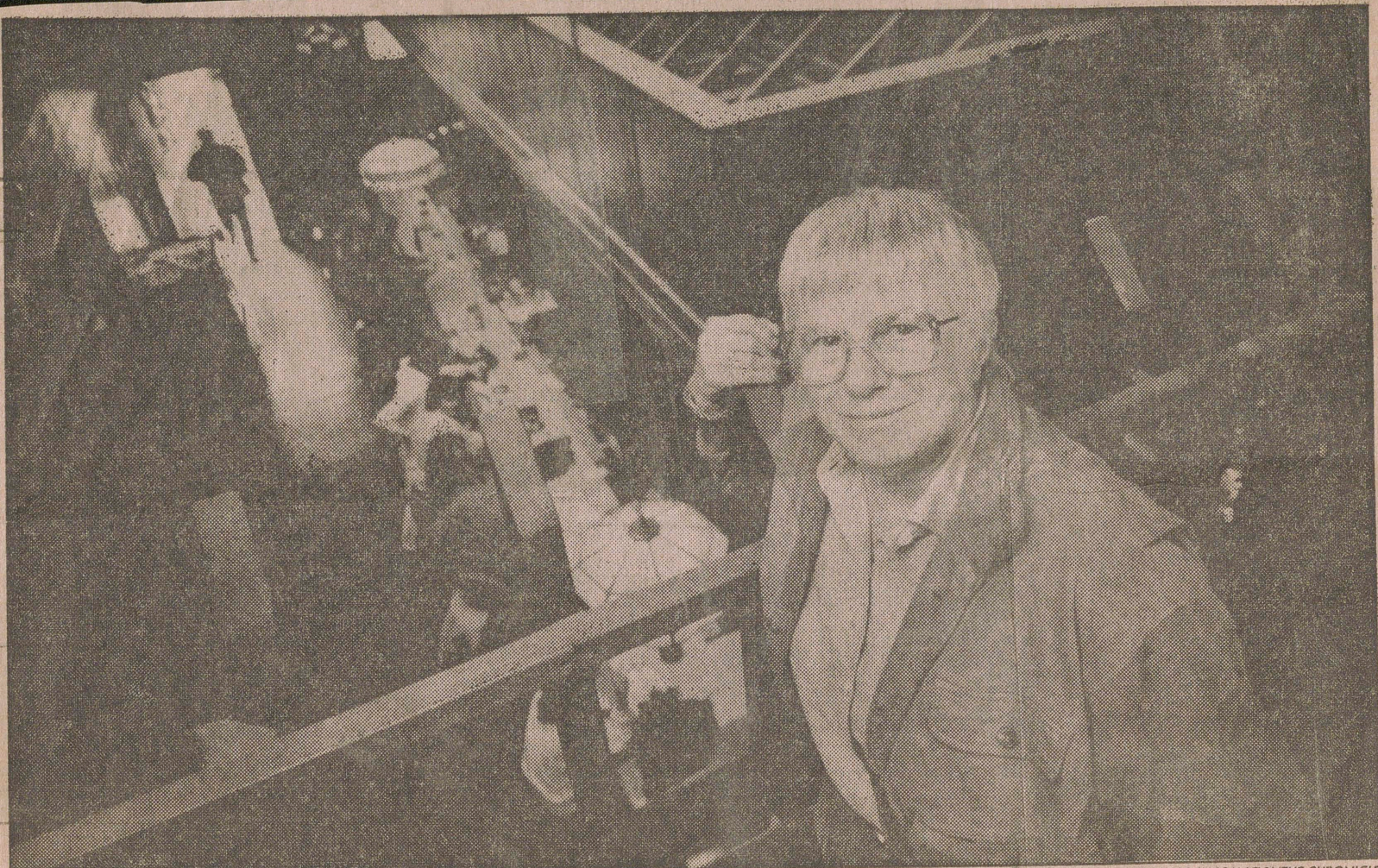


Maud's



PHOTOS BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Rikki Streicher is closing Maud's, the city's longest-running lesbian bar, next month. After 23 years in business, the bar is a victim of changing lesbian lifestyles.

The End of the Lesbian 'Cheers'

One of city's oldest women's bars to close

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BY SYLVIA RUBIN
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San Francisco, 1966. Only a few blocks from the Haight's head shops and jewelry vendors, there was Maud's, the groovy lesbian bar where the jukebox played Janis and the women came to shoot pool.

In the '60s, they came here nervously. In the '70s, they came to celebrate their sexuality. In the '80s, the decade of careers, health consciousness and cocooning, they stopped coming.

The longest-running lesbian bar in San Francisco will close next month after 23 years, a victim of changing times.

When it goes, it will be the end of an era, say those who have been coming here for years. "This is the lesbian 'Cheers,'" says a regular. "Everybody knows you; you come here at the end of the day to say 'hi' to all your friends and just feel comfortable. This makes me very sad."

On June 17, there will be a 23rd anniversary bash at 937 Cole Street, and later, an auction of memorabilia.

