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LA PORTE, Ind. The old fingers are long and thin.

But they cast out to new songs.

Pinetop Perkins is sitting at a table at Buck's Workingman's Pub on the east side of this northwest Indiana town (population 28,000). Muddy Waters' sideman from 1969-81 is talking about the one thing he likes better than playing piano.

Fishing.

Perkins, 87, relocated to La Porte two years ago because he didn't have anyone in Chicago to look after him. Perkins was befriended by 44-year-old blues-swing vocalist Buck Levandoski, who with wife Karen owns Buck's. La Porte is a good place for "Pine," as his friends call him.

The town is known for its 564-acre Pine Lake.

And that suits Pine just fine.

"I fish every day but Sunday," Perkins says on a sleepy Saturday afternoon at Buck's. "The first time I went to the lake I caught a Northern pike. I've caught bluegill, catfish. I use night crawlers for bait and I like heavy lines so big ones don't get away."

Perkins drives his own car around town, a 1983 baby blue Oldsmobile station wagon. The car is parked in front of Buck's. The back of the wagon is stuffed with rods, reels and a net.

And the big fish are still biting for Perkins.

Later this month Perkins will record a track in Chicago with Eric Clapton for an upcoming tribute album to Willie Dixon. Last spring Perkins sang "Walk This Way" (but did not play piano) for an upcoming Aerosmith tribute album.

And next month Perkins will be the recipient of the prestigious 2000 National Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. The award comes with a \$10,000 prize. Earlier this year Perkins won his 10th consecutive W.C. Handy Award as best blues pianist.

Perkins and his wife, Sarah, lived on the South Side for 40 years. After Sarah died in 1996, Perkins' stepchildren began to take advantage of him, he insists. "My steps started runnin'," Perkins says with a broad smile.

"Every time I went on the road they'd take something. My clothes. My tools. My guns. A portable CD player (given to him by Ike Turner). Anything salable, they got it. Those kids could steal all the sweetening out of a gingersnap_and not break the crust."

So Perkins broke away and moved to La Porte.

Levandoski met Perkins in 1985 when the late James Wireman, lead singer of La Porte's Elwood Splinters Blues Band, took Levandoski to see Perkins at B.L.U.E.S. on Halsted. Levandoski wears bright black and white wing tips in tribute to Wireman, who died from a heroin overdose.

Levandoski and Perkins are kindred spirits. They are characters at heart. Levandoski is a La Porte native. His late father, Raymond, a.k.a. "Tink," worked in the local radiator factory, and his mother, Dorothy, is a retired bank teller. Before getting into the bar business, Levandoski was the town bookie.

"People would call in football bets," Levandoski says. "We'd travel around and deal blackjack. My partner owned Ye Olde Pipe Shop (in downtown La Porte). He didn't have one pipe in the place. But we beat everybody and the money ran out. So I managed a VFW Hall in La Porte."

In 1995, a Mexican restaurant went belly up at 1025 E. Lincolnway about the same time International Harvester pulled out from a shop across the street. After remodeling the Mexican restaurant, Levandoski opened Buck's Workingman's Pub, named in tribute to the Grateful Dead's 1970 album "Workingman's Dead."

"I wanted to keep the blues alive," he says. "But it's been a hard road to run."

Buck's is full of blues memorabilia, much of it paying tribute to Perkins. The walls are dotted with autographed drumheads from the bands that have appeared at Buck's and color pictures of Perkins receiving honors at the W.C. Handy Awards in Memphis, Tenn. Perkins' 1995 Earwig recording "With the Blue Ice Band" is on the CD jukebox alongside Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road."

Perkins is managed by Pat Morgan, a public health professor at University of California at Berkeley. In an interview from Berkeley, she says, "Buck saved Pine's life. Pine's blood pressure was through the roof. After he moved, Buck took him to the doctor, and it's been normal ever since."

"Last time I was in La Porte, people on the street corners were waving at Pine. I went to meet Pine at Buck's club, and here are the nurses from the medical center massaging Pine's fingers."

"He's getting spoiled for the first time in his life."

About a month ago Levandoski drove Perkins to Chicago to get him a hearing aid. "It was \$4,000," Levandoski says. "For one day it was heaven. He could hear everything. But that night we saw Eddy Clearwater at Blue Chicago."

Perkins was called up to sit in with Clearwater. Perkins could still hear everything—including screeching feedback. Perkins never again wore the hearing aid. "Man, that thing made me mad," Perkins says sternly. "All that hollerin' in my ear? Buck took it back."

"Buck's my boy. I don't have to worry about nothing when I'm around him. He's like a kid of mine. I like it here. It's good and quiet. I was raised in the country, I'm a country guy at heart."

