

Lou's Place

by Patti Skorski

Student Essay

It is at least twenty years later and I can still remember my first visit to Lou's Café. Stopping in to see if anyone could tell us where to locate the turn we had missed, my husband and I received a large dose of culture shock. It seemed as if we had opened the door to the decades: a place where generations came and went, a place where time stood still and passed by at the same time

Miss Lou Dixon owns and runs that restaurant in the middle of the town of Sunbright, Tennessee. Miss Lou has been in business at that location since 1954. Even though the place looks a little squalid, it is not for lack of care; in fact, Lou is proud of how clean she keeps her place. She has often been heard to say, with the strongest East Tennessee accent, "It don't matter how pore a body is. They can be clean." She is proud of her "A" rating and prominently displays it.

It is not a fancy restaurant. The hundreds of booted loggers, railroad workers, and oil field roughnecks trekking through have worn the carpet thin. Chunks are missing from the carpet at the favorite tables of the workers. The hardened veneer on some of the tables is missing a notch here and there. The paint on the walls has cracks and there is a perennial smell of hamburgers permeating the air. The casual observer could be forgiven for thinking the place is about to fold financially; instead, what we found that night was a well camouflaged center of social activity and the finest, most accurate, information available.

When entering the door at Lou's, two things are immediately noticeable: the place is rarely empty and seems to consist of a maze of rooms. The first room, through the door, is the main part of the restaurant. There is another, rarely used, dining room off to the right. It was added during the oil well boom of the seventies. Through the main dining room is yet another room; it guards the door leading into the kitchen. This room contains the most coveted table in the place. The highest tribute Lou can bestow on anyone is to allow them access to seats at this table. This table is the family table; it is reserved for Lou's, and her daughter Karen's, immediate family and treasured friends.

When entering the main dining room, whether by design or by custom, there is a definite pecking order involved in the seating arrangements. The first table on the left, presided over by an elderly gentleman with Basset Hound eyes, belongs to the old men of the town. The table sits in front of one of two large windows; the old men can see and are able to comment on the "doins of them young 'uns running the town these days." It is amusing to discover that the average age of the people under discussion is at least fifty and they took over their businesses from the same old men looking over them now.

On the right side, the other large window is dominated by the "women's information league." In other towns they would be known as busybodies or gossips. At Lou's, they are part of the complicated information gathering process. They bring all the information from the night before and are linked to the rest of the town through the old fashioned rotary telephone hanging outside Lou's kitchen door. The phone rings constantly: someone wants to call in an order, someone wants to leave a message for a person the caller knows is going to be there sometime during the day, and someone else wants to know where the police and the ambulance were going last night. Along with all the calls coming in for the special of the day are also calls delivering the latest events of the day. The old men on the other side of the room will be giving a running commentary on the family of the latest newsmaker, their history in the community, arrest record if any; the who, what, when, where, and why, of the story, with an accuracy to equal any television or newspaper reporter.

In the evenings, when Lou's daughter Karen gets in from school, she brings a change of atmosphere. Even though the news branch never stops, it is replaced in importance by the young people, heralding the evening. The old juke box, reigning in the corner, is brought to life and starts blasting tunes that cover at least twenty years of change in musical tastes. The place fills up with the town's young people. Whether the kids are flirting, giggling, strutting around, being manly for the girls, or hiding in the darkest corner to profess undying love for each other, the restaurant begins its shift as the town's social center.

All of the activity at Miss Lou's is conducted in a haze of aromas, guaranteed to make the mouth water. The smell is never the same; it depends entirely on what is cooking at the time. Whether it is roast for tomorrow's lunch special, a cake someone asked Lou to make, the spices of an apple pie, or the ever present odor of hamburgers, it is a well known fact, it will taste as good as it smells. The best part of being at Lou's is not her food, however; it is the feeling of being part of her extended family, being part of a tradition, when traditions are hard to come by.

The last time I was in Lou's, I experienced another trip through time's door; it was as if nothing had changed, nothing, except the amount of gray in her hair. Some of the old men had passed on; they have since been replaced by two or three of the "young 'uns" they used to keep their eyes on. The phone still rings constantly, the women still gather their news, and a new bunch of kids take over at night. Everything is the same, everything is different.