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McHENRY
MUSEUM
& Historical Society



Newsletter

September 2021

History Lesson

Currently all around the country, students are resuming their studies, whether in person or remotely. Seventy years ago, 650 students knew they would be studying in person at Modesto's second high school. Thomas Downey High School marked its seventieth anniversary this year as it opened its doors on Coffee Road in 1951. It was named for Modesto Educator Thomas Downey (1859-1936). A large ceremony was held to dedicate this institution of learning attended by Mr. Downey's four children. The school itself was not the only grand opening on the street that year. Across the street, a woman named Mamie Noto opened a restaurant which would be named "The Knights' Round Table" in the front of her property at 1103 Coffee Road. Today, many of us pass the boarded-up building, now painted a brown color, and typically covered in graffiti, but few know its history. Mamie DiSciascio was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 7, 1910. She married widower Frank Noto (1895-1962) in 1929 and helped raise his two children: Frank, Jr. (1925-1967) and Mary (1927-2010). Together, they had three children of their own: Maria (1930-1983), Peter (1933-2004), and Theresa (1935-). After living most of her life on the East Coast, the family settled in Modesto in the 1940s.



Why did Mamie open a restaurant across from a high school?

Because she loved being around kids. Frank Noto, Jr. built the restaurant for his mother in her front yard with its crown roof to resemble a castle. Students who attended Downey from 1951 until the restaurant's closure in 1983 all had the opportunity to spend their lunch hour with Mamie.

Though this concept is foreign to most people now, Downey High School was an open campus. Students were allowed to leave during their lunch break to dine at a venue of their choosing. Being able to cross the street made "The Knights' Round Table" an ideal choice. Mamie opened every day ready to serve pastries at 5:45am and would sometimes stay open until 2:45 pm when classes were dismissed. Most Downey High School alumni think of one thing first when they think of Mamie's cooking: her spaghetti with her homemade garlic bread. She served other entrees such as hamburgers and French fries, but her spaghetti is what made her famous. She was also known for her cherry cola and milkshakes, something her granddaughter Margaret Noto Armstrong remembers, as she worked behind the counter while she attended Downey in the 1970s.

Lynn Youngman McSwain, class of 1974, explained to the MM&HS how the restaurant's clientele changed over the years. "In the early days, school clubs would meet there, Mamie was good friends with the principal, faculty would eat lunch there, and the school spirit group held meetings there." Judy Ward Tarter, class of 1954, said the school's mascot was born in the restaurant, the Knight.

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Those early days seemed full of fun and lively activity. Mamie became particularly annoyed when some let a live pheasant loose in the restaurant. Feathers and other “surprises” soiled the establishment. She found out years later that Ron Greenwood, class of 1956, was the culprit. In the late 1960s, the restaurant was known for having a rougher crowd. Boys were allowed to smoke in the front and girls in the back. Fights would erupt, however, Mamie was quick to stop things. Mamie would grab a broom to haul out any unruly students, or use a wooden paddle on which she wrote, “Savage Swatter.” If you ditched class, Mamie would make you return. She maintained order within her walls.

No matter what Mamie’s role was as a restauranteuse and disciplinarian, she served a greater purpose to the students. Mamie was a confidant. She was there to listen to all troubles. She let students work serving so they could in turn receive a free lunch. She was their counselor, their mother hen. Mamie went as far as to advise school groups, like the Ski Club. Mamie was quoted as saying “I’d go stark raving mad if I wasn’t here!” When school was out for summer, Mamie worked cooking for youth groups and chaperoned bus trips.