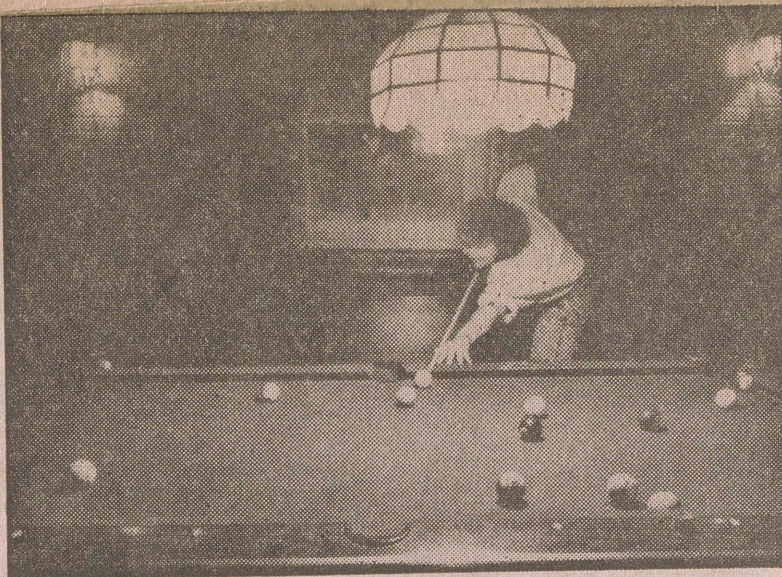
Owner Rikki Streicher can't believe she's selling the business. She steps behind the bar to mix herself a Rob Roy on the rocks. "I can't think about it. If I do, I'll break down. But it's been costing me \$1,000 a month to keep the place open."

At the bar, a well-dressed businesswoman who has been coming here for 15 years finishes her drink but doesn't seem to want to leave. "It's like watching your relatives sell the family home. I guess I'll just work harder at the job and go home to Mill Valley and pull more weeds."

Nursing a beer, 36-year-old Kathy Dalheim sulks. "I feel bad. Really bad. There really won't be any place else to go," says Dalheim, who works as a clerk at San Francisco State. "I've celebrated birthdays, promotions, getting my master's here. I'll really miss that kind of support system."

Changing Lesbian Lifestyle

You can blame the baby boomers: Straight and gay, they are spending more time at home and drinking less. "We're selling a



The atmosphere is relaxed at Maud's, where customers can feel comfortable or maybe, like Lisa Lewis, shoot a game of pool.

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lot more Calistoga these days," says bartender Susan Fahey.

Younger lesbians are opting for South of Market dance clubs.

"The lesbian lifestyle is changing," says Alexa Nickliss, 45, president of Bay Area Career Women, a social and business group for gay women. She, too, was part of the scene at Maud's 15 years ago: "It was the place to go to meet; it was a homey environment, you could shoot pool, sit around and talk, do a little dancing."

But health concerns and a more positive attitude about being gay, along with more blending into the mainstream, have made many lesbians question their motives for hanging out at bars. "Alcoholism has become a real issue in lesbian relationships," Nickliss explains.

Drug abuse has, too. "I would not downplay the drugs," says Peg Clark, who in the early '70s ran Peg's Place, a popular lesbian bar on Geary Boulevard that made headlines 10 years ago when a wild bachelor party involving some off-duty cops turned into a near-riot, resulting in the conviction of a San Francisco policeman on battery charges.

Clark sold Peg's Place more than a decade ago, though it remained a women's bar. Just six

months ago it, too, closed for good.

That leaves Amelia's on Valencia Street (which Rikki Streicher also owns) and Francine's, on 18th Street, as the only gay women's bars left in San Francisco.

"Maud's time has just run out," says Clark.

A Place to Find Love

Sandwiched between a sundries store and a cafe on a one-block commercial street, Maud's looks like any country-and-western bar. Video games beep and blink through a smoky haze. Fake Tiffany lamps throw a red and orange glow on the bottles behind the bar. Pool cues crack against balls, the sound muffled by paneled walls.

To former bartender Joann Shirley, a part of the scene since 1976, it is a sublime place.

"It was the place to go to find a new love," she says, recalling the early days. "Oh God, it was truly exciting to be able to come to a place where you felt free. It was a time when women were all of a sudden coming out of the closet. There will never be another time like that."

Maud's attracted the bikers, jocks and arty types; their more conservative sisters went to Peg's. "I got the older crowd that had kind of settled down; they didn't

wear the Levi's with the keys dangling from the pockets," says Clark.

"Polyester pantsuits," says Streicher with a laugh. "That was the Peg's crowd."

At 2 a.m., the whole neighborhood knew when Maud's let out for the night. "They'd rev up their motorcycles and churn out of there," says a neighbor who has often been awakened by the noise.

Rick Karp, who runs Cole Hardware across the street, remembers the spontaneous parties — and sometimes the fights — that would break out at closing time. "It could get pretty wild over there; they had their bikes. They were a boisterous, fun-loving group. I had no idea they were closing. It's too bad. It's just another indication that the neighborhood is becoming more gentrified."

Rikki the Cheerleader

To get at the heart of Maud's, you need to know a little bit about Rikki Streicher. In a word, she is a cheerleader. "What I really am," she says, "is the woman behind the women."

A tiny woman, quick to laugh, she arrived in San Francisco from Michigan in 1944 when she was 19. "When I moved here, I knew I was home. I felt immediately the freedom and the openness. In San Francisco, there was room for everyone, including a very young, naive lesbian." She became an X-ray technician, winding up as chief technician at Marin General. But she'd always wanted a business of her own.

After running several successful and not-so-successful restaurants, she took over the Study, a middle-class neighborhood bar on Cole Street, in 1966. By law, women were not allowed to be bartenders then — there was nothing she could do about that — but she refused to institute a dress code. "In those days, there were dress codes for women everywhere. I was determined to have a bar for women where they could show up as they were."

In 1966, that meant straight-legged Capri pants and ratted hair, which soon gave way to long tresses and bell-bottoms, and later, sweaters and pants. "It always amazed me. One day all those women with bouffants just overnight turned into women in tied-dyed shirts and straight, ironed hair."

She'll miss the place. "It was 23 years of my life. There'll never be another Maud's."

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