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Gordo's

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Illustration by Owen Tucker.

My mentor, Skip Fuller, from whom I had purchased The Alibi Club and transformed it into Chilkoot Charlie's, had an older brother named Red who claimed to have owned all the "B-Girl" joints in Alaska at one time. In 1971, Red had only one liquor license left, The High Hat Bar on Fourth Avenue, which had recently burned down leaving him in search of a new location. At that time, the 30-days-per-year operational requirement was strictly enforced.

There were no extensions allowed by the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board like today, albeit for a price. Red was also going through a divorce and wanted to keep the license out of the reach of his estranged wife, so Skip suggested that he put 51 percent ownership in my name and that I find a location and put it to use. I had never met Red before we made our handshake deal.

There were only about six months left in which to make everything happen, at a time when there were few good locations available because of the anticipated pipeline construction. But being young, ambitious and confident, as well as flattered that I had been given the opportunity, I agreed,

The result was Gordo's, located in leased space on the East side of Gambell Street, just north of 15th Avenue, with only four parking spaces in front. I received the Certificate of Occupancy in the last hour of the last day to open in compliance with the 30 day operating requirement. A health inspector, not surprisingly, had been my bane. Our architect had designed wall tiles in the bathrooms up to a lower level than the inspector deemed appropriate. That last afternoon the tile installer and I removed the bull head row along the top and substituted plain white tiles up to the required level, since we didn't have enough of the beautiful blue designer tile left on hand. It looked horrible, but it got us open. The whole experience pissed me off so much I vowed to do something about power-hungry bureaucrats and run for the Anchorage City Council.

Gordo's was the first disco-and the nicest bar in Anchorage at the time-with oak paneling, black high-backed booths, deep blue carpeting and an onyx black dance floor. I installed a telephone switchboard and continental phones on all the tables so people could communicate between them, an idea I had seen in a successful club in San Francisco named The Library. The walls were decorated with original modern art painted by noted local artists like Joan Kimura.

Opening night, I was behind the bar in a tuxedo when the sewer backed up-badly. Apparently, some building materials had found their way into the sewage lines. The place, full of people, was flooding and I could visualize the money badly needed on opening night evaporating into a river of sewage. Fortunately, the landlord, who owned OK Plumbing and Heating located next door to Gordo's, was in the crowd, and hollered over the bar, "Mike, I'll go get a snake!"

After a year of overseeing Chilkoot Charlie's, bartending at Gordo's, meeting myself coming and going, losing money all the while, I was desperate for an idea that would kick-start the new club. Then one afternoon, Dennis Powell, an old high school buddy who owned The Embers, a successful strip club on East Fifth Avenue, came by Gordo's for a few drinks and suggested I turn it into a gay club.

"This place would make a great gay bar. You've got the phones on the tables, fine art on the walls and parking in the rear! Ha! Ha!" I had to admit, it made sense, but I was mortified by the idea and had never even been in a gay bar myself.

I was unsure whether there would be a sufficiently large clientele in Anchorage to support the business. I had to be sure since I wasn't likely to be able to change it back to a place for heterosexual patrons because of the stigma. The only gay bar in town, sitting right next to The Embers, was The Bonfire, a small one-room little joint that did not require the support of many customers. It was owned and operated by Ed Fletcher, who I would come to recognize as one of the few truly evil people I have ever met—a bad guy right out of the pages of a Charles Dickens novel.

The gay community is a complex subculture that contains all of the elements of our larger society, including intellectual, white and blue collar, law abiding and criminal, good and bad. In large cities like San Francisco there are gay bars that cater to specific kinds of clientele, like bikers, lesbians and those interested in different kinds of fetishes. The difference, at least in the small community of Anchorage, was that they were all lumped together and more-or-less under one roof, so it was hard to avoid those elements one might have preferred to not have around.