Perkins was born in 1913 in Belzoni, Miss. He was born Bob Perkins, but things around the house got confusing because the family dog was also named Bob. Perkins' parents promptly changed their son's name to Joe Willie. It must have been easier than changing the mutt's moniker.

Perkins picked up his nickname nearly 50 years ago. He recalls, "I heard a piano player named (Clarence) `Pinetop' Slim do `Pinetop's Boogie Woogie.' I redid the song in 1951 for Sun Records (with slide guitarist Earl Hooker in Memphis). They've called me Pinetop ever since."

Perkins' grandmother Mary Walton was a black Creek Indian, and his father, Sandy Perkins, was a Baptist preacher. Perkins' mother bought him his first cigarette when he was 10. Perkins still smokes a pack of cigarettes a day.

Perkins listened to blues and jazz '78s from his parents' collection. He was partial to a regional boogie woogie piano player named Tubba Sludge, who despite the great name never made a record.

But Perkins started his musical journey as a guitarist. A 1940s run-in with a dancing girl from the High Brown Follies changed his life. Perkins was playing guitar on Sonny Boy Williamson's legendary King Biscuit Flour Hour radio program on KFFA in Helena, Ark. After the midnight show, Perkins was drinking in a local bar.

The dancing girl adjourned to the bathroom. Perkins recalls the dancer's husband as quite a prankster. He rolled a 55-gallon barrel of coal ashes in front of the bathroom door. "Well, I pushed the door on her," Perkins says. "She couldn't get out for a couple of hours. When she finally got out, she leaned on into me with a big knife. I was the first thing she saw."

Perkins rolls up his sleeve and reveals a three-inch scar halfway up his left arm. The blade sliced a muscle in the arm and prevented Perkins from properly fretting a guitar. "She did it to me, man," he says, looking at the scar. "But after she found out it was an accident, she gave herself to me."

The good luck continued. Within a year of the accident, Perkins was playing barrel house piano behind B.B. King and singer-slide guitarist Robert Nighthawk.

Nighthawk brought Perkins from Helena to Chicago, where they cut their chops on the Maxwell Street circuit. Nighthawk turned Perkins over to his protege, electric slide guitarist Earl Hooker. When he moved to Chicago in 1958, Perkins lived with Earl Hooker's mother for a year.

In 1969 pianist Otis Spann left Muddy Waters to form his own band. Waters contacted Perkins, who was playing with Hooker. "I wasn't making any money with Earl," Perkins says of Hooker, who died in 1970. "Muddy said, `I got a job for you when you're ready.' I told him, `I'm ready now.' "

Perkins' style differed from Spann's, in that he played with more rolls and greater harmony, filling in the spaces between Muddy's jagged guitar riffs and mannish vocals. "I knew Muddy's records," Perkins says. "So when I got with him, I knew what he was going to do. I didn't play too much piano, just good harmony. Otis played a whole lot of piano."

Perkins appeared on the records that signified Waters' rebirth: 1977's "Hard Again," which featured Johnny Winter and included the rollicking "The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock & Roll (No. 2)"; 1978's "I'm Ready," which included one of the final collaborations of Waters, Perkins, guitarist Jimmy Rogers and harpist Big Walter Horton, and 1981's "King Bee." Waters' band broke up after "King Bee." Waters died in 1983.

Perkins recalls Waters as an excellent chef. A couple of the band's touring vans were equipped with stoves. "Muddy cooked black-eyed peas, cornbread, cabbage greens," Perkins says. "I'd eat like a hog. I weighed 211 pounds when I was with him." These days Perkins weighs 170 pounds.

These days Perkins will sit in with the blues musicians at Buck's "if they make the qualifications." He explains, "I listen to the drummer. I follow the drums. I sing behind the beat. I've been doing it that way for 60, 70 years. I can't play bass lines like I used to, but I do the best I can."

Perkins pauses and looks around the club. A hard rain is falling outside, which will force the cancellation of La Porte's first Blueberry Blues Fest and Hog Roast, at which Perkins is slated to appear. "I miss the old guys," Perkins says. "I miss Sunnyland (Slim). Jimmy Rogers. Junior Wells."

Former Chicagoan Ed Kosary is producing the Willie Dixon tribute album. Besides Clapton and Perkins, the project will include diverse performers such as Howlin' Wolf guitarist Hubert Sumlin, actor-guitarist Steven Segal and guitarist Mark Kendall, formerly of the '80s hair band Great White and currently with Train Station.

"Pinetop is one of the last of the old-school Chicago blues players," says Kosary, former editor of the Chicago Jazz & Blues News, who now lives in Newport Beach, Calif. "The album wouldn't be complete without him. There's only a handful of these pioneers left. And Pinetop sits on the top of the mountain."