

AMERY, WIS.

*Club 53's cozy four bowling lanes and horseshoe bar hark back to the '50s. But if its owners can sell, they'd like to strike out for something new.*

**Jacob Jeska**, right, an Amery High School sophomore, concentrates on the pins last week at Club 53. High school classes have been bowling there for more than 20 years.



PHOTOS BY JEAN PIERI, PIONEER PRESS



**Owner Jim Leisz** cleans the four bowling lanes by hand and with a lane-oiling machine. After 25 years of running Club 53, Leisz and his wife, Ethel, would like to retire. "We've got a lot of things we do," Jim Leisz, 65, said, "if we don't get too old to do them."

# READY TO ROLL

BY JOHN BREWER  
Pioneer Press

The 1950s never ended at Club 53. Lacquered particleboard covers the walls, brass-colored lanterns hang over the bar and above the four-lane bowling alley is painted, "It's tough to lose, but it's tougher to be a good loser."

The bar and bowling alley on a main street in Amery, Wis., has long been a second home to Jim and Ethel Leisz, but after running Club 53 full time for 25 years, they're ready to retire.

If only somebody would buy the place.

"The right people have got to come by," said Jim Leisz. There have been lookers, but nobody has offered enough — the couple is looking for \$250,000 — to close a deal. "It was listed for a year, but now it's not listed. Now

it's a word-of-mouth thing."

Business is still good, Jim Leisz insists. The slump that bowling went through in the 1980s and '90s seems to be over, the couple said, and the roster at the club is filled by adult leagues, high school classes and youth leagues six days a week. And now that deer-hunting season is over, the lanes are open on Sunday, too.

Patrons say they'd hate to see the place change owners, but the Leiszes, both 65, don't plan on looking back.

"We've got a lot of things we do," Jim Leisz said, detailing future plans for golfing, bowling and ice fishing, "if we don't get too old to do them."

The business dates to about 1920, when a former owner put a couple of lanes in the basement and a pool hall



**A photo** of Henry, left, and Lucille Leisz (with longtime employee Herb Marschall) hangs on the wall of the bowling alley. Jim Leisz's parents bought the business in 1953. It hasn't changed much in the five decades since.

BOWLING ALLEY, 8B





**Owner Jim Leisz** cleans the four lanes at Club 53 last week. After a slump during the 1980s and '90s, Leisz says, bowling is back, with the lanes usually filled by leagues and high school classes.

## Bowling alley

(continued)

upstairs. Jim Leisz's parents, Henry and Lucille, opened shop in 1953 and got rid of the billiards and basement lanes, added four lanes onto the back of the building and put a bar out front. Jim Leisz bought the business from his parents in 1980.

Club 53 is one of five alleys in the Polk County Bowling Association — three have eight lanes and the other two alleys have four.

The business hasn't changed much in its 52 years, other than the brief presence of a bumper

pool table, the addition of synthetic lanes, and a switch from 45s to CDs in the jukebox.

It's that consistency that attracts many customers.

"The old-timers come in here because they remember everything in here," said Roger Gordon, a Vietnam veteran, one-time cowboy and sometime carpenter. The Montana native holds his post on the north side of the horseshoe-shaped bar and starts a lot of conversations with the appellation "Partner."

"Partner, this is my office," the lanky 59-year-old said. When a Clear Lake homeowner

needed Gordon to do some cabinetry work one morning recently, he called the bar.

Other lanes in the region have expanded and updated, but not Club 53. While McKenzie Lanes, 20 minutes away in Centuria, has glow-in-the-dark balls and automatic scoring on its eight lanes, Club 53 has the pin-setting machinery and manual scoring that were used in the 1950s.

Jim Leisz considered expanding the business years ago, maybe updating the lighting around the lanes.

"I had thought about it, but I got to the point where I got too old and the idea sort of died," he said. "I should have done it 20 years ago, when I was full of



"Jim and Ethel are super nice people, and they've been putting up with me for 10 years,"

*Roger Gordon, a Vietnam veteran, one-time cowboy and sometime carpenter*

piss and vinegar."

Last week, bowlers in the women's league had no problem sticking to the "good loser" admonition painted above the four sets of pins.

The Pink Ladies and Bremer Bank teams chatted in button-down bowling shirts about good form and plans for the weekend. Nobody brought up who won and who lost (the Pink Ladies sponsored by a local beauty salon, won).

Cliff Harper was working on a Michelob Golden Light and a Marlboro while his wife, Darla, talked with other bowlers.

"We live a block away. This is the only place we drink," he said. "The other bars are too rowdy."

Harper said that when the Leiszes sell the place, it will be hard for him to warm up to new owners.

"I wouldn't want anybody else coming here," he said.

For Gordon, the change would seriously disrupt his workplace.

"Jim and Ethel are super nice people, and they've been putting up with me for 10 years," Gordon said. "I don't want them to sell it. It would be kind of like when my dad passed away or buried my mom's boyfriend in Montana ... I miss them. And that's the way it is with Jim and Ethel, I'll miss them. These people are like family to me, OK?"

John Brewer can be reached at 1-800-950-9080, ext. 2093 or at [jbrewer@pioneerpress.com](mailto:jbrewer@pioneerpress.com).