

Remembering Chris' Diner and the way things were

BY GEORGE MORAITIS

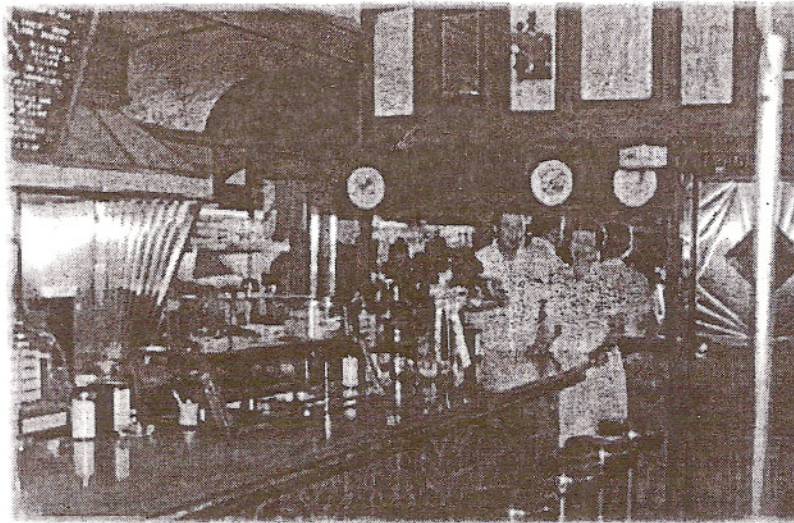
As a lifetime resident of the Port Jefferson Station area, I often search back in my memory and think about how things have changed.

For some of us old-timers: Do you remember when a new thing called a "shopping center" was being built? Remember Bohack? A&P? Newmark & Lewis? How about Jefferson Smith and Playmart? Or when Woolworth's had a luncheon counter where you could pop a balloon for a price of a banana split? In those days of old, some 47 years ago, well before all that came to Port Jefferson Station, Chris Karras with his wife, Elmina, lovingly known as "Rusty" for her reddish hair and complexion, opened Chris' Diner on the site of today's Hess Gas Station on Route 112 across from what later became the Jefferson Shopping Center.

Mr. Karras' family had been in the dining business even before opening the once-famous site. Chris' father, Alex, coming to the area in the late 1940s, worked with his son at Chris' Snackbar in the building across from A.B.I. Auto Parts. The building is now occupied by an antique shop. The snackbar had seven stools and a small "stand-up" shelf to eat sandwiches or "Pop" Karras' chili dishes. However, when the snackbar closed in 1955, Chris Karras, at the age of 27, bought a diner building which once stood in New York City and then in Babylon. He had it moved to Port Jefferson Station and started his own dining business.

Diners at that time were few and far between, making them a haven for out-of-towners, famous people and local residents alike who were looking for a clean and comfortable place to eat a meal. Chris' Diner was where local senators, judges and Town of Brookhaven officials, and all of us, would come to dine throughout its many years. I am told that Arthur Miller, the playwright, would come on Sunday afternoons and read his newspaper there.

Chris and Rusty worked long and hard in the diner to make it the best place around. They would work from 5 am to 11:30 in the evening, seven days a week,



Chris and Elmina ("Rusty") Karras c.1963

Photo courtesy of Steve Poulos

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with no vacation time. Once, a patron offered to pay the help for the afternoon and treat Chris and Rusty to a New York City play. They took advantage of it to escape for a while only to return to the diner, as someone would leave them a note at the register, "How was your vacation?" It had turned out that they only had two such "vacations" in 14 years. Their customers missed them and why wouldn't they when meals like meat loaf cost \$.25 or a roast beef dinner was \$1.15.

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The diner was always open. Even during the roughest snowstorms, when snow amounts were 24 inches, Chris would walk from their home on Sheep Pasture Road to the diner so his customers would not be disappointed, only to find Brookhaven highway workers had plowed the diner's parking lot. They knew Chris' Diner was the best place to be. There he would also find his grillman, Steve Klissas; the waitresses, Jeanette Lyons Potter and Millie Stretcher; and Marty Ericksen, the kitchen help.



Chris at the grill

Photo courtesy of Chris and Rusty Karras

In the summer, the diner would fill with area fishermen, who went on day trips in the Port Jefferson Harbor or out in the Sound, who would stop by for a meal on their way home. The fishermen offered Chris the excess of their day's catch of bluefish and clams. This writer and his family would go to Chris' Diner for the hamburger specials and enjoy the diner's interior decked out in red with a table jukebox in every stall.

What closed most of these local diners were the more elaborate restaurants and fast-food eateries, much as supermarkets did to the local dairy farms. McDonald's in Centereach was the first in the area. The original building still stands today. But, as McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's and others became more common, more and more of these roadside diners became extinct.

Chris' Diner closed in 1969. Chris and Rusty retired and eventually moved to the Midwest.

All in all, the best time spent for Chris and Rusty between 1955 and 1969 was with their loyal patrons; without them, the business would not have lasted as long as it did. Today, they wish all their customers hearty "Thank yous!"

for all they have done and wish them all well, even knowing some of them are now gone.

When this writer asked Chris, now 78 years old and married to Rusty for 57 years, what happened to the building? I was told that it's "buried under the Hess Gas Station." And life goes on.

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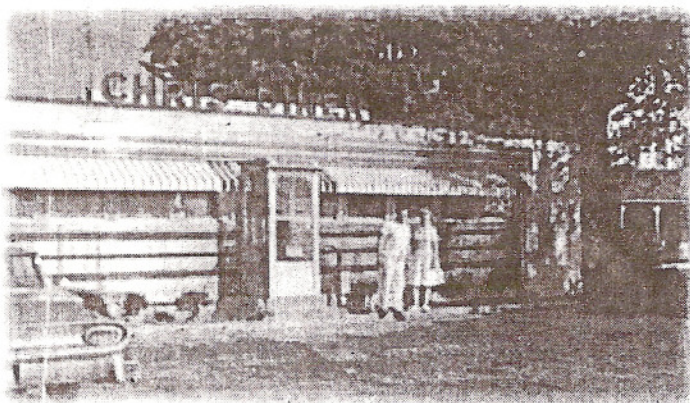


Photo courtesy of Chris and Rusty Karras

Chris and Rusty Karras with their 1959 Pontiac, c. 1962