

Once Upon A Time In North Park

Rudford's Restaurant – A North Park Icon

by Bertha Klann

My first recollection of Rudford's dates back to my arrival in San Diego, in the mid-1960's, when my boy friend and I frequently went there to indulge in milk shakes and pie. However, Rudford's dates back long before that time.

The first restaurant to occupy the present site, at 2900 EI Cajon Blvd., was W. B. Bickerton's, opened in 1938. The name was changed in 1947 to Walt Harvey's Eat Place. Walt Bickerton was not only the owner, but served as Chef for the first 19 years, until a hip injury prevented him from working in the kitchen more than on a part-time basis. Wing Tom, hired as a dishwasher the day Rudford's opened, worked there 25 years before he retired.

John Thomas "Tommy" Rudford purchased the restaurant in 1949 and apparently did everything right in attracting patrons from all walks of life and age groups, as well as retaining the same waitresses for many years. Rudford's prosperity was due to old-fashioned home-cooked food prepared from scratch on a 24-hour basis. They served breakfast all day and night. The waitresses knew their customers and cared about them enough to visit them when they were ill. They even took them flowers when they were in the hospital. Customer birthdays were celebrated with a lighted candle in a doughnut on their special day. Many patrons of the restaurant met there, married and continued to be a major part of the restaurant's home spun flavor. One celebrity was Glenn Ford who ordered an English muffin.

The early morning crowd included utility crews, blue and white-collar workers, newspaper route managers and people who worked in the area. The lunch crowd was similar, but the dinner groups included families with children. Some of the more interesting people came about 2:00 AM after imbibing a little too much. The waitresses made quick work of those who disrupted their tranquility by chasing off the offenders. They also chased after those who tried to get away without paying their bill.

Rudford's experienced its share of excitement of the criminal sort with a couple of robberies and a murder. In 1978 two men entered Rudford's, told the waitress they had weapons under their coats and announced "this is a stickup". They took about \$600 in cash from the cashier. Another robbery occurred in 1997 when David Anderson, 36, a convicted murderer, who had escaped from Vacaville State Prison, entered Rudford's with a sawed off shot gun and took about \$1000 in cash. The money was later recovered, when he was taken into custody.

In 1992 Joseph Cavanda, a Rohr engineer, was arguing outside Rudford's, with Anthony Klepper, who was apparently unknown to Cavanda. Klepper pulled a gun and shot him

and also hit his woman companion. Cavanda staggered into Rudford's and collapsed. He later died at Mercy Hospital. Klepper was arrested at the scene.

Tommy Rudford was active in many civic and fraternal groups such as the Scottish Rite Temple, AL Bahr Shrine, Fraternal Order of Eagles and several San Diego clubs. He ran for mayor in 1949 but was defeated. Mr. Rudford passed away in 1972. His daughters continued to run the business until 1983. Leon Gilman bought Rudford's in 1983 and quickly drew media attention by firing all of the employees because he did not want a union. Some of the employees picketed and he rehired about half of them. Rudford's still does not have a union.

Rudford's is presently owned by Tania and Jeff Kacha. The restaurant continues to enjoy a wide and diverse clientele by continuing to provide the home cooked dining faire that has always made this North Park restaurant a popular gathering place for the local residents as well as patrons from throughout San Diego.

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