

The Ice House Café Building

By Barbara Glakas

Many Herndon residents will remember the Ice House Café and its Oyster Bar, a well-loved Herndon restaurant/bar for nearly forty years, located at 760-762 Elden Street. Patrons will remember the café for its cozy atmosphere – with its table cloths, brass fixtures, woodwork, as well as its mounted animal heads and photos of historic Herndon on its walls. Patrons will also remember its extensive wine list, its delicious food, and its great live music. However, long before the Ice House Café came on the scene in 1979, this building had a long history of previous occupants.

The land on which the Ice House Café sits was bought by Welton T. Updike, John B. Keyser and Maurice P. Haines in 1947. The taller right side of the building was built on the lot in 1948 by Welton Updike, who was a local builder. There were apartments on the second floor. On the first floor was a drug store. The drug store changed hands at least two times over the course of approximately ten or more years. One was called Bellevue Drug Store another was called Edwards Drug Store. Some long-time Herndon residents remember that a pharmacist named Mr. Shefftelman was the proprietor of one of the drug stores.

But as some locals recollect, the drug stores were not simply pharmacies. As one former Herndon resident recalled:

“It was not only a drug store, but it had a great sandwich and ice cream counter. It had great egg salad sandwiches, a great grilled cheese and a wonderful banana split, among many other offerings.”

In 1955, Updike, Keyser and Haines sold the property to Melvin W. Staubus, who was an insurance agent. In 1957 Staubus sold the property to Ruby Coles Martin. Ruby was the wife of Marshall “Mike” Martin Jr., a local lawyer who would later serve as Herndon’s Town Attorney.

Sometime around 1958, Updike poured a slab on the west side of the building, in an attempt to build an addition onto the building, because – according to locals – Staubus wanted an insurance office there. The town put a stop to the construction. The building expansion was built into the bank of the adjacent Folly Lick Creek. One former town staff member said, “That violated the zoning ordinance. Mike Martin filed for a variance but never got it. He argued it was vested and a non-conforming use.” Another resident said, “The building to the left was built by Updike and was illegal; no permits, no plans, just threw it up.” Regardless, the slab was somehow allowed to stay. Of note is that the lack of permits eventually caught up with the building, as the Ice House Café owners later had to close off that portion of the Ice House (the addition later called the Oyster Bar) in order to shore up and provide supports to that section of the building.

Even more interesting than the slab debacle was what soon went on top of it. A life-long town resident who was about 18 years old at the time, remembers that he was sitting across the street in front of the Herndon Theatre one night and watched a bunch of drunk men - who were apparently friends of Mr. Updike - bring in on a flatbed truck, a shed-like building that had been

built elsewhere and placed it on the slab. The shed-like building only lasted for a short while, but while it was there it was occupied by Melvin Staubus as his insurance office.

Eventually, Updike built a new and proper small building on the west side, to replace the shed-like structure. Staubus continued to operate an insurance office in this building and lived upstairs in the apartment. The Martins still owned both “sides” of the building and, across the years, different businesses occupied the smaller addition on the west side. Herndon High School yearbook advertisements from 1952, 1954 and 1956 show that Staubus had his insurance office in the building. However, in the 1958 and 1965 yearbooks, the Lorey Real Estate and Insurance Agency was shown there. It was also known that a beauty parlor once occupied the building.

In 1961, after the drug store left the first floor of the original east side of the building, it became the Elden Street Restaurant, run by Alva Saffer. A Herndon resident and member of the Herndon Methodist Church, Saffer had previously ran “The Theatre Grill,” (later known as the Hornet’s Nest) for three years out of the old Herndon Theatre building (now The Upholstery Shop), located directly across Elden Street. With her growing business she was looking for a larger space. She wanted to be able to serve larger groups such as families and Herndon organizations that wanted to have group lunches or dinners. Saffer served breakfast, lunch and dinner. One of her nieces was a waitress. Aside from locals, many of her customers were also construction workers who were working on building Dulles Airport. People remember the restaurant as having inexpensive meat and potatoes type of food and beer. Music played on a jukebox. One Herndon resident remembered:

“When you went in, on the left-hand side was a long counter (mirror on the wall behind) with stools, booths on the right, and tables and chairs in the middle. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Nothing fancy, a lunch special (entrée, potatoes, vegetable and two slices of bread) for a set price (between \$1.00 - \$2.00).”

By 1968, Saffer’s niece said that her aunt was getting older and found it harder to find waitresses. Saffer decided to close the Elden Street Restaurant and open a smaller carry-out restaurant on Pine Street called Betty’s Grill, where she specialized in early breakfasts and mid-day lunches.

This is when the property took an interesting turn. In 1969 a man named Joe Wadle bought the Elden Street Restaurant, bringing along with him Joy, Rosemarie and “Diamond Diana.” The three ladies were topless dancers who wore nothing more than tasseled gold pasties and bikini bottoms.

