright yellow Formica tops. The bar was all polished wood.

This was a time in Manitowish Waters history when many families spent the whole summer at their lake places. Mothers would stay with the children at the lake home, and fathers would travel from the cities to spend the weekends with their families. Many of the summer kids and local kids got to know each other through the Skiing Skeeters Water Ski Club and became fast friends. After ski shows and during the evenings, the kids wanted to spend time together, and the Broken Knuckle Beer Bar was in close driving distances to most lake homes. So, if you could drive, you could all meet for a fun social evening. Most of the kids were between 16-20, but sometimes younger siblings joined in the fun if they were allowed to ride with their older brothers or sisters.

The owners of the establishment were Swede and June Christiansen. Swede and his first wife, Gertie, moved to Manitowish Waters and built their home on Alder Lake. He had a sign at his drive that read "Anybody Who Don't Like This Life Is Nuts!" Swede was a retired Milwaukee fireman and "Up North" was a special place for his family. After his wife Gertie died, he married June, and the era of the Broken Knuckle began. Swede handled the bar end of the establishment, and June was the cook and soda fountain attendant. They were both good at what they did and were very good at supervising the kids that came into their establishment. June made the best cheeseburgers and french fries in the Northwoods, and kids looked forward to late evening meals. There was a pinball machine in the bar that was called the "Ace of Spades" where many a competition took place. The juke box played all evening, and fun was had by all until midnight when they closed their doors and sent the kids home.

There was one regular adult patron, an older gentleman who would often come to the bar in bibbed overalls with a carpenter pencil in his pocket. Someone would always greet him and ask

how he was doing, and the answer would be, "I am just copesetic." He would stand at the bar and order his usual, which was a glass of sparkling beer with a raw egg in the bottom. Down the hatch it would go in an instant, and all surrounding him would look at him in awe. He would visit with Swede and a kid or two and soon he was on his way.

It was a great time to be a teenager in the summer in Manitowish Waters. Adults knew how we were spending our social time, and this great community kept close tabs on all of us.