

My Mouth Still Waters

By Dennis Payton Knight

Are you lucky enough to remember the Denver Drumstick, the Organ Grinder, Rocky Bilts, and the Yum Yum Tree? Those were some of the popular Denver places my wife and I would frequent during our dating and first years of marriage. We could afford them, for one thing, and they were unique to Denver. They're all gone now, by 30 years or more, but I do wish they would all come back.

The Organ Grinder on west Alameda was a pizza place; not a little corner place with checkered tablecloths, but an establishment large enough to showcase an original Wurlitzer pipe organ so large it could have backed the choir in Salt Lake City. There was no table service, and patrons were constantly on the move carrying pizzas and drinks from the service area to their tables. But everyone had a view of the organist, who's every limb was involved pushing keys, pumping peddles, pulling valves, and magically activating drums, cymbals and bells, all the while making music fit for Carnegie Hall. And the pizza wasn't bad, either.

When I came to Denver in the early seventies, there was only one Rocky Bilt burger shack left. It was on Federal, near where Speer streaming out of downtown Denver joins Federal. It wasn't even large enough to house tables for sitting. No drive-thru service either. You would park and walk up to buy burgers in a sack. Once all over Denver, they were Colorado's answer to White Castles, with a greasy little burger on a soft bun with a secret sauce and grilled onions. They've been missed since the chain went out of business in the seventies, but a few aficionados know that Micky Manor, a saloon on Federal, has the recipe and flips them by the hundreds every week.

The Yum Tree on Colorado Boulevard once seated six hundred in four dining rooms surrounding seven restaurants, serving 302 different dishes. You could step over to Adam's Ribs for barbecue, to Tommy Wong's for wontons, and Apple Annie's for pie. You could taste the spaghetti from Fellini's, enchiladas from Ponchos, schnitzel from the Hoffbrauhouse, and a chop from Eddie's Steakhouse. Or all of them, on one ticket you would pay going out.

Another favorite spot for us was the Denver Drumstick chain in several locations around town. Catering to families, they served delicious fried chicken and wonderful mashed potatoes with chicken gravy. They were large enough to accommodate maybe a hundred folks, and a model train would follow a track around the circumference of the room, delighting children and hypnotizing me. Most of the buildings are still around housing various businesses. Of those, I frequent the Breakfast Inn on Evans, a terrific place with a broad menu, and the train still runs. They were smart enough to keep it, but I do wish they would have kept the Drumstick's recipes. Thinking of that chicken and those mashed potatoes, my mouth still waters.