

Last call at the Boulder Club

By MARIA GAURA
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BOULDER CREEK — It's noon at the Boulder Club, and the lunchtime crowd is filtering in for a cold brew and a break from the heat outside. Bartender Lee Nelson swabs the bar, sets out the beer mugs and greets the regulars by name.

It looks like business as usual, but when the bar doors close at 3 p.m. today, they're staying shut. After 17 years in business and a long tussle with the state Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, owner Frances Gualtier has agreed to sell her liquor license to a new owner.

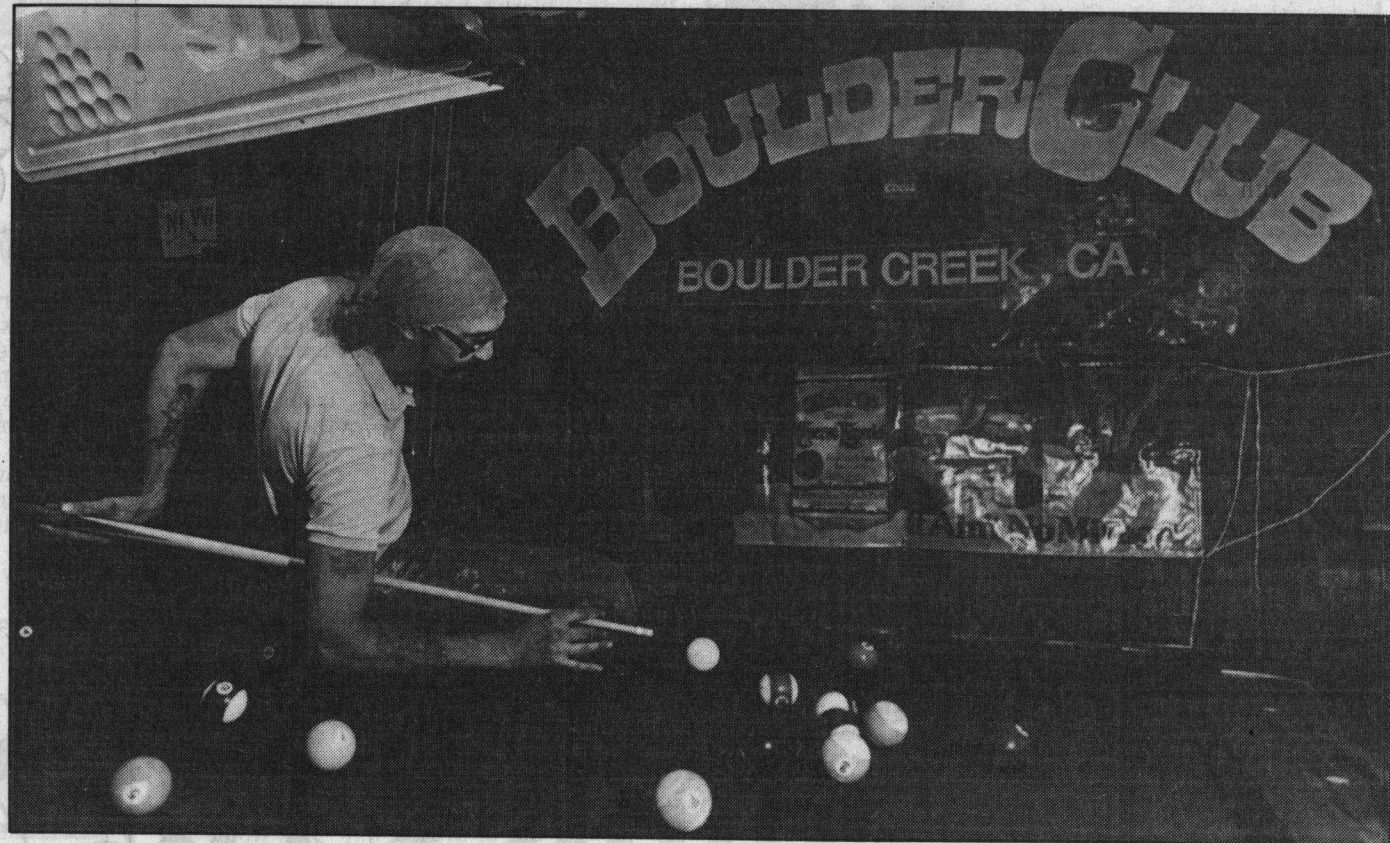
"I came in this morning and gave Fran a hug, and just started to weep," Nelson said Thursday, her eyes again brimming with tears. "It's a big loss, this is a home away from home for a lot of people."

The ABC's order to sell the liquor license was filed in January after stacks of minor complaints over such things as fights and public drunkenness had piled up in the agency's files. But Nelson wishes the agency had kept a similar file of the good things the bar accomplished over the years.

For 17 years, Gualtier and her husband Jack draped a tablecloth over a pool table, cooked up holiday feasts and opened the doors to the public at Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter. Frances donated money to local charities and helped countless people through rough times with small loans and paying jobs, she said.

Bar regulars returned the warmth, calling Gualtier "Mom," and the Boulder Club home. The quiet mother of six doesn't fit the stereotype of a tough bar owner. Gualtier said she quit smoking and drinking nine years ago, and regularly attends Bible study classes. If Frances Gualtier has a fault, it's being too trusting and goodhearted, her friends said.

"She gave a lot of steady employment over the years," said Nelson, who has



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Steve Barclay lined them up for the last time Thursday at the Boulder Club, which closes today.

worked at the Boulder Club for 4½ years. "It was like a little union hall. Guys would come here in the morning and people would call with day jobs — say they need someone to stack wood or make a dump run.

"We had a floating library here," she said. "People would bring in books to pass around, and clothes and food too — especially after the earthquake."

The club became a community switchboard after the Oct. 17 quake as people from outside the community tried to get in contact with friends and relatives.

"We took a lot of messages from out-

side the state here," Gualtier's daughter Marsha Savko said. "A lot of people out here don't have phones, and after the quake a lot of them didn't have homes either. Everybody really pulled together. People would walk in here and see friends and say 'Thank God you're still alive.'"

But the past two years have brought Gualtier some hard times.

Jack Gualtier died a year ago April, then the problems with the ABC took a serious turn. Gualtier's home was almost destroyed by the Oct. 17 quake, requiring eight months to repair, and complicating her dealings with the

state liquor agency. Some area residents and business owners objected to the bar's unconventional clientele, and pressured the Sheriff's Office to keep a close eye on the club.

But a sign over the bar reads "No Sniveling," and Gualtier refuses to cry over her problems. She says a sale of the business is in the works, and should reopen under new ownership within two months. She declined to reveal the purchaser or the nature of the new business until the deal is closed.

"We're a family-type bar," Gualtier said. "We're not what they make us out to be."