Customers enjoy a quick meal at the lunch counter at Dearman's Drug Store. Dearman's, which has become a local icon over the 40 years since Bill and Mel Dearman opened it, will close May 13.

Dearman's closing door to burgers, drinks

By CHAD CALDER

When Jimmy Beyer and his family returned to Baton Rouge for a visit, getting a hamburger at Dearman's Drug Store was on their short list of things to do before they left town.

Beyer, who now lives in northern California, grew up near the Jefferson Highway drugstore and has been one of its many loyal customers since he was 8 years old.

As it turned out, he arrived just in time to say goodbye.

On May 13, just shy of its 40th birthday, Dearman's will close the doors on its '50s-like lunch counter and soda fountain, its friendly atmosphere and, yes, its hamburgers.

"It's sad," said Brad Pope, a friend of Beyer's who happened to run into him at Dearman's Wednesday. "It's not something that you let go of easily."

"It's an institution. It's the last drugstore/lunch counter I know of and it was always one of the best," Pope said.

Owners Bill and Mel Dearman, who opened the store in 1960 near the corner of Jefferson Highway and Corporate Boulevard, are both recovering from a recent illness and have decided to close the store.

"I've been trying to get my father to retire for years," said Mitzi Jones, the Dearmans' daughter. "He loves this business and he didn't want to (retire) but with this illness, it was a good time."

The Dearmans, recovering at home from a recent hospital visit, were not available for comment but provided information through Jones.

While it may be a good time for the Dearmans to close
the store, it is hard to imagine there being a good time for the customers that have grown accustomed to the drugstore's malts and handmade fountain sodas.

"Could we at least put it to a vote?" asked attorney Mary O'Brien as she paid her lunch bill.

Customer Randy Breland, 32, grew up on Palm Hills Boulevard, when it was one street north of Dearman's, instead of the three streets that separate them today.

Breland is one of the many customers who appreciate the consistency of Dearman's as the area around it changed with the times.

"It's 2000 out here but it's 1958 inside," he said.

Indeed, the walls are adorned with decades-old signs advertising "American cheese sandwiches" and one pointing out the "luncheonette."

Very little has changed over the years.

"What you see ..." said employee Betty Rose, "... is what they started with," added co-worker Mary Adams.

The two seem to finish each other's sentences often, a product of the close friendship that developed over the years they've worked together.

"We're all friends," said Rose, the senior cashier with "25 years, give or take" behind the counter.

Rose said she is having a tough time with the thought of closing the store.

"I cry constantly," she said, laughing and a little embarrassed.

"I cry very easily now."

Rose said the fixtures inside the store are not the only elements that hark back to another era.

The counter serves free Com-