



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

A Little Railroad Café

Copyright © Gilbert Gia, 2003, Bakersfield CA

Bakersfield was at war. Troop trains rolled past F Street cafés north of the tracks, and lunch-counter girls handed out hamburgers and hot coffee to soldiers.

The Santa Fe Café is the only restaurant left where F Street dead-ends here at the tracks. Tranquil businesses, a water company shack, the old Santa Fe Station.

The first restaurant along here was probably *Harvey House* at the Santa Fe Station. In 1940, Thelma Pinkston's Restaurant opened at 1517 F on the same side as the station. Until 1963 the café had other names: *Thelma Echols Café*; *Capitol Café*; *Thelma's Café* and the *Church of the Universe*; *Mary's Café*; and *Ann and Jean's Restaurant*. Cafés came and went after the war.

Pete Giovannetti's was one of those, and his café has an interesting story. It's called the *Santa Fe Café* today, but it address wasn't even listed the city directory until 1949, and that year it was the residence of O.L. Williams. In 1952 Lon Joslin opened it as the *Golden Spike*, and he was there through 1956. In 1957 it was *Bill's Café*, in '59 *Hilda's Coffee Shop*, and in '65 it was *Foys*. In 1966 the place was vacant. In 1967, and for the next eight years, it was known as *Rae's Coffee Shop*. Pete Giovannetti bought the building in 1974. This is where the story takes up.

Kathryn Giovannetti talked about what it meant to be a restaurateur. "I've been cooking in restaurants most of my life, but I need to give credit to my grandparents-- Egiggo Giovannetti and Caterina Landucci who came from Lucca in the late 1800s and farmed here with plows and mules out around Buttonwillow. The Italian community has food at its core, and it's still the center of the family. I guess we were destined to go into the restaurant business."

"My parents get the next credit. Dad loved farm work-- he knew how to drive a plow, a big one with mules or six or eight horses. He didn't speak English until he was in school here, and he always had an accent. When you talk Italian, the words are sometimes in a different order. If my dad told me to wash a pot he'd say, "You wash me the pot. But his accent never held him back from anything."

"My mom, Faye, was born in Arkansas. She and my dad met here in Bakersfield. By that time Dad was coming up in the world, and he had a big Chrysler roadster. They fell in love. I was born in 1932 in the old two-story Bakersfield Hospital across the street from Central Park. My parents had four daughters--Pat, me, Mary, and Penny."

"My father always loved to cook. I don't know when he left farming and moved to town, but around 1930 he opened the *Fior Di Italia* restaurant at 21st and L. That's now a parking lot for downtown Bakersfield College. I remember that the *Fior Di Italia* was a noisy place. It had black ceiling fans and a big dance floor."

"My dad bootlegged out of that place with my uncles Armand and Louie. Dad told me that one time Louie was arrested for making gin, and Dad had go down to the old jail at Q and Truxtun to bail him out. My father said he could hear Louie yelling at him a block from the jail, "Pete, get me out of here!" In 1935, times were hard, and my dad had to sell the restaurant and get himself a steady-paying job. He worked for the next ten years for San Joaquin Light and Power's Gas Division on Q between 20th and 21st."

"But he never really left the restaurant business. You see, my dad never could relax because to him was just like wasting time. He had to stay busy. I remember we helped cook for most of the big events at Kern River Park, like the Sheriff's Posse Barbecue and the Fish and Game Barbecue. In those days Charlie Castro was called the "King of Barbecue." He had a deep-pit in his back yard on White Lane, and we went out there and helped him get the food ready for the big events. When the coals got hot they put in the meat from Kern Valley Packing, and on top of it went the bean pots. They covered up everything with wet burlap sacks and dirt. The next day we'd dig up the barbecue and haul it out to the park."

"As far as restaurants go, Dad loved to open them, but then he'd lose interest. After the war he quit San Joaquin Light and Power, and in 1945 he opened a place called *Pete's Log Cabin* on H and White Lane.

It was more like a beer joint than a restaurant. He sold it and opened a place for Henry Marchetti out in Pumpkin Center. Later on, he ran the restaurant inside the Actis brothers' bar on Union Avenue. Oh, he also ran another restaurant for Tommy Pascusso and Joe and Frank Jeffra that was at Oak and Brundage. Dad also bartended around at places like *Ida Stroud's* in Oildale, *Gladdens Card Room*, and the *Metropol Bar* on Baker Street. He also bartended downtown around 19th and L and even out in Lamont. People like my dad just have a drive to work inside them."

"When I graduated from KCUHS in 1949, Dad opened a *Pete's Café* that was at Oak and Truxtun Avenue. We owned that building more or less until 1964. I say "more or less" because we sold it a couple of times. But everybody who bought the Oak Street place from us went broke. Dad would buy it back, put up a sign saying 'Pete's Back,' and he opened the doors like nothing happened. I think he retired five or six times from that cafe. Sometime in between all that we also ran a café for Mr. Bender at the Bakersfield Airpark on South Union. Dad finally sold the Oak Street place for good when he was seventy."

"After we bought the café by the tracks, I found out that in 1940 the Williams family had moved that building there from Enos Lane and Taft Highway--that's way out west of Pumpkin Center. I don't think the Williams people ever opened it because they say that just afterward the husband got sick."

