

Taste of History

Once tabbed as the second rowdiest bar in the nation, The Cattle Baron Supper Club just south of the Canadian border in Babb has seen it all

BY MEGAN AULT REGNERUS

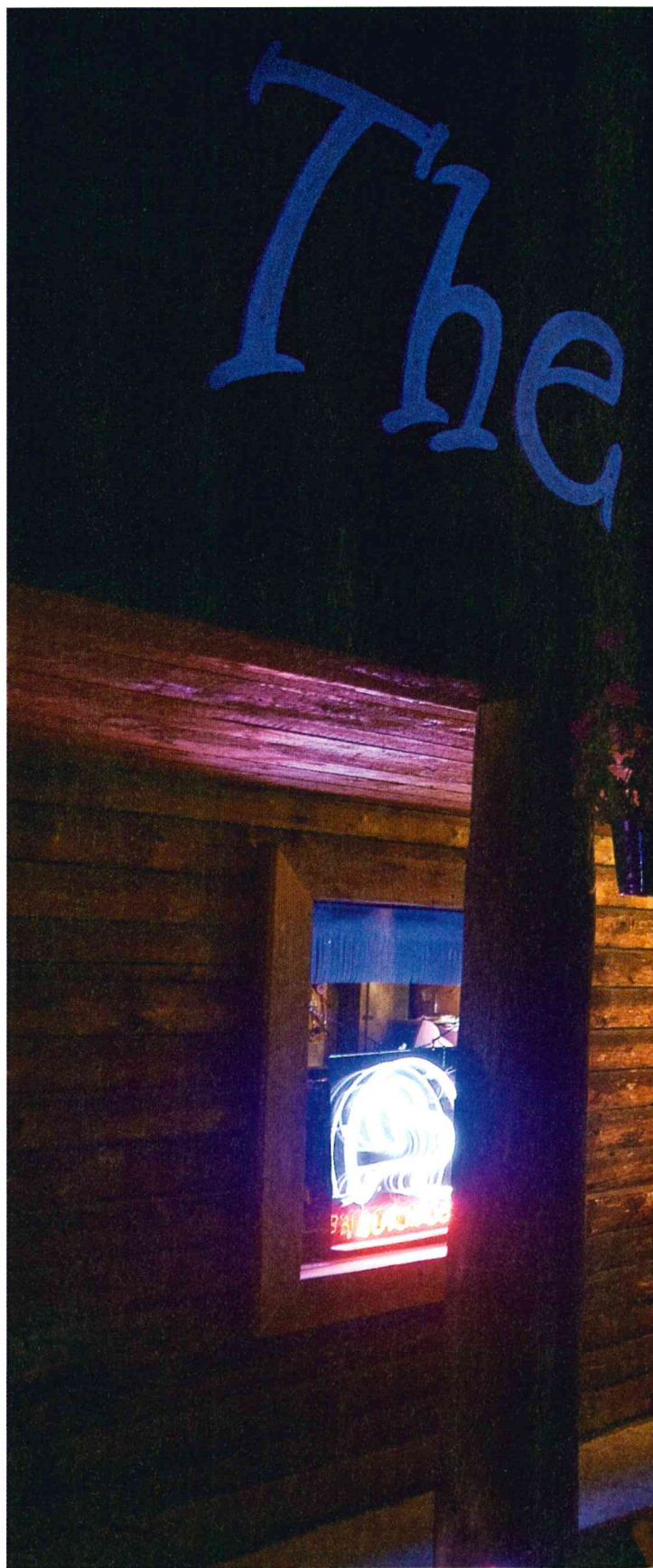
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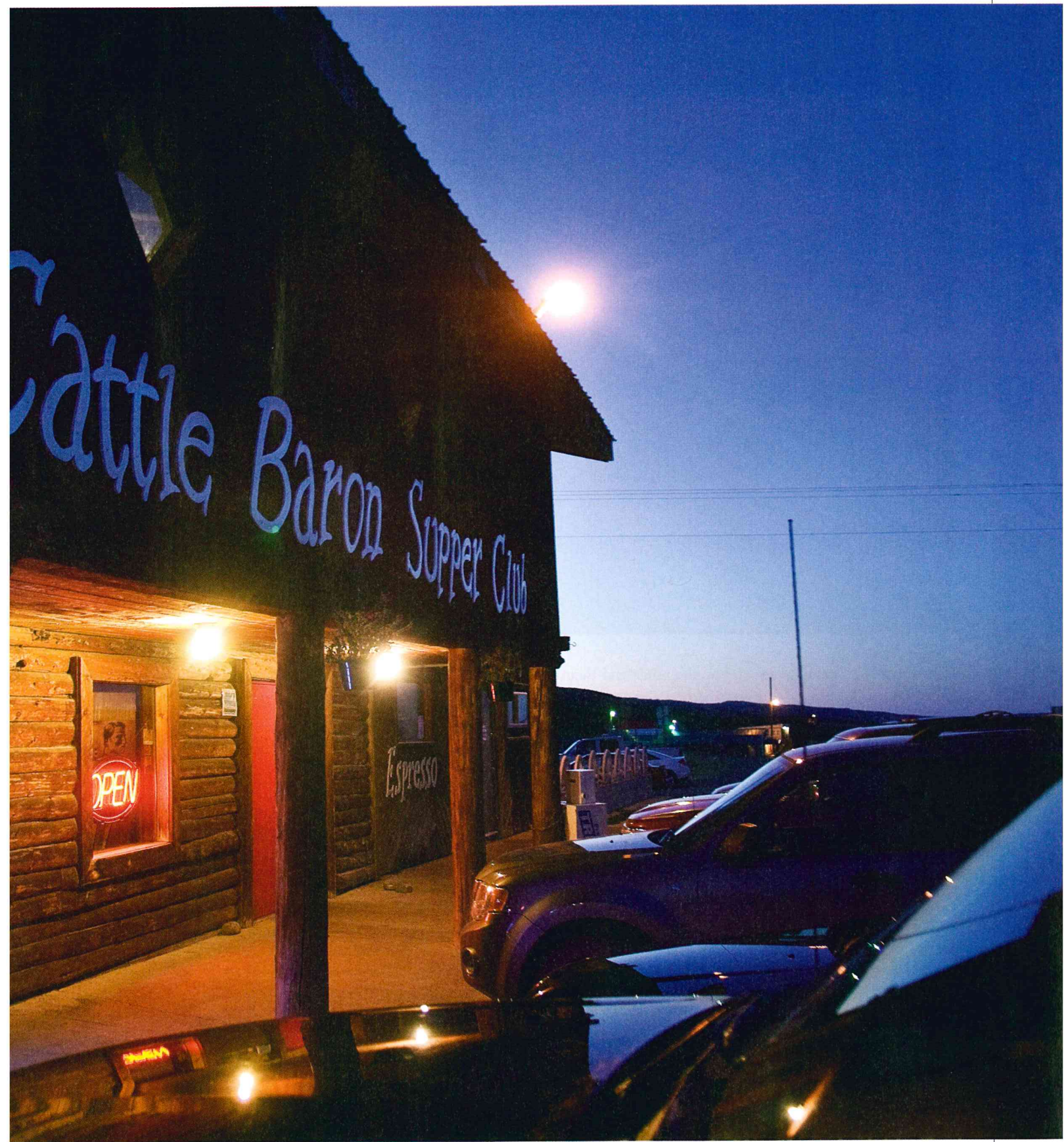
If YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME IN GLACIER National Park, skip pulling over to read the historical markers and head to The Cattle Baron Supper Club in Babb, where you'll find a place alive with area history, and you'll lock into a steak that will leave you wishing that this restaurant eight miles south of Canada and in the middle of nowhere was just a little closer to home.

