



High Tide at the Happy Hour

For two decades the Klungervik family has encouraged folks to cut loose (and promised not to tell)

BY MEGAN AULT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN SPERRY

Be careful if you ever visit the Happy Hour Bar & Restaurant, 15 miles northwest of West Yellowstone on the shore of Hebgen Lake. Things tend to happen there. Step inside and you'll see 20 years worth of ball caps tacked to the ceiling and a few liberated bras dangling from the rafters; drag your eyes down the walls and you'll see Polaroids everywhere — one wall covered with the bare breasts of headless patrons, another covered with distinctly male behinds. Behind the window in the men's bathroom is a nude female mannequin whose adornments change with the seasons, though last time I peeked she still sported a St. Paddy's Day necklace and a detailed sign requesting help. A deer mount on the wall occasionally has



A weathered boat sits roadside, serving as a sign for the Happy Hour Bar and Restaurant. At left, Tahni Longworth holds a pair of underwear donated by a patron to hang with the Polaroids, hats and other undergarments on the bar's walls and ceiling.

a microphone rigged near it's mouth, a sign that folks have gotten a little silly with the Karaoke machine again. There's a three-man water balloon launcher that might earn you a free drink if you nail someone and Rin Klungervik or Tahni Longworth —sisters who help run the bar with their folks, Bud and Karen Klungervik — think it's funny enough. Although ever since some locals accidentally nailed a cop car and ran for the closets, they try not to encourage mischief that might get anyone arrested.

The first time I visited the Happy Hour was with a group of runaway moms on a Nordic ski weekend together in West Yellowstone. It was dark, the snow swirled and landed in dusty piles, and inside the bar was warm and packed with an eclectic mix of snowmobilers, old timers and locals ranging from 21 to 70 years old.



With a marina and docks adjacent to the The Happy Hour, a pair of boaters prepare to secure their boat.

I ordered a drink from Rin, a tall, permed, blonde woman wearing shorts and a baggy sweatshirt, then turned around to find one of my friends already dancing cheek to cheek near the jukebox with an old man wearing lots of jewelry. I introduced myself to some snowmobilers, filled them in on how the skiing had been. One of them narrowed his eyes at me. "I'll bet you drive a Subaru," he said.

A park ranger told him to be nice and over the next drink I managed to get the ranger to tell me exactly how far over the speed limit I could drive in the park before he'd pull me over. At one point a guy came over to the bar and informed Rin he was going to get a game of Twister going. "Nope," she said, staring him dead on. "Nobody plays Twister 'til I say so."

Rin and Tahni are tall and take after their father, Bud, more than their tiny mother, Karen. The one time I asked them if they ever had any trouble with drunk patrons giving them guff they seemed confused.

Anyway, the guy skulked away and before long, one of the sisters had the tables pushed aside and a whole-bar game of musical chairs started. Not playing didn't seem to be a option. I watched as if on some surreal movie set as my friends and everyone else was gradually weeded out of the game, singing and dancing all the while. I eventually found myself the sole competitor against a woman who looked like my grandmother. Country music played in slow motion, all eyes on us as people cheered on the older woman. When the music stopped she cocked her hip to one side and then unloaded it, sending me flying across the room before smugly plopping in the last remaining chair and raising a victory fist.

"That was Carleen," Rin told me this past summer when I revisited the Happy Hour. "She's a regular. That's funny — we were just remembering that game this past week."

Beyond these anecdotes, good luck getting any incriminating stories out of the Klungervik family. "We don't pour and tell," said Rin. Despite the fact that Rin is only 38 years old, she's helped her parents run the bar since the day they bought it 20 years ago. In a sense, she and her siblings have grown up at the Happy Hour.

"Iris (the former owner) would let us sneak in here and play asteroids," said Rin, referring to the days when her family lived in Utah and came up to vacation on Hebgen Lake every summer. "Then if things got too busy she'd kick us out."

"She'd feed us Shirley Temples and we'd play pool," said Tahni.

"The Happy Hour was originally an old summer home," explained Karen. "When the earthquake hit (in 1959) it ended up in the lake, but then got pulled back out. Iris McNabb bought it in 1972 and started running the Happy Hour Bar during the summers."