"I know some more about that story about the hamburgers and the soldiers. In the late 1930s a lot of military things were going on around the high school and the Santa Fe Station. Somebody put up a metal building at 1500 F between the tracks and where the Santa Fe Café is now. They built it so they could swing up a door and hand coffee and hamburgers to servicemen on the trains. In 1951 that little building was still there, and for a year or two somebody operated it as the *Renegade Round-Up Restaurant*. Later on Ray Duvall had a paint business there. In 1967 his wife Rae bought the café next door."

"At this time Tenneco had an empty restaurant in Kern City, and as usual my dad had his eye out for a new place to open. He told me and my sisters that we should go out and look at it. We did, but I wasn't sure what kind of business it could do. Tenneco wanted us in there so bad they offered it to us for \$100 a month. We took it. Dad was almost seventy, but even then he was still a worker. He and our mother came

out and helped us set up the place. We had it for three and a half years--until Tenneco sold the building to Kern County Schools."

"On my dad's advice in June 1974, my sister Penny and I bought the café by the tracks from Rae Duvall and renamed it *Pete's Café*. Maybe we should have called it *Pete's Café Number Two*, or even *Number Three or Four*. This little place was a really classic, but it was built before there were many building codes. When we started to hang shelves, we spent most of one morning trying to find studs in the walls. The problem was the 2x4s weren't spaced at a standard 16-inches-on-center like it's done today."

"We got the café going, but it was hard work because we wanted the food to be good. We had a lot of business. By the middle '70s we were unique because we cooked the way my dad did in the 1930s-- everything from scratch. We offered everything from strawberry pie to tamale pie to fried chicken-- and everything was home made."

"Mom and Dad were getting up in age, but they were right in there with us cooking. We were at first open from eight in the morning until nine at night, but it was too much. So we decided to just go for breakfast and lunch."

"People say I ran a tight ship, but I had to make it work. I knew the names of almost everybody who came in, and the customers got used to me. We were so organized we could turn the seats over three or four times at breakfast. At 10:50 Penny would announce no more breakfast, then we had about ten minutes to switch over to the lunch crowd, and the people were already backing up. We ran lunch until 2:00 PM."

"One day there were some roasts in the oven, and Dad told me he wanted to take them out. When I told him I'd do it, he said, "No! I'll do it." I got to the oven first. Well, he threw his apron down and stormed out saying he'd never come back again. Dad was a proud man, and I'd insulted him. My mom told us later that he came home and told her we'd thrown him out of the restaurant. Dad eventually did come back."

"Shortly after this my father started complaining of a pain in his back. He got sick in mid-July and died in August. From the beginning of his life to the end, my father never stopped working."

"Dad had done more in the kitchen than we realized. After he died we had to figure-out how to cook everything. "Mom, how do you make Tamale pie?" Speaking of pies, Mother was famous for hers. She'd make

20 or 30 a day, every day. They were all good, but the customers' favorite was banana. We had a routine down to turn out those pies, but damn, it seemed like they always sold out no matter how many we planned for. After our mom retired, my sister Penny became the pie maker. The café business was fantastic for our family for 45 years."

"Our cafés always attracted a lot of men. At the Oak and Truxtun place we had mostly blue-collar workers. On F Street we saw ties and white shirts from downtown, and we had doctors from Mercy Hospital. People used to ask us if it was okay for women to eat at the cafe."

"Me and my sister Penny were single and lived at home with Mom and Dad. He'd say, "When are you two going to move out?" And we'd say, "The rent is too good." My father was an old-world man of few words, and most of the time he never discussed anything financial with our mom or with us. One day he came home and announced he'd bought a house across the street on Truxtun. It was probably one of the few times that the parents moved out on the kids."

"We sold *Pete's Café* in May 1994. That's when I retired. My sister Penny died a little after that, and because of probate and because the buyer defaulted on the mortgage, it took two years for me to get the place back. I put it up for sale again, and Mr. and Mrs. Mayer bought it."

The Mayers did some remodeling on the place, and that's when they found the south door that'd been covered over long before we got the building. The Mayers hired Rico Medoza as cook and changed the café to the *Santa Fe Café*. Maureen Mayer had a lot of experience managing the Bakersfield College cafeteria, but I'm not so sure it prepared her for running a café. They ran it a couple of years and then leased it to Miguel and Ruben Ornelas."

A little recent history about the café: A year or so before Miguel Ornelas bought the place he'd quit an office job in San Jose, California. Miguel moved to Bakersfield, and after several months of minimum-wage job offers, he got a call from his brother-in-law Rico "Junior" Mendoza who told him that Maureen wanted to sell the café. Miguel was not a restaurateur, but he had cash from the sale of his San Jose home, and this was an opportunity for him to be his own boss.

It's working. The Ornelas family serves breakfast and lunch to a similar clientele--doctors, nurses, lawyers, clerks, and the old regulars from years past. Junior is still in the kitchen, but you might

notice a few differences if you've been away a while. For one thing, pies aren't a feature of the menu any more, but they do have a killer rum cake. Also, Miguel usually shuts the doors during the last week of December so he and Junior can enjoy a family Christmas in Mexico.

Small town America is different than it used to be, but the important thing in this world of corporate conglomerates is that the café on F Street is locally run, and it's still a place where everybody knows your name.