

# Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

## Tucson's Beau Brummel Club

Did you ever wonder about that odd-shaped building – the one that looks like an old drive-in food establishment (see photo) - near the northeast corner of N. Main Avenue and W. Speedway Boulevard? In fact, the building opened as Dukes Drive-In in the early 1940s, offering eating from your car or inside at a counter and booths. Today, the building is the home of the Beau Brummel Club, a private social organization.

The Beau Brummel Club was established in 1936 by small group of African American men “who were refused entrance into Anglo social clubs of that era.” The founders included Colonel Reuben L. Horner III, one of the most decorated blacks of World War II, and Duke Shaw, who would later build and operate Dukes Drive-In.

The Club was named after the iconic Beau Brummell who lived in England in the early 1800s and is famous for introducing modern men's fashions, like the suit worn with a tie. For an unknown reason, the Club's name “dropped” the second “l” in Brummell.

Initially the group was limited to 15 men, supported education and social services in the African American community, and provided a sort of hospitality welcome for blacks new to Tucson. Club members started out meeting in each other's houses, held a popular annual formal dance at the old Blue Moon ballroom (burned down in 1947), brought in entertainment like Louis Armstrong, and held picnics on Mount Lemmon and in Sabino Canyon.

The Beau Brummel Club was also helpful in the integration of major league baseball. In 1947, starting a 15-year relationship with our town, Bill Veeck, owner of the Cleveland Indians, brought his newly integrated team to Tucson for spring training. The Pioneer Hotel, the team headquarters, had a strict “whites only” policy then so Dukes Drive-In became the place for black professional baseball players to eat and socialize. This included such Cleveland Indians stars as Larry Doby, Satchel Paige, and Harry “Suitcase” Simpson.

At first Beau Brummel members hosted black Cleveland Indians in their homes. But Duke Shaw built a ten-unit motel just to the south of the Club to accommodate the baseball players and visiting black entertainers.

In 1954 the drive-in was expanded and the Beau Brummel Club moved into a portion of the building with, as current member and local attorney Rubin Salter says, “great fanfare.” The Beau Brummel Club took over the whole building when the drive-in restaurant was shut down in the 1970s. The motel lasted until 2005 when it was torn down, after being abandoned for several years.

The Beau Brummel Club is still active today. The Club has changed its all-male, blacks-only policy and now is more racially diverse and includes women. According to attorney Salter, the membership is mostly professional, including people from IBM and Raytheon for instance. Currently the Club has 20

members on the Corporate Board, but sells “access cards” for \$10 to an average of a hundred people a year.

The Club is primarily for members, who enjoy getting together to play cards or dominoes; younger members are attracted more to sports-related activities. Both members and those with access cards make use of the full-service bar in the Club.

Occasionally the Club sponsors musical events, hosting visiting bands with an emphasis on “Downhome Blues,” according to Rubin Salter’s son, Kristian, also an attorney.

The Club has maintained its community service mission by holding tailgate parties at University of Arizona football games, sponsoring an annual Ghetto Open golfing event for charity at local courses, and hosting an annual ball for members and invited guests.

The Beau Brummel Club faces two threats to its future. The first – a sign of the times – is the difficulty of maintaining successful private fraternal organizations and social clubs in an increasingly impersonal, electronic-messaging society. The second threat – to the building – is the probable future redevelopment of the entire just-north-of-town-center area.

But, for an amazing 76 years the Beau Brummel Club has survived, thrived, and become a worthwhile community institution. As the Club’s namesake Englishman Beau Brummell might say, “Good show and good luck for the future!”

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*Sources: Arizona Daily Star (February 10, 2005 and August 22, 2011), Beau Brummel Club Tucson (Tumblr.com, 2011), Historical Facts of Tucson’s African American Community (tucsonalumnae.org, January 2010), Interviews with Rubin and Kristian Salter (September 2012), Rueben L. Horner III, In the Steps of Esteban: Tucson’s African American Heritage (1996).*



*The Beau Brummel Club building at 1148 N. Main Avenue has a storied history. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)*