By CHET FOLKES

The Village on Airline Highway was one of Baton Rouge’s most popular dining places from the 1950s until it closed in the late 1990s. Its main dining room is shown about the time the restaurant opened in 1947.

Undergoing major renovation.

One of the indicators of the local economy can be seen in the varying number of restaurants through the years. Records show a total of 84 restaurants and "lunch rooms" in Baton Rouge for the boom year of 1929, and despite the Depression that began soon after, the number had increased to 88 in 1931. By 1950, there were 104 eating places. During the war year of 1942, the number of restaurants slipped to 93, but in 1945 the number surged to 245 as Baton Rouge’s post-war business boomed and started cooking.

In 1955, the number of restaurants had narrowed to 208, but by 1971 a total of 436 restaurants were listed in the telephone directory.

Today’s restaurant scene includes a number of upscale places where, for the price, diners can enjoy cuisine that compares favorably with high-end dining establishments in New Orleans, Atlanta, Dallas and Houston. In earlier years, Baton Rouge restaurateurs for the most part stuck to the basics, serving such local favorites as gumbo with the fresh fish and tainy, tasty shrimp from the Mississippi River that was so abundant then. Catfish was cheap and plentiful, and there was plenty of beef, veal, chicken and pork raised on nearby farms and ranches, and butchered locally.

Through the years, certain restaurants are remembered for a particular dish or for their ambiance. Some gained fame through the talents of their chefs or the personality of their owners. In some cases restaurants (and bars) provided a backdrop for meetings involving the most powerful politicians and businessmen of the day.

In the first years of the century, some of the better eating places to be found in hotels and in the many restaurants that flourished along Third Street, the bustling heart of the city at that time. According to numerous references in the Guaranty columnists, there were dining rooms in the multi-storied Irresolvent Hotel at the corner of Third and Florida; at Judd’s Traditonal Hotel at Third and Laurel; at the Mayer Hotel; and at the Mayer Hotel.

The hotel was turned over to its original Pecanola Cafeteria for some 30 years. The old structure is known as the Slip & Skip Sandwich Shop.

When it opened in 1927 at 206 Lafayette St., the Heidelberg Hotel provided another full-service dining facility for travelers and guests.

Above: The room on the top floor of the Heidelberg Hotel featured the piano where musician Castro Carazo is reported to have played Huey Long’s campaign song, "Every Man a King," for the first time. The formal room provided one of Baton Rouge’s elegant facilties for dances, receptions, banquets and dinner meetings for decades after the hotel was completed in 1927. The windows afforded views of the Mississippi River. Left: The formal dining room of the Heidelberg hotel on Lafayette Street was called The Baroque Room when the hotel was completed in November 1927. The room was Baton Rouge’s most elegant dining facility during the depression years, and was the scene of many political meetings during the turbulent Huey Long years.

Photos provided by the Ed Reed Organization

Shown at The Village restaurant in this undated photo are LSU football stars Jimmy Taylor, left, and Johnny Robinson, right, with pro football coach Vince Lombardi, second from left, and The Village’s owner, Vince Destefano.

Photo courtesy Destefano family

The lobby of the Irresolvent Hotel at 205 Third St. was popular with businessmen and attorneys during the day, and was one of the few places large enough to provide banquet facilities for private dinners and meetings. By the 1980s, the Irresolvent office space was known as the Slip & Skip Sandwich Shop.
Dining
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located. Located to the rear of the main lobby, the Baroque Room featured high ceilings with large side windows overlooking Convention Street. The dining facility is listed in the city directories of the 1930s and 1940s as a coffee shop. The Heidelberg, along with its sister Bestel and the King, across Lafayette Street, teemed with politicians and the shakers and movers of the day. Under new ownership after 1958, the hotel was enlarged, remodeled and renamed The Capitol House. The dining room became the Azalea Room, a new counter was installed in the lobby for a coffee shop, and the old bar just off the hotel lobby was redevorated with pecky cypress walls, glittering etchings and displays of vintage shotguns. Renamed The Hunt Room, the bar-grill attracted downtown workers for its daily prime rib, special dishes and a lunch special.

On Third Street were restaurants in the two large department stores, Rosenfeld's, 438 Third, and Dalton's (later D.H. Holmes), at 239-53 Third. Dalton's dining facility was named The Green Room. Located on the second floor, the restaurant served mostly a luncheon clientele. Rosenfeld's Rose Room catered to women shoppers and downtown workers with lunch and sandwiches until the store closed in the mid-1960s.

Another popular Third Street cafe before World War II was Dodge's on the corner of Third and Convention. The cafe was open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and was popular with young people because it stayed open late for after-theater dining. Several "dining out" restaurants which evoke nostalgic feelings for Baton Rogues of a certain age were located at the intersection of Convention Street. The Village, near the traffic circle, on Airline Highway (across from the Cortana Mall entrance), Spinotle's and Bob & Jake's Steak House (now operated as The Place). North Baton Rouge had its flavorful restaurants as well. Mike and Tony's was opened on Scenic Highway in 1941 by Mike D'Amico and his brother Tony D'Amico. Described as a "dine-in" restaurant ad as a "spaghetti, steak and seafood cafe," the place was packed with businessmen and sales reps for lunch and dinner. The restaurant's signature dishes, Esquilo Salad, Ladies Filet and Broiled Red Snapper, the restaurant moved to Airline Highway in 1979 and closed in 1987, according to Mary Alice D'Amico Forrient.

daughter of Mike D'Amico, who operated the place after her father's death.

