

Popular G.I. restaurant closes; 40-year employee says goodbye

By Carol Bryant

cbryanttheindependent.com

Dreisbach's, once "the" place to eat in Grand Island, closed on Tuesday.

And Helen Armour of Grand Island worked her last day at the restaurant after a 40-year career working part time there. Armour's specialty has been making salads and salad dressings.

Her daughter, Mary Armour, gave her flowers at the conclusion of her work day Tuesday.

"In the old building, we used to serve maybe 1,500 on a busy night," Helen Armour said Tuesday afternoon.

Dreisbach's was popular "because of the good food, the atmosphere, the waitresses, the help," Armour said. The restaurant was a frequent destination for visitors, Fonner Park fans and Hall County Fair participants. Dreisbach's Steakhouse Restaurant at 1137 S. Locust St. will be sold at auction on Sept. 30.

Dreisbach's Manager Carrie Dowd, daughter of Dreisbach's owner Patrick Dowd, said Armour is like family.

"Helen's a hard worker -- dependable. She's been very good to our family," Dowd said.

Dreisbach's served its last meals at the restaurant Tuesday night and plans to do a few meal deliveries and caterings that have been booked for the next few days, Dowd said.

"It's been nice working with the Dowds over the years -- from Frank on down to his grandchildren," Armour said.

The restaurant opened in 1932 and has been owned by the Dowd family since Frank Dowd bought it from the Dreisbach family in 1944.

Armour, 71, began working at Dreisbach's washing dishes. She then shifted to cooking at night.

"After my kids were in school, I started working days," she said. "I've raised eight children, so I've been busy."

Armour has made Dreisbach's trademark salads, including coleslaw, potato salad and fruit salad; as well as its salad dressings, including the pungent Italian dressing with capers and Roquefort dressing. The Italian dressing "was strong, but everybody liked it. The most popular dressing was the Roquefort dressing," she said.

Celebrities ranging from Bob Hope to Tom Osborne have been among those who have dined at Dreisbach's, Armour said. The restaurant has been known for its aged steaks, "Racer's Special" of ribs and fried chicken, sunflower potatoes with cheese and family-style dinners with food such as roast beef, fried chicken, shrimp, au gratin potatoes and coleslaw.

Armour recalls the football and basketball teams that came to Dreisbach's late at night for the family-style dinners. When the restaurant was in a former farmhouse, employees used to do a lot of work in a nearby barn.

"We always cut up our own chickens. We aged our meat. We used to serve rabbit. We always prepared our own food," Armour said.

When the restaurant was very busy, it sometimes didn't close until 2 a.m. on weekends. Employees stayed to prepare for the next day.

"The sun would be coming up before they went home," Armour said.

She learned a week ago that the restaurant would close.

"I really hated to see it close. It's part of your life," Armour said.

She will return to the restaurant one more time, when the business has a final party for its employees.

Carrie Dowd declined commenting on Tuesday on whether the business might reopen at a different site after the auction. She told The Independent in April 2001 that the family might consider moving the business to the Highway 281 corridor if the current building was sold.