McNabb was a little red-haired spitfire who let the girls help out around the place as they got older, then one year Rin and Tahni sadly recalled that something wasn't right with her, and they ended up running the bar by themselves for a whole week. The next summer the doors to the bar were locked when they arrived. "Iris came to the door and said, 'I've been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and I want you folks to take the bar,'" said Karen.

Tahni and Rin remember the early days of running the bar fondly, back when boats would pull up at the deckside dock and one of them would hop in and go water ski during their shift. The Happy Hour Web site states, "The Happy Hour Bar & Restaurant is the only bar accessible by boat, car, or snowmobile."



The bow of the Happy Hour deck is shaped to resemble a ship.

“Back then if we had a hundred dollars in the till we were doing well,” said Tahni.

“As we got busier and busier sometimes we’d still sneak off and go water skiing. But we can’t do that anymore,” said Rin. “I remember sometimes even mom would be in the kitchen, and you’d bring in an order and she’d be gone.”

“People ask us why we don’t advertise. We don’t need to; we’re busy enough,” said Rin, pausing to explain that they run a full-menu kitchen where everything is homemade and even steaks are hand cut. “It’s a small little joint and we like it that way.”

But plenty of people have heard of their small little joint, including Charles Kuralt, Henry Winkler and Heather Locklear.

“Most of the time we don’t know ‘em and we don’t care,” said Bud of their more famous patrons.

“What he means is we treat them just like anyone else,” said Karen.

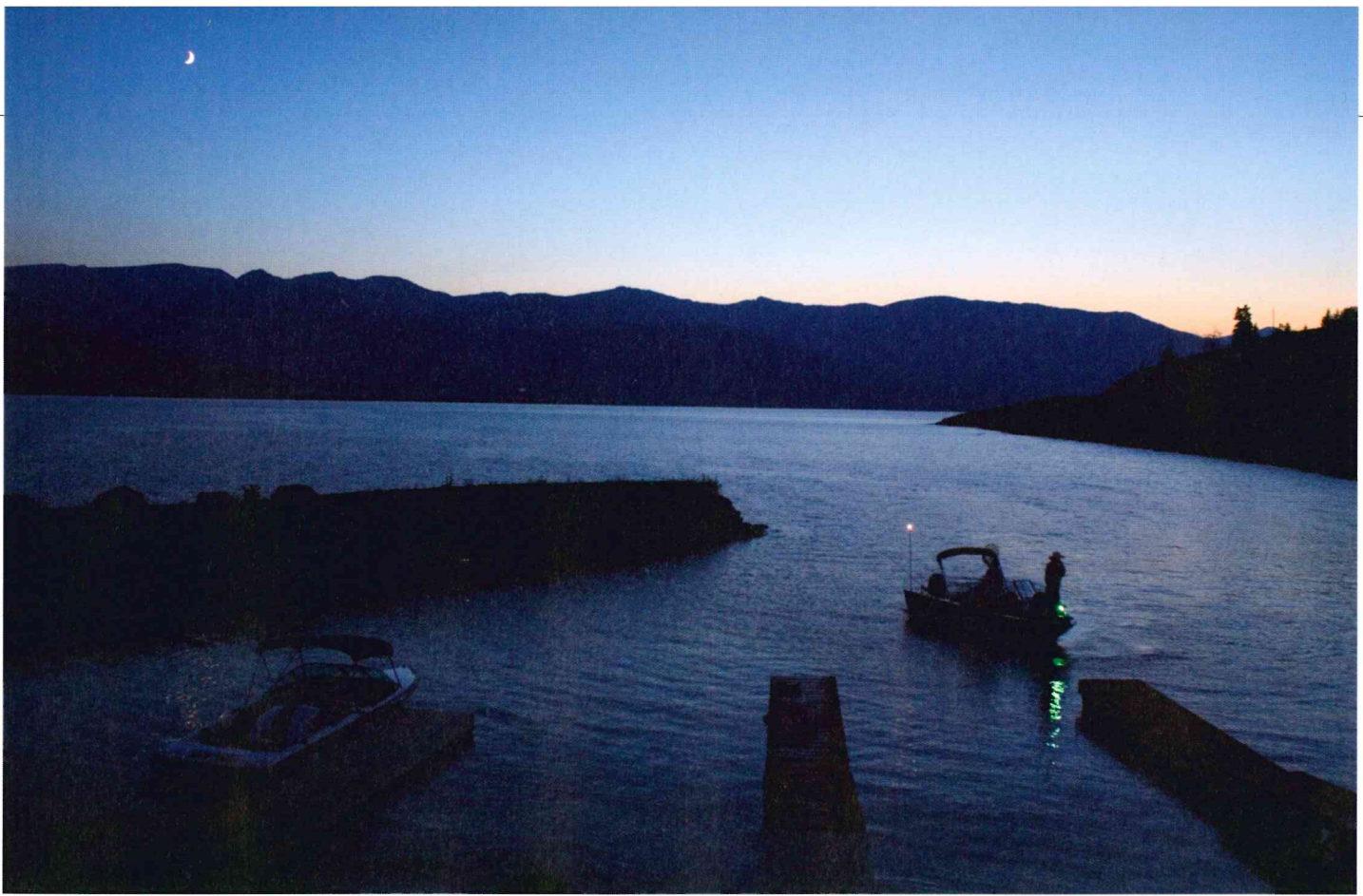
Like the time a Hollywood-type walked in the door on a