You'll know the owner, Bob Burns, when you see him. According to him, he's "Blackfoot and Irish — which means there's a good chance I'm gonna drink whiskey." Burns is formidable in size and looks like actor Graham Greene, and when he talks to you, he looks you dead in the eyes as if to decide whether you're full of crap.

It's a presence that must have served Burns well back in the 1970s when Playboy magazine voted his place (called the Babb Bar back then) the second rowdiest bar in the nation. Ask him how often he called the police back then and he'll laugh. When you live in Babb

Less than 10 miles south of Canada and near Glacier National Park, The Cattle Baron Supper Club draws people to Babb from miles around.







Diners eat on the second-floor balcony, which is decorated with a 100-foot mural that tells the story of the Blackfoot Indians.

(where census statistics are so low you can't find them on the Web) and something — or somebody — goes sideways, *you are* the police. Even today, Burns points out that on the entire Blackfoot Indian Reservation, which encompasses Babb and more populous Browning, there is only one Bureau of Indian Affairs officer on duty at any time to patrol a million and a half acres. "Call the police and you'll get a call back in three days," says Burns.

But really, Burns means to quell any notion that this place is or ever was unsafe.

What it is and was is a unique crossroads of cultures, unlike anywhere else. "We get white Canadians, Native Canadians, white Americans, Native Americans and foreigners in here mixing it up all the time," says Burns.

Press Burns a bit and he'll admit the place did sometimes get pretty interesting in the old days, especially on Sundays. That's when the Canadians came down because they couldn't buy liquor there on the good day. Sure, there was the occasional girl jumping up on the pool table taking her clothes off, but keep in mind the times, he says. "People have to under-

stand those were the 70s. People were hell raisers, but they were mostly fun-loving."

And quirky.

Pity the poor woman who came in the bar one afternoon back then and was visibly feeling out of her element.

"This bar is pretty rowdy," she said to Burns.

"I said, 'No, you're okay. It's pretty tame,'" he recalls. At that moment a guy walked into the bar, holding a bear cub.

Why?

"He just had it," says Burns.

Then a lady came riding through the bar on her horse. Why? Heck if Burns knows. It was the 70s. Maybe that's why shortly thereafter, a guy rode through the bar on his Harley. Just another day at the Babb Bar. A bit lively for some tastes maybe, but not a mean place, for sure.

Since that time, Burns raised four sons, all of whom have pitched in at the bar at various times over the years. Now

64 years old and a grandfather to 28 grandchildren between him and his second wife, Charlene, Burns likes things a little quieter.

“Back in 1997 I switched from the bar to supper. I was getting too old to fool with that rowdiness anymore,” he says.

Burns, who also owns a sawmill, peeled all the logs and built the grand, open addition to the original bar (which has been in his family since his grandparents took their allotment on that site in 1915 and ran the business as a store), which was finished in 2000.

“Yeah, people didn’t like the transition from whiskey and honky-tonkin’ to escargot at first,” Burns admits, but the 150 to 200 dinners he now serves a night during the summer tourist season and the stacked reservation list suggest people are more than getting used to it.

Burns’ specialty rib eye and the buffalo rib eyes are quite popular, along with the salmon, the filet of tenderloin and the New Yorker. Besides the fact that the meat melts in your mouth, Burns grills them in a sauce that’s so exquisite, you’re sure to put away more than you promised yourself you would. Burns makes those sauces and all the salad dressings himself — something he learned from his mother, who ran a restaurant for years and who was “a wizard with spices.” Beyond that, Burns says his secret is to start with a choice cut of meat and make it better.

Come in to the Cattle Baron Supper Club now and you’ll probably meet one of Burns’ granddaughters, or some other

