



Gone Fishing

“John Wayne taught his kids how to fish here,” says Patrick Holleran, owner of the Sportsmen’s Lodge. It opened in 1946 as a clubhouse for the Trout Lakes farm that supplied restaurants as far off as Vegas and offered locals a place to toss back beers while tossing out lines.

Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, and Bette Davis were also among those who dangled liverwurst-baited rods into the lakes to lure trout that the lodge staff would grill and serve on white tablecloths with a martini, or on the bar with a lager. Though suburbia has since turned the lakes into a pond, the Sportsmen’s Lodge has barricaded itself from the strip malls of bordering Ventura Boulevard with a parapet of towering eucalyptus and palm trees, and the stubborn ghosts of the past.

Its bar, the Muddy Moose, has the look of a mountain chalet. There’s a massive stone fireplace with eponymous moose antlers hanging over the mantle, log-beamed ceilings, and antique wooden snow-skis and faded black-and-white mountain landscapes on the walls. Draped over it all is a nostalgic musty smell like the inside of a grandfather’s steamer trunk.

The name “Muddy Moose” was added during a recent renovation, and is thus completely ignored by its regulars. To them it has always been and always *will be*, simply, “Sportsman’s Lodge” or “The Lodge.” These sixty-somethings are accountants, insurance salesman, and the like by day. But by afternoon, they are ordained members of an unofficial club. Around 4 p.m. they start drifting in, passing around forwarded email jokes printed out at the office—“My wife ran away with my best friend and I still miss him,” etc.—and the results of their weekly Lotto Pool.

From their burgundy-cushioned stools, they look out through the wall of windows behind the bar at the swan pond and gazebo that they still remember as the trout lakes and bait shack. As they settle onto the soft recoil of their French 75’s—their drink of choice between the first and last beer—one of them recalls the long ago night he gave Richard Burton a ride home from the bar after he’d had a few too many. Another brags of having an apple martini with Anna Nicole and a bourbon with Billy Bob Thornton.

Across the parking lot from the tavern is the Sportsmen’s Lodge Hotel. This 1960s addition is a place where the Griswolds would stay, with tacky-cool signage, a Winnebago-sized carport, and rooms facing the pool. Its what-you-make-of-it charm and \$150-per-night rooms make it a nice alternative to pricier options “over the hill.” Forgot your Swisher Sweets or Brylcreem? Don’t worry, there’s a “Tobacco and Sundry” in the lobby.