

A Special Treat

By TOM KLEVAN
Staff Writer

Noontime at Tom and Joe's. Two customers at the counter, three in the booths and two more "downstairs" in the lunchroom. It's fairly quiet. All the prep work is done, and George and four waitresses are relaxing a bit before the lunchtime crowd.

George (George Batrus, proprietor), turns from the grill where he is watching a batch of home fries. Perspiring heavily, he greets me with a genial smile and asks what I'm having today. "A BLT," I reply. "Mayonnaise?" he asks. I nod. Donna, one of the regular waitresses who has been with Tom and Joe's for about six years, asks me what I want to drink. "White milk," I say, and as an afterthought, I ask what the soup is for today. It's noodle, and I ask for a cup.

In less than 30 seconds I have my soup and milk and two packages of crackers. While George prepares my sandwich, I carry on a sporadic conversation, interrupted from time to time as business quickens.

Tom and Joe's has been in business for 45 or 47 years — George can't remember exactly. Before 1950 it was across the street in the first floor of a frame building originally used as City Hall. The present building was constructed in 1950.

George says business is "lousy," but he's not really complaining. Salesmen tell him that all the restaurants are off. They can tell by the food orders. Besides, George tells

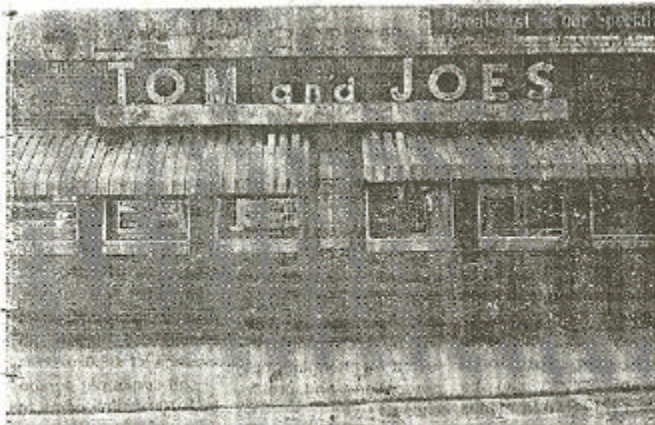
me, Tom and Joe's has a fairly regular clientele as opposed to transient customers.

That fact is evident as George, Donna and "Cheyenne" (the other regular waitress, who's been with the establishment for 18 years), greet customers by their first names.

I've got my sandwich now — it took about two minutes — and as we've been talking, the noise level and activity has increased. The waitresses are now shouting orders to George and to the kitchen, George is shouting orders to the kitchen, and with five or six orders going simultaneously on the grill, is taking filled plates from the kitchen, plunking them down on the counter and yelling to Donna and "Cheyenne" that they're ready. He is in constant movement between the grill, the opening to the kitchen, the refrigerator and the counter. But his concentration on the meals he is preparing is deceptive. As Donna squeezes past him between counter and grill, he asks if she has caught the two customers in the end booth. She says she has.

I don't want to bother George anymore. He's too busy. The place is full now, and although the shouting and the seemingly random hustle of the waitresses give the appearance of chaos, the place runs like a machine — a distinctly human machine.

I catch Donna's attention and order a cup of coffee. It comes, steaming and full, in a heavy mug (no saucer) labeled "Dunkin' Donuts,"



and I absently wonder where the mug came from. I light up a cigarette, and as I sip my coffee (it's too hot to drink), I sort of observe the show going on around me. There's a young couple with a small child in one of the booths. I spot the city planner and the president of the school board. A banker is sitting next to me, and up at the end of the counter are two attorneys. Beside the doctor sits a man in work pants, cap damp with sweat, and grimy t-shirt stretched taut by a muscular torso. In another booth, three young men in short-sleeved shirts and ties — probably office workers — joke with Donna. A mistake: Her caustic wit delivered out of the side of her chewing-gum laden mouth completely outclasses them.

All the booths and the seats at the counter are now full, as is the "downstairs" dining room. Over the laughter and hum of conversation,

orders ring out. Spatula in his left hand stirring onions, knife in his right cutting a sandwich in half, George reaches out with his left foot and expertly kicks shut the refrigerator door. Commands from Donna and "Cheyenne" rain down on his broad, sweating back: "Three orders of fries!" "Cheeseburger, ketchup, no mustard!" "Meatloaf special!" "Two home fries!" "A number two special with home fries and bacon!" "Two coffees, one with, one without!"

Somewhat, George manages to keep it all straight.

I finish my coffee, pay my check, receive a pleasant thank-you from Donna, put down a decent tip, and leave. Lunch at Tom and Joe's is more than lunch. It's an experience.

Oh, yes, George says his busiest day is Friday, but Saturday morning is pretty busy, too. This was a Wednesday.