

February 17, 2014 Story for Weekly News

Local Restaurants and Tea Rooms, 1930s: During the Depression years, many housewives who were good cooks tried their hands at running small country restaurants to supplement the family income. Some lasted for many years; others were short-lived. Those mentioned here are out of business, and some lasted only a few weeks.

First, here are some that lasted several decades: The Kennett Kandy Kitchen (mentioned in the “News” of 10/24/11), the Naamans Tea House, the Old Court House Restaurant in New Castle, Watson’s Restaurant in Avondale, the Avon Grove Restaurant on Route 1 between Avondale and West Grove, Graff Sinclair’s Restaurant on State Street in Kennett Square, the College Inn in Newark, the Coach & Four in Coatesville, and Christy’s at Painter’s Cross Roads between Wilmington and West Chester. In West Chester itself, the Mansion House was well known.

Naamans was in an old 18th-century house near the end of Naamans Road north of Claymont, the former home of the Robinson family. It was a favorite Sunday dinner location for my parents, and I was there often. I think it closed in the 1960s. The Deakyne family ran the Old Court House restaurant in New Castle, which was in the large room of the historic courthouse. Their home-made hot rolls were a feature, and in the days of the New Castle-Pennsville Ferry, business was brisk. Watson’s was known locally for its good food, and the family opened a much larger operation in Ocean City, New Jersey. The Avon Grove also had good food and occupied a former home that was suitable for small banquets and receptions. Graff Sinclair, a character in his own right, didn’t have a full-scale restaurant but was known for his good seafood and especially oysters in season. Leon Wagner and his wife operated the College Inn at the corner of College Avenue and West Main Street in Newark. It was a favorite of my parents, who would drive from Yorklyn frequently for evening dinner in the late 1940s. Wagner served the meals at the Yorklyn Gun Club one year after the women of the Kennett New Century Club had given it up. Entering the Coach & Four in Coatesville required climbing steep steps from the sidewalk along U.S. 30, but for a long time it was known far and wide as a good place to eat. King Christy, a Greek with many show-biz connections, ran his restaurant for a special clientele in an imposing structure on the corner of Routes 1 and 202. Most people referred to this crossroad as “Christy’s,” rather than to its correct name (Painter’s Cross Roads).

Of even more interest, perhaps, are the small operations that lasted very briefly in the local area. Mrs. Duer Mancill opened a restaurant in a home on West Cypress Street in Kennett Square. It was so well received that she was overwhelmed and couldn’t keep up with the traffic, and she closed after a few weeks. On West Miner Street in West Chester, there was an excellent restaurant in a private home near the Presbyterian Church, but I think it operated for only a few years just before World War II. I ate there with my father, Joe Strobe, and Henry Winchester in 1939. In the early 1950s, the old and run-down Kennett Hotel had a major face-lift, and its dining room opened to the public. So busy were they that they ran out of food and the service was terrible, so after a few weeks, it was given up. A few doors from the Kandy Kitchen, a man named John Blokzehl (the spelling may be incorrect) operated the Dutch Kitchen, which was no match for his popular neighbor. In the old Robinson mansion at Kaolin, a restaurant was tried

for a short time but soon closed (this is at the entrance to Hartefeld Country Club). At the end of Snuff Mill Road in Centreville, a small one-room schoolhouse was a restaurant for about two years in the 1930s. My father and I had lunch there, traveling in his 1932 Packard Club Sedan. At Hamorton, where the Kennett Pike joins Route 1, there was a modest restaurant next to Sam Cooper's store, where a full-course dinner cost 75 cents. The Encore Shop occupies this building today. To my knowledge, no one in Yorklyn or Hockessin ventured into the restaurant business during this period.