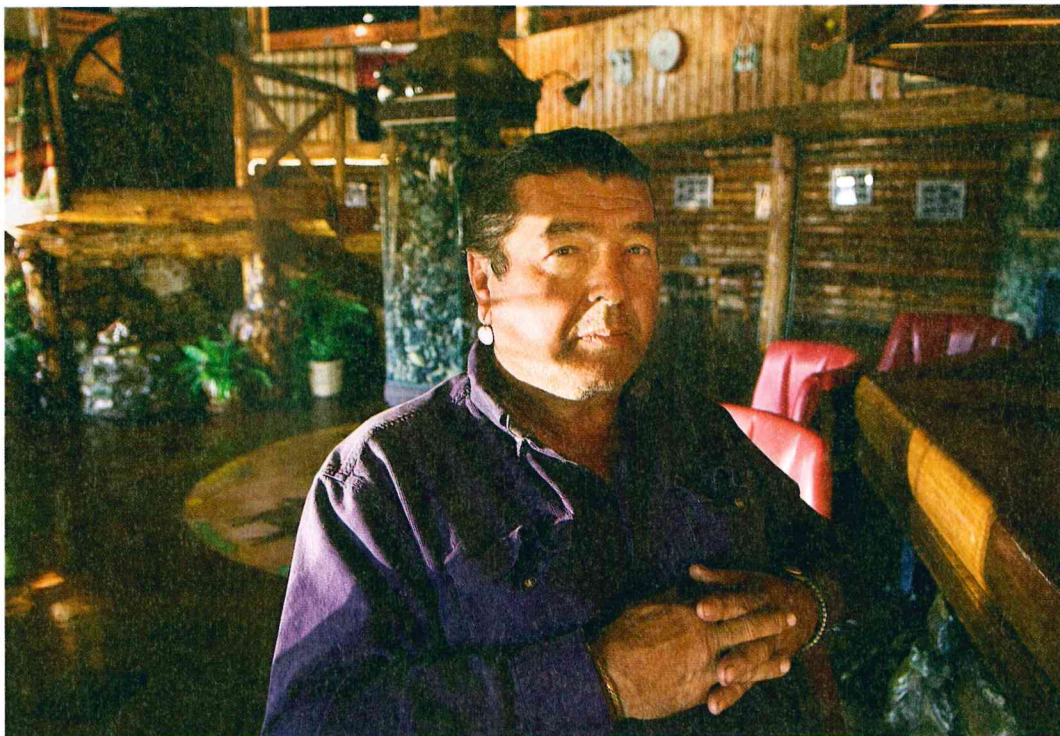


member of his extended family. It’s a place rich in heritage, that knows where it came from and who it still is today. Burns shares his Blackfeet heritage with diners in the circumference of the upper level dining area, with an artistically rendered timeline of his peoples’ history that reaches far back before white explorers arrived in the area.

Along the timeline there are some sadly familiar markers: decimation of tribes from the introduction of small pox and other diseases; disappearance of the buffalo; and here, one that Burns pauses in front of. “Heavy Runner was my great, great grandfather,” he says quietly.

The date is January 23, 1870, when the Marias Massacre wiped out 173 Blackfeet, mostly women and children. The American Army was seeking revenge for the killing of a white man named Malcolm Clarke. Heavy Runner was chief of a peaceful band of Indians known as the Small Robes, who were uninvolved with

Bob Burns has owned the Babb Bar since 1974. Once proclaimed one of the rowdiest bars in the nation by Playboy magazine, it now operates as The Cattle Baron Supper Club. Above, a medicine wheel honoring women as the center of the Blackfoot society decorates the floor of the supper club.





Whitey Burns, left, and regular customer Kent Wright talk over a morning cup of coffee at the old bar. What was once a place where hard liquor was served to hard drinkers and hard fighters, patrons can now get a double espresso.

Clarke's death and were under the impression that they enjoyed peaceful relations with the American Army. Heavy Runner was shot and killed holding an American flag.

"He told them they had the wrong camp, but they kept shooting anyway," says Burns. "It doesn't feel that long ago. These are stories I grew up with from my grandparents."

Burns has stories of his own to tell. He still remembers traveling off the reservation to nearby towns like Cut Bank as a boy, seeing that familiar sign hanging in shop windows: No dogs or Indians allowed. He tells these stories with a matter-of-fact lack of bitterness that has allowed him to happily feed and visit with anyone who walks through the door today.

In fact, ask him what's the hardest thing now about thriving and feeding people here at this crossroads and he says, "I love to be able to provide excel-

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lent food for people, but if you've got 100 customers, there's always going to be one you can't please, and I hate that."

When the three to four million visitors who pass through Glacier National Park (the hungry ones venturing a bit north to Babb) return home, Burns is still here evolving with this family business that's been here nearly a century. Look around and it's changed some, but Babb is a lonely, curious



A sign in the old Babb Bar recalls rougher times.

place really, where it's easy to imagine his grandparents making dandelion wine and moonshine after the turn of the century, or his dad Teddy turning the family store into the Babb Bar in the 1950s. All these voices are still here, their photos on the walls and the stories in Burns' heart.

He's survived the 70s, and gone on to reinvent this place with his own good sense and strong hands.

"People here are kind of stuck in the old ways," he says. "We help each other because we have to."

He says this with pride, as if that's exactly the way he likes it. Burns says when people ask him if he's lived in Babb his whole life he tells them, "Not yet."

Not by a long shot. ■

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