

AT LUCKY LIQUOR WITH DORIS AND POOH-POOH

A dive bar on the edge of downtown Shreveport once offered hard blues, cheap beer, and enormous cabbages.

BY CHRIS JAY

LUCKY LIQUOR STANDS AT THE END of an otherwise razed block of Christian Street in downtown Shreveport, Louisiana, an exclamation point on a sentence that has been erased. Vestiges of St. Paul's Bottoms, the neighborhood that once surrounded the bar, are everywhere. Sidewalks dead-end abruptly in blackberry brambles. Flights of concrete stairs rise into meadows.

I became a patron of Lucky Liquor in the late 2000s, sometime after the squat, grey cinder block building, painted with colorful murals of palm trees and martinis, began appearing in the opening credits of the vampire soap opera *True Blood*.

As the popularity of *True Blood* grew, the bar began to attract tourists. On my first visit, bartender Doris Wilson met me at the door. "You looking for vampires out here?" she asked, gesturing toward the camera I always carry.

"Usually, when I see white folks out

here with cameras, it's got something to do with *True Blood*," Wilson explained, raising her voice to be heard above the jukebox. Twenty-five feet from the source of the music, I could feel each bass note through the soles of my sneakers.

"My buddy said he bought a great big cabbage here," I shouted.

Doris nodded. "The cabbages will be here in a minute," she said. "PooH-PooH is on the way."

I took a seat at the bar. Most of the light in the room entered through the glass door. A fixture above the pool table, three video poker machines, and the glow of the jukebox provided the rest.

The murals from outside continued within: palm trees, island sunsets, and sparkling cocktails covered grey walls. Behind the pool table, a man and woman walked along a beach in silhouette. In carefully rendered, flowing letters, the mural

Thomas "Pooh-Pooh" Butler and Doris Wilson with greens outside Lucky Liquor, 2011.





Inside Lucky Liquor, 2018

read: BABY, LET'S GO TO LUCKY LIQUOR.

Patrons sat at an L-shaped bar and at tables surrounding a tiny dance floor. The crowd was mostly older Black men and women in small groups. Couples who wanted to keep to themselves would shoot pool, and there was almost always a game of eight-ball in progress.

In those days, if you wanted to drink in her bar, Doris had to buzz you in. Day and night she sat on a stool within easy reach of a switch that controlled the door. Seats near Wilson's perch came with responsibilities, like exit-row seats on airplanes. Patrons who sat near her helped evaluate new arrivals.

Occasionally, someone would take hold of the door handle who did not pass muster. Maybe they'd caused trouble in the bar on a previous visit or two-timed one of the women in Doris's poker group. She would wave her hand dismissively and shout "Go on!" I was lucky. She let me in.

Thomas "Pooh-Pooh" Butler Jr. arrived shortly after. Doris ran the bar, but

Pooh-Pooh owned it. A native of the town of Plain Dealing, thirty miles away, he stood about six feet, four inches tall. Broad-shouldered and heavysset in a muscular way, he had the largest hands I've ever seen. In his grasp, normal-sized objects appeared tiny: a can of beer from the cooler, a tomato from the garden, or four quarters for the jukebox.

Covered in sweat and soil, he was carrying a beer box overflowing with cabbages, squash, and tomatoes. Regulars gathered around to ogle and barter.

I told Pooh-Pooh about the enormous cabbage that he'd sold my housemate, how we'd eaten it for meal after meal, shared it with friends, and posted about it online. He signaled for me to wait as he retrieved something from his truck.

Pooh-Pooh returned with the wildest-looking cabbage I'd ever seen, a dark green-tendriled monstrosity with unruly outer leaves so large that they nearly obscured his upper body.

"Look at the size of *this* goddamned cabbage!" he shouted.

M.C. Rollo



Thomas "Pooh-Pooh" Butler in 2017

POOH-POOH CAME and went throughout the day, using Lucky Liquor as a homebase from which he managed other businesses, including a long-haul trucking company and the four-acre vegetable garden where he raised that cabbage. Doris always worked the bar.

Pete Fetterman, a regular who hosts a free annual cookout at Lucky Liquor, told me that many of the bar's patrons felt a deep affection for Doris. She was often alone at the bar, where she was the only employee, for hours at a time.

"I'd go just to be there with Doris and catch up with her," Pete said.

Each year on Mother's Day, Pete purchases two flower arrangements: one for his mother and one for Doris. Pete told me about one Mother's Day when a woman who looked to be in her eighties showed up at the bar with her daughter and granddaughter. "They were the only ones at the bar besides me and Doris," he said. "And they were just tearing up the dancefloor right in front of the jukebox, in the middle of the afternoon."

Sometime in the early 2010s, Pooh-Pooh decided to replace the CD jukebox with an Internet-enabled digital jukebox. Saddened by the development, my housemates and I headed downtown for a final evening with the old-fashioned jukebox.

"I stocked it myself," Pooh-Pooh said as we flipped through page after page of CDs. "This is the music that's hard to get around here. I loaded that thing with nothing but the hard blues."

To Pooh-Pooh, "the hard blues" meant artists like Otis Rush who belted out slow-burning stories of secret love affairs over the wail of electric guitars. Pooh-Pooh's personal curation of the jukebox was, like the tropical murals and locked door, another way of protecting the bar from the influence of the outside world.

The jukebox was so loud that patrons would often go outside to carry on conversations. Communicating inside the bar required forehead-to-forehead proximity. Much of the atmosphere of the place was dictated by the jukebox—by its

remarkable contents and its extraordinary loudness.

My friends and I worried about the implications of a fancy Internet jukebox. We were right to worry. After Pooh-Pooh made the change, a friend of mine spent a snakebit afternoon at Lucky Liquor. He'd settled in at the bar and had cracked open his quart of beer when a patron slipped a five-dollar bill into the new jukebox and cued up the Original Broadway Cast Recording of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. By the fifth song, regulars had begun angrily tossing tips on the bar and leaving.

As my friend headed toward the door, he glimpsed a lone woman on the dance-floor, swaying to the maudlin chords of "Memory."

I have no recollection of the last time I got to visit with Doris and Pooh-Pooh at Lucky Liquor. At the time, that was just another trip to the bar. I mentioned this to Pete, and he reported a similar regret: "When I look back on all of the beautiful memories, it all becomes the same event."

Pooh-Pooh Butler died from complications of COVID-19 on July 26, 2020. Shaken by the loss of her friend and employer, Doris Wilson has not returned to the bar where she worked six days a week for thirty-four years. Pooh-Pooh's son, Thomas "Tank" Butler III, reopened the bar this past June.

In July, I visited Lucky Liquor for the first time since Pooh-Pooh died and Doris stepped away from the bar she ran for so long. When I pulled on the door, I was surprised to feel it give way without waiting for the familiar buzz. A Top 40 tune blared out of the TouchTunes-branded jukebox, its green and purple lights



Exterior mural at Lucky Liquor

flashing in a mostly empty bar.

Tank and I stepped outside to talk.

He told me that the community of Lucky Liquor regulars had accepted him "with open arms" when he found himself thrust into the role of bar owner, a role that he had never envisioned for himself.

"Every time I see people coming in here, I smile," he said. "I'm glad to see these folks getting back together."

I asked him what had become of his father's garden just off of Interstate 20 in Bossier City. He winced at the mention of the garden.

"We're trying," he said. "One step at a time."

He may be occupied with the bar for the time being, but it's easy to imagine a day when Tank will walk through the door of Lucky Liquor, covered in sweat and soil, carrying a beer box overflowing with cabbages, squash, and tomatoes. 🍷

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