

That's no Bayou, it's Shoal Creek

Publication Date: September 11, 2003 Page: 13 Section: XL Ent Edition: Final

Long ago and far away I used to dream of moving to New Orleans. Every time I visited the place, I was astonished by its vitality, by the mix of tumbling houses and glorious mansions, by the decadence and elegance, by the crazy people and the Southern people and the Creole people and the musicians, who were generally some mix of the above. New Orleans, I thought, would be the perfect place for a young poet. And of course, there was the food.

But as often happens, things didn't go according to plan. I ended up in San Francisco (they have pretty good food there, too). I love San Francisco, loved my years there, but part of me occasionally wonders how different my life in New Orleans would have been, how my adventures and understanding and poems would have changed. My Austin life is a full one, so I don't think about New Orleans much anymore, but I've been thinking about it lately -- largely because I've been hanging out at Shoal Creek Saloon.

Shoal Creek is a neighborhood sports bar with Louisiana flair at the corner of Ninth and Lamar. It's home to the New Orleans Saints football-watching crew and serves crawfish and catfish and jambalaya to soothe the gullets of the saintly fans. It's worn and comfortable, with wood that's been distressed by years instead of style. Games play in the background -- baseball and football and whatever else requires numbers to determine who wins. It's chatty noisy and food comes unpretentiously in red plastic baskets, the grease caught in white wax paper. It's warm too, this time of year, both inside and out on the patio, the way family reunions are warm. Pitchers of beer complete the tables and neon dominates the walls.

Outside, plastic chairs mix with wooden benches; ceiling fans whirl. Shoal Creek runs behind it and a few trees grow up close to its borders. No whiskey, no bourbon, but beer: Lone Star, Miller Lite, Anchor Steam, Shiner, for example. Beer. Folks wear baseball caps and jeans. Collars show up for Friday night happy hour. Service is efficient and relaxed, if such a thing is possible. The Web site -- yes, of course there's a Web site -- exhaustively explains the history of the creek, even manages to mention an O. Henry story from way back when. The bar feels permanent.

I've gone there only with writers, oddly enough (though most of my friends these days are writers, with the occasional lawyer who wants to be a writer thrown in). We slip out back, catch up on who's been offered a job, who's given up writing to find a job, who's given up a job to write. We never seem to talk about writing itself; the atmosphere somehow too laid-back, too convivial for the intricacies of metaphor. (Or perhaps we just need to turn our heads off.)

I wish I'd spent more time in bars in New Orleans. Not the touristy bars, but the real, deep New Orleans bars, the kinds of places cops go after a bellyful of oysters. I've no idea if Shoal Creek has the same texture as those bars. It seems impossible, given that Shoal

Creek closes at 10 p.m. on Sundays and is never open late enough for patrons to watch the sun rise from one of its chairs -- and I hear tell that seeing the dawn is part of a proper New Orleanean night. But you can at least watch the sun set over a po'boy. It's not quite the same thing, but it's a heck of a lot easier than moving to Louisiana.

bargirl@covad.net

Shoal Creek Saloon. 909 N. Lamar Blvd., 474-0805. Open 11 a.m.-midnight, Mon.-Sat.; noon-10 p.m. Sunday.