A *Washington Post* article wrote about this establishment, which caused many jitters in town. Wadle kept the Formica tables and vinyl-covered lunch room chairs and stopped serving breakfast. On his first Friday he racked up the cues, turned up the music, and said, “Stand back, boys, here’s Diana!” And out came Diana, “shimmying, stacked, near naked, tassel-tummy-tossing 115 pounds of her, dancing right on top of that smooth green felt pool table!”

One Herndon resident remembers going inside the establishment and seeing a dancer on top of a piece of plywood that was laid across a table. Some teenaged boys of that time remember trying to peek through the windows, while others remember that the windows were painted, making it difficult for people to see inside. Another resident said, it was a, “huge issue. I never got to see them. I was embarrassed over the entire chain of events.”

The *Post* reported that they had farmers, handymen, pilots, salesmen, engineers, college kids, single men, married men, and a crowd that lined up 50 feet down the block. Diana, one of the dancers, said,

“This is a nice place. The people here are nice too. There’s only been one irate wife who came in here, mad at me because of my dancing. I told her if she was doing her job at home, she wouldn’t have to worry about her husband.”

The dancers did not last too long, however. One former resident said, “everyone raised hell” about it. The police and town attorney would visit the establishment, to ensure Virginia’s obscenity law was not being violated and to make sure “no one was getting drunk and attacking the girls.” Herndon’s mayor, Richard Bennett, wondered if the town should make a test case of the state’s obscenity laws by closing down the go-go operation.

A former town staff member added:

“The Town Sergeant, Joe Murray, accompanied by his deputy John Kirk and the Town Attorney, closed it down because the Mayor, Richard Bennett, complained about the gals dancing on the counters and on poles. It was closed down by Joe Murray, and his deputy suggested that we take polaroid pictures of the dancers and the men who were there, husbands of proper ladies in town. The pictures would then be placed in the windows of the [building], for all the world to see. They packed up the dancers and left town in a week.”

Next to occupy the building was an establishment called Margaret’s Inn, run by Margaret Pearson and her husband, Howard. One resident said, “She was a good cook.” She also served a similar cuisine as did the previous Elden Street Restaurant. Locals generally described the place as being a “beer joint.” It was also known as a watering hole for many Washington Redskins players, such as John Riggins and Charley Taylor. Margaret’s grandson said,

“If you’ve ever been to the Ice House in Herndon, Va... then you’ve been to my grandmother’s old bar. It used to be Margaret’s Inn and it was a place many Redskins visited in the late 70’s to blow off steam and drink a few beers. Riggo knew my Nanny well.”

Margaret’s Inn occupied the building through most of the 1970s. Howard Pearson died in 1976 and Marshall “Mike” Martin Jr. died in 1978. Margaret had been on a month-to-month lease and Ruby Martin was looking to turn the building into a nicer, first-class restaurant. In 1978, Margaret’s lease was not renewed.

It was at the time that three locals – Dan Chamblin, Ronnie Ashwell and Eddie Grimes – thought they could fulfill Ruby’s vision. They told her they could design it like the Clyde’s restaurant in Georgetown. The three men formed a partnership and opened a new business in the building. When asked why they decided to do that, Ashwell said, “An opportunity that we didn’t expect to get came about and we thought we knew how to run a bar.” Ashwell was a car dealer, Chamblin was a banker, and Grimes had some previous experience working at other restaurants. But they carried on and the new business opened in 1979 and it was named The Ice House Café.

Some people erroneously believe that the café was given that name because they thought that the town of Herndon’s ice house was formerly located there. However, Herndon’s former ice house was previously located on the west side of Center Street near where the Vinehaven subdivision is now located. The old ice plant was formerly managed by John Robert Lee Chamblin in the 1930s and 1940s. Blocks of ice would be delivered by horse and wagon to people’s homes. John Chamblin was of no relation to Dan Chamblin who later owned the café. Ashwell recalled that it was Chamblin who had selected the name of the new restaurant. He said Chamblin was an admirer of Herndon history and was aware of the former ice house that used to be located nearby. Whether or not he was also taken with the fact that he and the former ice house manager shared a common last name is unknown.

Unfortunately, the same year the three opened the Ice House Café, Eddie Grimes unexpectedly died in an automobile accident. Soon after, the partnership broke up between Chamblin and Ashwell. Chamblin’s father-in-law bought out Ashwell. Chamblin continued to be the owner of the Ice House Café for many years.

Sometime in the early 1980s, Ruby Martin re-negotiated Chamblin’s lease, allowing him to use the smaller addition on the west side of the building. It became the Oyster Bar. Chamblin later added a deck to the rear of the Oyster Bar.

Ruby Martin died in 2005 and ownership of the Ice House Café and Oyster Bar building was passed to the Martin’s daughter, Alice Martin. Dan Chamblin continued to be the owner of the Ice House Café until he sold the business to Alice Dai, in 1991.

For another 27 years, Dai ran the Ice House Café, to the delight of its many loyal customers. In 2019 Dai announced her retirement, bringing to a close one of the longest-running dining establishments in the town of Herndon. In 2021, Alice Martin sold the building, and now Herndon awaits a new tradition to begin in the old building that has long been the home to many well-loved restaurants.

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.