I paid a visit to The Bonfire. Luckily, I ran into another high school acquaintance, Toby, known as "The Pekinese" in the gay community because of his facial features and bisexual orientation. His favorite saying? "I'm a better woman than you'll ever have and a better man than you'll ever be." He assured us we'd get plenty of business. After all, we'd already had an experience with the gay crowd coming into the place and taking over the dance floor one night until my night manager turned up the lights and closed the place early.

The appointed evening arrived; a regular of mine who used to stop by for a few beers after playing handball, noticed guys on the dance floor dancing with one another. When he brought it to my attention, I said, "I've been wondering how I was going to tell you I've decided to turn

the place into a gay bar." Justin jumped off his barstool and disappeared quicker than a moose into an alder patch.

Approaching the end of that first year, Gordo's was firmly established, making money (though we still had plenty of debts from the previous year's operation) and was scheduled to host all the major gay parties and celebrations. My second wife, Tiffany, and I treated the gay community with respect, unlike Ed, who used The Bonfire as his personal trap line for young males, but who no longer had a monopoly on the clientele.

My manager at the time was a very obese queen named Wayne, a.k.a. Auntie Wayne. Auntie Wayne must have weighed 350 pounds, drank a case of Schlitz a day and was comical-looking in a dress with his big, bushy, red beard and size 12 tennis shoes. He got along with most everyone and was a draw in the gay community. He, as well as T-Bird Tommy, an infamous gay character around Anchorage all the way back to my high school days, used to delight in running into me in the check-out line at my neighborhood Carr's grocery store, embarrassing me by acting out in front of everyone. Our best waiter at Gordo's was a young man named Jeff Wood, aka Myrna, who now owns the most popular gay bar in Anchorage, Mad Myrna's, which hosted Chilkoot Charlie's forty-third annual company party.

At that time, I was a trustee on the Bartender's Health Welfare and Pension Trust Funds, and took Tiffany to Miami for an annual convention. One night when we were out visiting gay bars to see if we could discover interesting trends or novel ideas, Ed Fletcher struck. We returned to our hotel room late and I had just gone to bed when the phone rang. It was my partner in Chilkoot Charlie's, Bill Jacobs: "Are you sitting down?"

"No. I'm lying down," I said.

"Good. Gordo's burned down."

Fletcher had hired a couple of his young boyfriends to torch the place. Shortly after closing, the two men forced open the back door of the club, sloshed in a couple five gallon cans of gas and threw a match to it. I later learned that the explosion almost torched the boys as well. Gordo's was a total loss. The poor lady who owned the beauty salon next door was ruined. There wasn't nearly enough insurance to pay all our bills and it broke my heart, but I was forced to sell Red's last liquor license to clean up the financial mess. I paid off the artists, whose works had been hung on consignment, out of my own pocket.

Mr. Whitekeys was entertaining the folks at Chilkoot Charlie's and wrote one of his typically zany songs called *The Night They Burned 'Ol Gordo's Down*, in which he asserted that the fire had been started by a flaming queer getting in too close proximity to a five gallon can of gasoline.

Unsurprisingly, plenty of people surmised I had burned the place down myself because it was well known that we had been struggling. The truth is we were actually beginning to prosper. It was Ed Fletcher who had been struggling. Fortunately, the Anchorage Fire Department had a very able young fire investigator named John Fullenwider, later to become the chief, who tracked down the arsonists and convinced them to turn state's evidence against Ed, who was convicted of the crime and sent to federal prison.

Before Ed's sentencing, his cook at The Bonfire, a guy named Cooksey, walked out of the kitchen one night, said, "Hey Ed, I need to talk to you," then stabbed him three times in the torso with a big butcher knife. Miraculously, Ed survived. When he got out of prison he was hired as a cook at the Beef and Brew Restaurant, which preceded Elevation 92 on Third Avenue overlooking the Anchorage port. I called them and told them they had hired a convicted arsonist. They said they needed a cook and I said, "Good luck. You'll never get any of my business."

Ed Fletcher got his in the end. He operated a restaurant and bar on the Homer Spit called the Porpoise Room, drove home to Anchor Point after closing the place one night, went to bed with a cigarette in his mouth and burned to death.