

## Atmosphere at the Columbine Steakhouse

*By Dennis Knight*

The view at Third and Federal is of a collection of small used car lots on the verge of being junkyards, Asian food and mercantile stores, noodle shops, gas and convenience stores, nondescript commerce and, on the corner, the Columbine Steakhouse. Established in 1961, it's a mid-century modern structure with a sweeping low roofline, massive wooden beams inside, and an atmosphere that fits the neighborhood.

The Columbine has been purveying baked potatoes and steaks, from filets to Porterhouse, for over half a century. I had my first dining experience there when I joined my brother Jerry and his young family one Saturday evening back in 1971. Just inside the front door, we encountered men in white aprons taking orders and barking them down the line. We made our selections from the illuminated movable-letter sign board suspended above. Someone presented us a tray of salads to be carried to any table of our choice.

The place was jumping that night and adrenaline flowed through the room. Our party of three adults and two small children had just gotten situated when the burliest white apron brought our baked potatoes, burgers and steaks, and presented us with change for a twenty, correctly anticipating the amount to be tendered.

The whirl had Jerry and I digging in with frenzy, and we each finished our salads, potatoes and steaks in about twelve minutes. The children were not about to be rushed and my sister-in-law just watched us in amusement. I can't tell you whether my steak was good or bad, but it must have been tender because I certainly didn't take time for chewing.

After I put down my fork and knife, I surveyed the room. It was clean with well-trodden linoleum flooring and Formica table surfaces. The salad bowls were tan Bakelite and the plates were green. The forks were just strong enough to hold meat down to be incised by the black-handled steak knives. Maybe I exaggerate in calling it a dining experience, but the joint definitely had an atmosphere.

The Columbine Steak House still operates on that corner in southwest Denver, and it looks exactly like it did in 1971. I decided to have lunch there to see if it has changed. The highest price on the same old sign board, now much yellower, is for a Porterhouse at \$17.95. I immediately noticed the baked potatoes stacked by the grill, wrapped in foil. I wasn't hungry enough for a steak, so I ordered a cheeseburger, and with a coke it came to seven bucks, including tax. I dropped an extravagant two dollars in the tip jar.

The pace was a little more relaxed, but it was only noon on a Sunday. The burger was really quite good, finished over an open flame, and the fries were freshly cut. There were several patrons in Broncos jerseys, apparently bound for the game at Mile High north on Federal. The linoleum floor has been replaced by ceramic tile, and that's about it, except they added a self-service soda dispenser near the grill. It didn't ruin the atmosphere.