

A PLACE CALLED



UAMS staffers raise their glasses at Peck's in the early 1960s.

A guy walks into a bar. . .

No, this is not a joke.

The guy slaps a big bill on the bar, orders a beer and calls a taxicab to drive him to New Jersey — from Little Rock. The cabbie drives him there, only to find that the man (who had been a recent guest of the State Hospital) had walked from the hospital to a nearby bank and procured — by illegal means — his impressive bankroll.

By the time the pair reached New Jersey, the authorities were waiting. The cab driver headed back for Arkansas empty-handed and somewhat bewildered. The high-rolling traveler made the return trip as a ward of the state.

This story is just one example of the colorful goings-on that added to the mystique of a place called Peck's, which was, for many years, a "second home" for numerous UAMS staffers. Peck's wasn't exactly Cheers, but it was the closest thing to it in Arkansas.

The place was legendary. The unassuming "little beer joint" was a favorite haunt of UAMS faculty, staff and students for decades.

The mere mention of the now-defunct tavern evokes sly grins and warm reminiscences among loyal former patrons. Peck's formerly graced the spot now inhabited by the Taco Bell restaurant north and slightly west of the UAMS campus across Markham Street.

Peck's was razed in 1988. Proprietor Velva Walthall, who owned the tavern for 33 years (and had worked there for nearly 40 years), sold the place to pursue a life of leisure. The popular tavern survived numerous robberies, allegations of illegal gambling activities and a fire during its checkered history, only to succumb to the wrecking ball. Velva and Peck's — traditions for generations of UAMS faculty members, employees and students — were gone, but not forgotten.

For some at UAMS, the demolition was traumatic.

"Peck's was the center of gravity," says Bob Donaldson, chief of Audio-Visual Services/Instructional Television. "It was the best little beer joint in Arkansas. Life evolved around Peck's. . . . I used to go there after work every day."

"When they tore it down, I couldn't bear to watch them," Donaldson recalls. "So I drove in the

back way to work every day. I'll never eat another meal at Taco Bell. I'll never forgive her (Velva)."

For many, Peck's was a bona fide UAMS institution, as much a part of the campus as the chapel or the library or the cafeteria. Peck's had it all: earthy atmosphere, cold beer, greasy burgers, an eclectic jukebox, camaraderie, stimulating intellectual and philosophical discourse, bawdy humor, bizarre happenings — and shuffleboard!

And, like the fictional Cheers of television fame, it was a place "where everybody knew your name."

Velva, now 76 and still living in Little Rock, says she took pride in her friendly and diverse clientele. "Everybody knew everybody," she recalls. "I always told them we had doctors and lawyers and Indian chiefs in there."

The proximity of Peck's to UAMS was a definite bonus for business, Velva says. "A lot of folks from the Med Center came over," she recalls. The location wasn't perfect, however, because Peck's often was frequented by clients of the State Hospital, which is adjacent to UAMS on the west side. "We had a lot of crazy people come in, too," Velva says.

And then there were the students. "We had a lot of students," Velva says. "They were all good boys. Sometimes they would lie about their age, though. I had one boy that came in that told me he was 42. I asked him if he had any I.D. I looked at it when he handed it to me, and it was his daddy's.

"Yep, I've raised a many a doctor."

David L. Harshfield, M.D., an assistant professor of radiology (diagnostic radiology) and urology, is one such doctor. "I just sort of grew up at Peck's," he admits. "The first beer I ever drank was at Peck's. It was a Schlitz. . . . I learned a lot of little lessons in life. They're almost as important as my medical degree. I wish I had a diploma that said, 'Graduated with honors from Peck's.'"

The most important lesson, he says, is that appearances can be deceiving. At Peck's this lesson came in many installments. For instance, he says, it took him a while to figure out why Peck's "regulars" always won at shuffleboard when they were playing against newcomers. Finally, he learned that a well-placed matchbook under a leg of the table made it level. When the matchbook was removed (on the sly, of course), the slant of the table gave the regulars a decided advantage.

