

Remembering First Café Meal **April 30, 2002**

I am dating myself with this column. Most of those who read it regularly will know whereto I speak. The reason I say so is that I have learned that my walks down memory lane are of interest to mainly those of us who have reached middle age. (Note that I have included myself in the middle age group.)

A recent conversation with a friend who is truly in that age bracket was the spark that ignited yet another stroll down memory lane. It started with a remark by him of how often people today go out to eat. We both then proceeded to tell each other about the first time we ate a meal in a restaurant.

My first was in Smith's Restaurant in North Syracuse sometime in the 30's. To my amazement, I learned a few years back that it is still there and doing business under the same name.

I do not recall what the meal was, but I was very impressed with the occasion and availed myself of every opportunity to tell friends and relatives of the experience. I have forever been grateful to my Aunt Ida and Uncle Frank for the pleasure.

The next occasion was with my dad in a small diner on Route 5 in Herkimer a couple of years later. It was operated by an Italian couple and I remember that meal well – it was my first authentic dish of spaghetti. I even recall the Romano cheese that garnished it as being another first in my heretofore-mundane life.

It would be years after that before I dined at any kind of commercial establishment with both my parents. I feted both of them on that occasion and was filled with pride and thankfulness for being able to do so.

We never had much until World War II when there was work for everyone and people were able to afford a few luxuries. We always ate well when we had little else. We raised most of our own food and my mother canned and preserved the surplus for later use.

The first extravagance I recall as a result of the war-generated economy was an occasional Friday night out with my dad. It was fried oyster dinner and a glass of 7-Up at Carrington's Bar & Grill. My brothers did not relish the oysters the way I did, so I had an added pleasure. I enjoyed my dad's company and reveled in the opportunity to have him to myself and not have to share his attention.

A lot of water has gone over the dam since that time and things in most respects have become a whole lot better. It's still a luxury dining out for many people. I am sure if things should ever regress and we find ourselves in similar straits, it will be one of the first things people will forego. However, I am very optimistic it may never reach that point.

Few youngsters, I pray, will ever have to cherish the memory of their first restaurant meal.

The memory of mine pales compared to boyhood pal Mike Praul's father's account of his first taste of white bread as a preteen upon arriving here from the Ukraine.