busy night when Rin was behind the bar. “I was balls to the wall in here and this star — I won’t say who he is — tried to get in front of everyone and order from me. I told him he needed to wait his turn and I’d get to him when I could,” remembered Rin. “So he says, ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ and I said, ‘Do you know who I am? I’m your (expletive) bartender, which makes me the most important person you know right now. I’ll get to you when I can.’”

Still, the family means for everyone to have a good time — even when they present a demanding customer with a Burger King crown. “If I have a high-maintenance customer sometimes it even helps me to lighten up when I put a crown on their head,” said Rin. “We say, ‘You think you get it your way here? You’re at the Happy Hour, princess, not Burger King.’ I’ve turned some of the grumpiest SOBs around.”

And they’ve seen some pretty conservative folks cut loose. Hence, the body parts adorning the walls with captions like, “Thank-you Doctor Morgan, \$4,500 later.”

“I think the fun thing about the boob wall is that we have



A boat prepares to dock in the last light of the day. Below, a female mannequin peers into the men's restroom.

people in here from all over the world — some of them with high-powered jobs — and they can come here and do something they'd never do in real life," explained Tahni.

"I love when I see people come in and have a good time," said Karen, who at 63 years old has such a maternal sweetness to her that she could just as easily be talking about hosting a church potluck.

Which perhaps isn't too far off the mark. The family hosts several "theme parties" a year, including Christmas in August, where they hold a big fundraising dinner with donated turkeys and trimmings, and have created an account to help needy families in their community. To hear all that Karen, Bud, Tahni and Rin do and to see them rushing around on a normal night at the Happy Hour is enough to make a person tired.

"We are tired," admits Karen.

Tahni and Rin each put in 60 hour weeks during high tourist season without blinking. "As anyone in this town knows, we have two seasons to make money; that's six weeks, twice a year," said Tahni.

"It's been a hard year for everybody here in West because we're all busy and there's not enough help," said Karen.

The Klungerviks may be tired, but not too tired to rally when a couple of Happy Hour "virgins" walked in the door, just as I was leaving. It was two fly-fishermen who admitted they'd been coming to West Yellowstone for 15 years, but had never been to the Happy Hour. Tahni heckled them a bit, then coaxed them into checking out the view of the night sky from the deck.

"Can you see Venus over there?" she hollered out to them. "Get over to the edge where it's darker and you can really see it."

She looked back at her dad Bud, who was ready at the helm of the bar, hand on a big air horn.

"Okay, Dad," she said, and he gave them a blast.

Both guys jumped and came back inside laughing.

Tahni handed them each a sticker that is only given to customers who earn it. It says: I've been Honked at the Happy Hour Bar. 🍸