And once, Harshfield recalls, he and some friends at Peck's were lured into a golf match (for money) by a hustler. It was an expensive learning experience. "You cannot gauge how good anybody is at anything by just looking at them,"

Harshfield says. "That's kind of the way it was with Peck's. From the outside, it didn't look like much, but

on the inside, there was this incredible microcosm of the world.

"I met a lot of people that I otherwise wouldn't have met. It was like one of those outposts for inter-dimensional travel. . . . Peck's was on the edge of reality. You could come in the front door from one universe and go out the back door into another one . . . I think it was good for a lot of us."

Velva, he says, is a prime example of the valuable lesson he learned about appearances. "She lives her life the way she wants to,"

Harshfield says. "But you won't meet a finer person. She'd give you her last dollar. She was like your mom. People are not always what they seem on the surface."

Robert E. Burns, Ph.D., a professor of anatomy and pharmacology and toxicology, remembers Peck's for its odd diversity and the melding of groups of people under a single identity. "You could get anything you wanted at Peck's," Burns says,

"including the greasiest cheeseburgers in town. . . . The whole place was bizarre, but that became the norm. There were the locals and faculty

members and members of every class of the medical school, and they were all in there together in that

little place."

Exposed springs in booth seats "didn't seem to matter," he recalls.

"It was a good place for therapy."

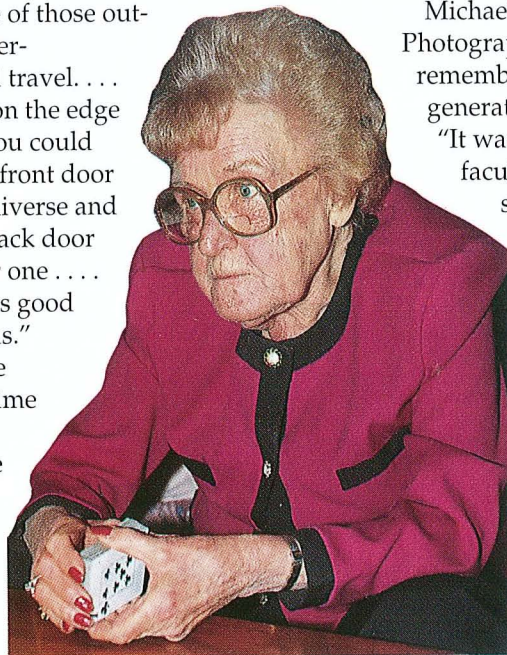
Michael Morris, chief of Photographic Services, remembers Peck's as a trans-generational meeting place.

"It was a good place for a faculty member to bring a student, if they were having a problem, to sit in a booth and just talk," he says. "Once you were in there, you weren't at the Med Center anymore. . . . It was not what you'd call a young folks' hangout or an old folks' hangout — it was just a hangout."

There are many Peck's stories to be told. Take, for instance,

the mental patient who stole a beer distributor's truck from the Peck's parking lot and drove it to Conway. Or the tales of the many buckets strategically placed on rainy days to catch the flow from the leaky roof. Or the divorcee who "won custody" of Peck's (after she caught her husband with another woman at Peck's, he never came back, and she declared the bar to be *her* hangout, not his). Or the knife fight broken up by Velva. Or the guy who robbed Peck's on its last night of business. Or the Molotov cocktail that set the place ablaze in 1987.

Donaldson's account of how Peck's helped cure him of a kidney stone fits in nicely. "I went to see a resident here about my kidney stone, and he told me I needed to drink beer," he recalls. "I misunderstood and thought he said *don't* drink beer. After a few weeks, I saw him again and he straightened me out. I went straight to Peck's and drank four pitchers of beer, and that night, I passed it."



MICHAEL MORRIS PHOTO

"Yep, I've raised a many a doctor."
— Velva Walthall



PHOTO COURTESY OF VELVA WALTHALL

Peck's changed little in its long history.