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DEVIL'S ELBOW, Mo.--It is fitting that the best beer joint along Old Route 66 is in a place called Devil's Elbow. The Elbow Inn & BBQ Pit lies between a rock cliff and the Big Piney River on an original surface of 66 about two hours west of St. Louis.

And once you settle in at the Elbow Inn, the regulars will bend your ear.

The Elbow Inn opened in 1929. The roadshackle bar and grill claims to be the oldest restaurant along Route 66.

Beef brisket and pork spare ribs are prepared on a vintage smoker behind the bar.

A loving 85-pound German shepherd named Dakota watches over the proceedings with big brown eyes.

I've been through this stretch of 66 several times and missed the Elbow Inn until last month, when I was escorted to the bar by former Chicagoan Tom McGreal, now a resident of Waynesville, Mo.

Waynesville is on the map. Devil's Elbow is not.

McGreal met me at mile marker 163, near the Dixon exit on Interstate 44. He was easy to find.

McGreal was riding a black 1984 Harley FXR.

His black leather chaps and fringe were accented by a decorative black German helmet affixed with bumper stickers that read, "I know Victoria's Secret" and "Life's too short to ride with ugly women."

That's when I knew this wouldn't be just any old road trip.

McGreal led me down Highway Z (as in ZZ Top) east for three miles and over the Big Piney River. We hung a right on Old Route 66, also known as Teardrop Road. Like the calloused thumb of a hitchhiker, the Elbow Inn & BBQ Pit stuck out on the right-hand bend of the road. A 78-year-old two-lane steel truss bridge still stands over

the river, southwest of the bar.

"Missouri used to be heavy into logging," McGreal said over a plate of barbecued brisket at the Elbow Inn. "They would cut the trees down near the river here and try to send them downriver. But there's a bend in the river where all the logs would get jammed. That's why they call it 'Devil's Elbow.' The people who unjammed the logs lived in the town."

The establishment opened in 1929 as the Munger-Moss Sandwich Shop.

Proprietors Nellie and Emmett Moss served barbecued chicken, ribs and pork. In 1946, when they relocated down Route 66 to Lebanon, Mo. (now the site of the wonderful Munger-Moss Motel), new owner Paul Thompson reopened the sandwich shop as the Elbow Inn.

Paul was kind of nutty. He'd place two glasses of water in front of first-time customers and brag about how the adjacent river had been "cleaned up."

Paul's son, Harold "Jug" Thompson, operated the restaurant and bar until 1978. It was closed to the public until 1997, when the business was purchased by retired Army vet Chris Leaverton and his wife, Nicki, a native of Darmstadt, Germany. "We ran across it when we were riding our Harleys down 66," recalled Chris, 40. "We thought we'd give it a shot." The Thompson family still owns the cabin-like oak building. The Leavertons kept using the original bar and barstools.

Many of the Elbow Inn regulars have worked at nearby Ft. Leonard Wood, built in 1940 as a U.S. Army training facility. Ft. Wood is five miles southwest of Devil's Elbow and is the county's largest employer, with 10,084 active-duty and 4,635 civilian personnel. That's how McGreal got to Devil's Elbow. McGreal, 37, arrived at Ft. Wood from the South Side of Chicago in 1990. He is a 1981

graduate of Brother Rice High School. He retired from the Army in 1999. McGreal has been a combat engineer, paratrooper and drill sergeant.

If the McGreal name is familiar, that's because his father, Thomas, is head of facilities for the Chicago Public School system. One younger brother, Michael, is head of Culinary Arts at Joliet Junior College. Another younger brother, Patrick, is a 5th District Chicago cop, and their 24-year-old sister, Kathleen, is currently studying in the Chicago Police Academy.

War vets are not forgotten at the Elbow Inn.

A bulletin board near the front door features patches and pins from Ft. Wood vets.

Leaverton said, "An old Indian medicine doctor made that board for us. He is a Vietnam veteran. He said the spirits came to him in a dream, told him to build it and bring it down here. So he did."

With REO Speedwagon's "Riding the Storm Out" playing on the jukebox, McGreal added, "When service members retire or die, their stuff gets put up on the board. We have one retired star major who has four purple hearts two in Korea, two in Vietnam who comes in here. He's in his 70s. He drinks for free."

Ft. Wood is a tourist destination itself. The region is stocked with deer and turkey. When area farms were going out of business in the 1970s and '80s, people released their animals at the 63,000-acre Ft. Wood.

McGreal explained, "There's a big wild boar population there. They call them feral pigs because they were born in the wild. They have big tusks. You have to take a file and cut their teeth." That's more than I needed to know about the wild game. But then my traveling companion, Chris T., chipped in, "My dad gave me one of those tusks. I have claws. Skulls from all kinds of animals."

That's more than I needed to know about her.

On weekends during the summer and fall, bands perform on the Elbow Inn's patio. Big Piney Float Trips also rents boats, so bikers and music fans can coast up and down the river to a rock 'n' roll soundtrack.

Another option is the US Missouri Route 66 Canoe Rental, located on the Big Piney River.

The river is stocked with small mouth bass, rock bass and bluegills.