



MILLION DOLLAR
Cowboy BAR

EVER SILVER
FRI AND SAT
STEAKHOUSE OPEN



Jan. 29, 2006---

JACKSON HOLE, Wyo. -- I hear cowboys are the next big thing.

As Oscar season approaches, cowboys are getting notice for walking the line or crossing it. Johnny Cash seemed to be on to this in 1991 when he released the album "The Mystery of Life."

Well, partner, there's no mystery about the best place to be a real cowboy: The Million Dollar Cowboy Bar in Jackson Hole (pop. 8,700). The bar dates back to 1937, and cowpokes like Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and Hank Williams Jr. have played the room. Original owner Ben Goe had the first liquor license in the state of Wyoming since the repeal of Prohibition, and the bar is included on the Jackson Hole Historical Society's downtown walking tour.

The bar walls are lined with knobbled pine imported from forests in western Wyoming, and the bar top is inlaid with 624 silver dollars. Guests sit at the 75-foot-long bar atop any one of 38 big-butt saddles, with stirrups that were installed in the mid-1980s. Some people sit sidesaddle, others get on and can't get off -- and that's before they've had a couple of cold Teton beers. The dance floor can hold up to 50 swinging couples, and the downtown roadhouse has four very active pool tables.

I visited the cowboy bar a year ago after getting a custom cowboy hat made down the street at the Jackson Hole Hat Co. The hats are built one at a time in the back of the store. The business began in 1983 as an offshoot of the cowboy bar. Under the long shadows of my brown beaver fur hat, I started walking around town with a rootin' tootin' attitude just like part-time Jackson Hole resident Vice President Dick Cheney.

In fact, you never know who you will bump into here. The day before my visit, actress Sandra Bullock and her future husband, Jesse James, spent quality time in the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar. Liv Tyler was in a few weeks before that. In the summer of 1980, scenes from the Clint Eastwood movie "Any Which Way You Can" were filmed here. "Gilligan's Island" star Dawn Wells (Mary Ann) and Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning are regular customers of the hat company. These are all some of my favorite celebrities who celebrate the independent cowboy spirit.

But now everyone is in a cowboy way.

I laid down my wide-brimmed hat on the rustic bar. The folks at the hat company told me the bigger the brim, the smaller the herd; the smaller the brim, the larger the herd. The cowboy riding the horse and working the cattle has a big brim. I can relate. Sometimes you ride a horse with great valor and all you get is bull.



The 476-capacity bar is also a functioning art museum. In the 1940s then-owner Jack Kranenberg created the wood inlay work that features silhouettes of cowboys wrestling steers and riding bucking broncs. (The inlaid work reminded me of some of the silhouettes that used to adorn the walls at the dearly departed Sharon's Hillbilly Heaven in Uptown.) The bar also features oil paintings on canvas of Western scenes circa 1940s. They were painted by the Art Colony of Ogden, Utah. The artists were inspired by the crude yet subtle style of Charles M. Russell. A native of St. Louis who was reared in Montana, Russell was a self-taught artist who depicted the West circa 1890s as the last unfenced frontier.

Any sober visit to the cowboy bar demands an inspection of the huge carousel chandelier at the end of the long bar. Black iron silhouettes of elk and cowboys twirl around a Western panorama, but there are also contemporary images like motorcycles. The staff has been thinking of adding a police car behind the motorcycle. The Vegas-inspired neon sign on the bar's roof dates back to 1953. On the darkest of Wyoming nights, the neon cowboy and bucking bronc will illuminate the western side of the town square across the street.

Hagan Dudley has owned the cowboy bar since 1988. Isn't that a great name for a Western woman? Dudley said one of the best times to visit is during the annual Sturgis, S.D., motorcycle bike rally.

"Jimmy Bedford is the master distiller of Jack Daniel's and he comes every year," Dudley said in her office, three flights of winding stairs above the bar. "There is a category of Jack Daniel's that comes in a single barrel, and we buy a single barrel. It is not mixed with anything else, and they bottle it. A true Jack Daniel's whiskey drinker really likes it. Jimmy signs bottles for us. Three or four days later he goes to Sturgis (a day-and-a-half drive from Jackson Hole) and does the same thing there."

Dudley walked across the room and picked up a mostly empty Jack Daniel's bottle. She held it up to the light, looked at the bottle and said, "This gentleman used to come to Jackson Hole to hunt and fish. When he died, his wife sent us a letter asking if we could place his ashes in a Jack Daniel's bottle. So this is him, Bob Whitaker, a banker from Kansas. Sometimes we'll take the bottle downstairs, put it on the bar and do shots with it."

Hey, someday maybe they'll be doing that with this Cazadores Cowboy down at the Matchbox in Chicago.

Dudley is keeping the Million Dollar flame alive after her husband, Roger, passed away in 1997. Roger was a hunting pal of Art Andersen, another bar partner. Art has retired, and Dudley now runs the bar with Art's wife, Carol Andersen. "I work 14 straight days and she works 14 straight days," Dudley said. "We all had been up here hunting many, many times. We came here from Vegas." Hagan was a registered nurse in Sin City. Her other partners were working in the gaming

industry.

"We just loved Jackson Hole," she said. "It was scary moving from Las Vegas to a small area like Jackson Hole. It is so beautiful here. I hunt, as well -- anything I can get a tag for. I hunted a lot of elk this year. We eat elk."

Elk is also served in the downstairs Million Dollar Cowboy Steakhouse, but it is not Wyoming elk. The USDA does not permit elk to be eaten unless it is raised on a domestic elk farm. For example, the Elk Carpaccio appetizer (baby arugula, shaved pecorino Romano, lemon and white truffle oil) is imported from Colorado, New Mexico and occasionally New Zealand.

"To me, elk tastes better than beef," Dudley said. "It's a little milder than beef."

No one is sure how the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar got its name. Previous owners suggested it cost \$1 million to renovate the bar in 1953, after a gas explosion in the basement resulted in extensive damage to the building. Dudley said she guesses the "Million Dollar" was added because so many taverns in Wyoming are called Cowboy Bars. "The liquor commission just told me that there are eight 'Cowboy Bars' in Wyoming," Dudley said.

I think it's because the Silver Dollar Bar & Grill is around the corner, in the historic Wort Hotel. "They came first," Dudley added. "They have more silver dollars than we do."

True: Fully restored in December, the Silver Dollar Bar has 2,032 inlaid silver dollars along the bar in a traditional Western landscape of custom black walnut tables, doors and millwork.

Of course, since I left Jackson Hole, "Brokeback Mountain" was released -- and, not surprisingly, the warm film about two lovesick Wyoming ranch hands had a cool reception around the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar.

"The real cowboys don't like it," Dudley said last week in a phone update. "A real cowboy wrote an article in the local paper, and he was upset about how the wild west was depicted. Actually, the Jackson Hole Film Festival rented our place and had a private party here when the film opened a block away at the 64-year-old Teton Theater." "Brokeback" director Ang Lee attended the screening. Planet Jackson Hole reported the sold-out showing left "more than a few weeping fans in the lobby."

Every real cowboy has to find his own way, and Wyoming is the best place to do so. Among the 50 United States, Wyoming ranks 50th in population -- only five people per square mile. So next time you're at the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar, have a shot of Jack to toast the diverse little paths that shaped this big country.

Happy trails!