

## **The Restaurant**

**By: Stephanie Allmon, Waco Tribune-Herald**

For many blacks who worked in Waco restaurants during the early to mid-20th century, stated or unstated rules stipulated that they not mix with white customers.

Waco resident E.C. Kirkpatrick, a black man who has worked at local restaurants most of his life, recalls having to sneak through the back door of one local restaurant to drink a cup of coffee inside.

His son, Winston Kirkpatrick Sr., recalls the raised eyebrows and looks of disbelief from his co-workers when he entered the "white" men's restroom in another restaurant.

But while many public places slowly chipped away at color barriers during the 1960s, Nick's Restaurant knocked them down in one act.

Owner Nick Klaras said he didn't set out to be socially progressive when he hired the first black waiters at his Greek restaurant. He simply needed top-notch servers. He looked to the men from the Connally Air Force Base Officers Club, which was closing at the time.

"I got the idea of using their waiters because they were so polished and great with people," he said.

So he hired a handful of black ex-Connally waiters.

Nick's was one of the first sit-down restaurants to hire black waiters. He had a blended staff, with white men and women and Hispanics, as well. All the servers tried to give excellent service to customers, who, in return, took an interest in them and treated them cordially, Klaras said.

Elmer Spivey, a black man who was hired at Nick's around 1970, said working at Nicks, where he wore a formal coat and tuxedo shirt and pants, was like being in another world.

"Over the years, we learned those people (customers) by name, we knew their wives, their children, their parents," he said. "And they got to know you, and a lot of customers wanted certain people to wait on them. It was very cordial, really nice."

Klaras said he had few racial incidents at his restaurant. But when anyone did give his waiters a hard time, he wouldn't stand for it.

One night, a white man called Klaras over to his table and requested a white waiter.

"I told him that the waiters were a great part of the restaurant, and he'd have to find another place to eat," he said. "He left with our blessings."

Wallace Wells, a black man whom Klaras hired as a waiter in 1971, said he never experienced any racial harassment at the restaurant. But every once in a while, customers who'd had too much to drink would say something derogatory.

Spivey said that on those rare occasions, the waiters knew they could count on Klaras to stand up for them.

"He did not tolerate that kind of stuff," Spivey said. "Color didn't make any difference to him. If you were a good person and had something to offer, he wanted you to bring it to the table. That's all that counted."

Some of Klaras' waiters stayed on until Nick's closed in 1996. (The Waco Drive building now houses El Conquistador restaurant.)

They still remain good friends and get together frequently. Klaras said he cared about all his employees, but his goal in the restaurant business was to serve people as well as he could. That meant hiring the best staff possible, no matter what they looked like on the outside.

"I felt like my waiters were more qualified, and that's why I went with them," he said. "I didn't hire them because they were black. I hired them because they were the most experienced. We had Hispanics and people of all nationalities. We were kind of a 'United Nations Place."

Feb. 25, 2001