

Wild Times at the Eagle River Nature Center

by Chris Lundgren

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John Barclay, owner of the Paradise Haven Lodge, was either “ahead of his time” or “just odd,” depending on who’s talking. Many people living in Eagle River and Chugiak in the ‘60s and ‘70s had been to the lodge for dinner or drinks and knew at least something about Barclay. And everyone seems to remember what he looked like.

About six-foot-three and 300 pounds, he made a striking impression from behind the bar, according to John Vanover of Palmer, who grew up in Eagle River and was friends with Barclay’s younger brother, Bob. “He always had real blond hair that he kept in a crew cut. He had horn-rim glasses that looked like Coke bottle bottoms.” To read, Barclay had to lift his glasses and hold the page inches from his eyes, Vanover said.

But poor vision didn’t keep him from building one of the area’s most popular bar and grills and operating it for over 10 years.

The lodge sat on Barclay’s five-acre homestead (according to the Eagle River Nature Center’s archives), at the east end of Eagle River Road. Vanover said Barclay began homesteading in the early 1960s, after arriving with his parents and three of four of his brothers in 1958. It took several years to clear the land and prove-up the site before he could open the lodge, Vanover said. “He really hung in there,” said John Vanover’s mother Joe Anne, who described the lodge as “amazing, considering all that went into it.”

Other descriptions say as much about Eagle River in the ‘60s and ‘70s as they do about the lodge. To the south, the building looked out on a track where motorcyclists raced in the summer and snowmachiners in the winter, John Vanover said. Despite the racket, the lodge was an upmarket eatery. “They served steaks, and the place had a full bar,” said longtime resident Tom Take. “I guess you could say it was fine dining for Eagle River at that time.”

“He never had the money to make it real plushy,” Joe Anne Vanover said. “It was pleasant and cozy but not fancy—very Alaskan.”

A Bumpy Road

Getting to the lodge was the tricky part. Eagle River Road was mostly unpaved back then, and the easternmost two miles were known as the Old Homestead Road, John Vanover said.

It was up to Barclay to keep the Old Homestead Road clear, Joe Anne Vanover said, so his patrons could come and go safely. But nature was a tough opponent.

“Parts of the road were glaciated in the winter,” Take said. “It was quite a drive.”

“There were lots of little springs next to the road,” Joe Anne Vanover added. “The time and energy he put into it cost him everything.” If he’d convinced the state to upgrade the road, his business might have turned out differently, she said. “He was just ahead of the times.”

Business finally stalled. In 1980 Barclay sold his lodge and surrounding property to Alaska State Parks, said Dale Bingham, retired superintendent of Alaska State Parks in the Mat-Su and Copper Basin area.

Extreme Makeover Home(stead) Edition

Park officials inherited a mess. It looked as though the place had not been maintained in years. Bingham, who at the time was the ranger in charge of transitioning the lodge into the Chugach State Park Eagle River Visitor Center, described a building with holes in the walls and plywood covering the dirt floors. “We had to totally redo the roof, the walls, the floors, the electrical wiring and the plumbing,” he said. “It would have been so much easier and better if we could have taken everything down and started over.”

Pete Panarese, Chugach State Park superintendent at the time, agreed. “With a close look at the building, most engineers would say, ‘Tear it down. Build another one.’”

But because of funding constraints, park officials were required to remodel the existing structure rather than start anew, Bingham said. They were also committed to finish the project within a year, he noted.

And on March 29, 1981 (355 days after its purchase), Paradise Haven re-emerged as the Chugach State Park Eagle River Visitor Center, Bingham said. Nature photos and hands-on displays lined the walls. A “Close-up Corner” that looked like a trapper’s cabin invited guests to explore and touch items collected from the park. A new, second level of windows on the south wall drew attention upward. “We designed the visitor center to entice people to go into the park and explore what it had to offer,” Bingham said.

Trailhead vandalism, which had been a huge problem during Paradise Haven Lodge days, all but disappeared, Bingham said.

The state was fat with oil money. Park officials coordinated with the Department of Transportation to upgrade and pave the road, Panarese said. In 1983, the visitor center had a budget of \$180,000 and a staff of five, according to Asta Spurgis, manager of the Eagle River Nature Center. But like so many institutions in the 1980s, it suffered when oil prices crashed. By 1995, the budget had shrunk to \$16,000, and one part-time staff person (Spurgis) managed the center. Even the expert naturalist was a volunteer.

Visitor Center gets a Little Help from its Friends

Spurgis and volunteer naturalist Carole Lloyd were not surprised when state park officials began talking about privatizing the visitor center in 1995. “When they came out with a request for proposals, we decided to go for it,” Spurgis said. Carole’s husband Dick—an engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers—joined them in creating a nonprofit group, Friends of the Eagle River Nature Center.

Friends’ proposal was accepted, and in 1996 the Eagle River Nature Center opened with a slim budget and a crew of volunteers, according to Spurgis.

“We were floundering,” she said. “It was a big experiment.”

To fund operations at the new nature center, they tried charging visitors \$1 at the door. Spurgis laughs. “We soon found that didn’t fly. People just walked around the outside of the building rather than pay.”

During the second year, they instituted a parking fee—a new concept for Alaskans, who up until that year had enjoyed free access to their state parks, Spurgis said. “I remember a lot of irate people coming through the door. But there was just no way of making the place self-sufficient without parking fees and memberships,” she said. Gradually the complaints tapered off.

Both the Lloyds have since passed away, but in part because of them, people still hike the trails, camp out at the nearby public use cabin and yurts and flock to the

center's educational programs, Spurgis said. The old Barclay homestead is as popular as it was 35 years ago, but this time the crowd is less party animal, more animal lover.

The irony isn't lost on Spurgis. "Over the years, I've met folks who had frequented the bar, and most of them agree that it should have been a nature center to begin with," she said. "It's a natural for this place to be a nature center."