Leon's Italian Kitchen on Weller Avenue was a favorite in the late 1940s and 1950s. The restaurant was opened during the war by Leon Lupino in a building that had formerly been a neighborhood grocery store. The restaurant, open for lunch and dinner, specialized in Southern Italian cooking. The Village, founded in 1947 by Victor Distefano and his wife Stephanie Lupino Distefano, held a special place for Baton Rougeans for more than four decades. The restaurant maintained a reputation of high quality Italian dishes, steaks and chicken until its closing in the mid-1990s. It was located on a 7.5-acre tract on Airline Highway across from the entrance to Cortana Mall.

Bob & Jake's was started in 1947 by two brothers, Bob Staples and Jake Staples, in a small building at the intersection of Christian and Karruthers streets near the foot of the Perkins Road overpass. The restaurant featured steaks and attracted well-dressed businessmen and LSU football fans. The restaurant became so popular the brothers moved to larger quarters at 225 Government Street, at the corner of Eugene where Johnny Hill's drive-in restaurant had been popular with students and GIs during World War II.

Bob & Jake's popularity continued through the 1950s, and in the mid-1960s the Staples brothers opened a supper club with a large dance floor featuring live band music, orchestra and nightclub-style entertainment. The building is currently Bonjour's Garden. Bob & Jake's closed in the 1970s, and Jake re-opened another restaurant at 2255 Florida Blvd. called The Place, now owned by Bob Yarbrough. The Place continues to serve lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch.

The hottest spot for teen-agers in the 1950s and '60s was the Drive-In, which first opened in a building on Scenic Highway a couple of blocks from the plants. The drive-in served hamburgers and giant glasses of bright green limeade topped with a maraschino cherry. The Drive-In later moved to Florida Boulevard and opened at other locations around Baton Rouge.

Hopi'kin's Restaurant
211 3rd St.

A partial list of Baton Rouge's best-remembered dining rooms, supper clubs, lunch counters, sandwich shops and drive-in restaurants has been compiled from listings and advertisements appearing in the Baton Rouge City Directories and in the telephone directories of the periods. This list does not include long-time restaurants that are still operating. It is a representative summary of old dining establishments created as a result of interviews with long-time restaurateurs and several dinners whose memories span a half-century or more. The restaurants are grouped by era, but many of the restaurants overlap time periods listed here.

1900-1930

Hopkins, 211 Third St. 
Izzy's, 227 Third St. 
Terry's, 227 Third St. 
Savoy Cafe, 233 Third St. 
Busy Bee Restaurant, 136 Third St. 
Columbia Cafe, 201 Third St. 
River View Cafe, 105 North Blvd. 
James Bernhard (restaurant), 1348 North Blvd. 
New Orleans Hotel dining room, 201-207 Main St. 
Istroma Hotel dining room, 250 Third St. 
May's Hotel and restaurant, 200-204 Laurel St.

1930-1940

Al's Cafe, 137 St. Ferdinand. 
The Hub, 136 St. Ferdinand. 
Daltton's Green Room Luncheonette, 246 Third St. 
Italian Gardens, 1101 Convention St. 
Hotel King Cafe, 203 Convention St. 
The Baroque Room, Heidelberg Hotel, 25 Lafayette St. 
Post Office Cafe, 32 North Blvd. 
Paradise Sandwich Shop, 1102 North Blvd. 
The Golden Slipper, 2400 North Blvd. 
The Chicken Shack, 1676 East Blvd. 
Pender's Grill & Bar, 247 Main St. 

1940-1950

Coney Island Sandwich Shop, 110 Third St. 
Don-Ley Restaurant, 238 Third St. 
Al's Restaurant and Bar, 1628 Main St. 
Hotel Heidelberg Cafe, 201 Lafayette St. 
Izzy's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 
Champion's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 
Cafe Hoff, 233 Third St. 
Cafe Catina, 233 Third St. 
Cafe New Orleans, 105 North Blvd. 

1950-1960

Mae's Coffee Shop, 1556 Main St. 
Buckhorn Cafe, 1533 Scenic Hwy. 
Louie's Peacock Inn, 2518 Govt. St. 
The Green Gables, intersection of Government and Jefferson St. 
The Grove (Goodwood Plantation house), Goodwood Boulevard 
The Gumbo House, 1042 Chimes St. 
Cozy Corner, 1008 Chimes St. 
Tiger Town Cafe, 3350 Highland Road.

1960-1970

Coney Island Sandwich Shop, 110 Third St. 
Don-Ley Restaurant, 238 Third St. 
Al's Restaurant and Bar, 1628 Main St. 
Hotel Heidelberg Cafe, 201 Lafayette St. 
Izzy's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 
Champion's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 
Izzy's Restaurant and Bar, 3252 North Blvd. 

1970-1980

Mae's Coffee Shop, 1556 Main St. 
Buckhorn Cafe, 1533 Scenic Hwy. 
Louie's Peacock Inn, 2518 Govt. St. 
The Green Gables, intersection of Government and Jefferson St. 
The Grove (Goodwood Plantation house), Goodwood Boulevard 
The Gumbo House, 1042 Chimes St. 
Cozy Corner, 1008 Chimes St. 
Tiger Town Cafe, 3350 Highland Road.

1980-1990

Coney Island Sandwich Shop, 110 Third St. 
Don-Ley Restaurant, 238 Third St. 
Al's Restaurant and Bar, 1628 Main St. 
Hotel Heidelberg Cafe, 201 Lafayette St. 
Izzy's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 
Champion's Chicken Luncheon House, 3252 North Blvd. 

This restaurant advertisement appeared in the 1906 Baton Rouge city directory.

Gone but not forgotten.