Mamie serves Jeffery Puccinelli, Charles Maino, and Lewis Franklin

at
The Knights Round Table



Mamie’s first husband Frank Noto passed away in 1962 and in 1967 she married George Alberti (1911-1982) who also became a staple to Downey students. Always by her side was her right arm Donna Cisi (1938-2007). Running the restaurant became too much for her as she aged, and following the deaths of her husband and daughter, Mamie decided to close the doors of her beloved restaurant in the Summer of 1983. She spent her final years attending school reunions, and had regular dinners with Lynn Youngman McSwain, Cindy Tarter Wilson, Leslee Adams, Valerie Brey Mitchell, Sally Ford-Machado, and Debbie Hansson Heckendorf from the class of 1974. In 1999, in celebration of her eighty-ninth birthday, Mayor Dick Lang honored Mamie with a Certificate of Recognition. The festivities appeared in the *Modesto Bee* with the headline “Downey Legend ‘Mamie’ honored.”

Mamie was more to the students at Thomas Downey High School than simply the woman who fed them at lunch, she was the heart and soul of the school for 32 years. She lived in her home behind the boarded-up restaurant, which remained intact other than it being used for storage. The death of her youngest son, Peter in March of 2004 weighed heavily on Mamie. Mamie Noto Alberti passed away September 27, 2004, at the age of 94. Her funeral was attended by several Thomas Downey High School grads. They never forgot her and honored her for one simple reason, as Lynn McSwain stated, “She took care of us, even when we were rotten and nobody else in the world would love us.”

By: David Seymour



THOMAS DOWNEY KNIGHTS

In researching this article, a post was placed on the Facebook page "You Knew You Grew Up In Modesto When ??????????" asking Thomas Downey High School graduates for memories of Mamie, here are some of the highlights:

Linda Kirkpatrick Agan, class of 1963, "Mamie was a special lady, always taking care of us like family which Mamie knew. She knew I loved to go to the dances at the California Ballroom. She would give me lunch, so I had money for the dance, wonderful memories of her and her daughter Theresa."

Kaye Camp Overfield, class of 1966, "Mamie loved all the kids and all the kids loved her. She had rules though and everyone knew them."

Jerry Sheffield, class of 1969, "I had troubles going to school. I would sometimes show up late morning at Mamie's and she would get me a cup of coffee and just talk to me like a mother. I loved the woman."

Debbie Savage, Class of 1968, "Mamie was one of a kind...when anyone got into a scuffle, or fight, she was the first one there breaking it up. She didn't do it sweetly either."

Doug and Patti Hagerty Taylor, class of 1973 and 1974, "We were Mamie kids, when you needed advice, she was there, when you ditched class for some garlic bread, she reprimanded you and sent you back to class."

Kim Keenom-Green, Class of 1974 "Mamie was a treasure...She had a fit when I showed up on a horse dragging another horse... then I would catch her feeding them carrots in the alley."

Gwen Gray, class of 1984, "I loved that place! The "Italian Burrito" was the best. Deep fried, served open faced covered in spaghetti sauce."



Class of 74' Girls Reunions
Lynn Youngman McSwain, Cindy Tarter Wilson, Leslee Adams, Valerie Brey Mitchell, Sally Ford-Machado, and Debbie Hansson Heckendorf

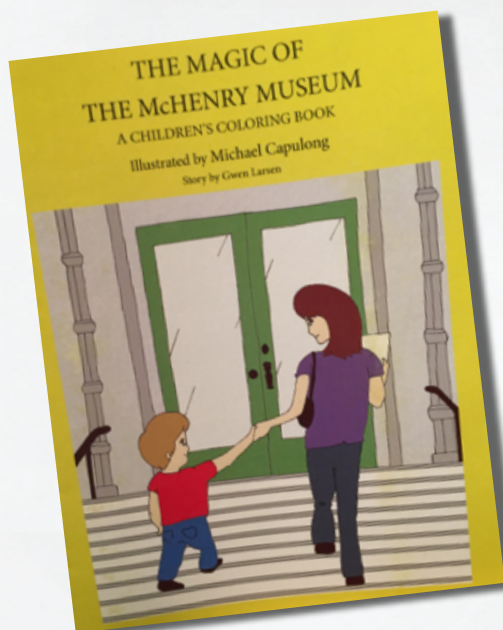
Photos of my Grandmother: Margaret Noto Armstrong



Donna Cisi, Margaret, Mamie, Maria Noto DiBona



In Memoriam



Gwenlyn "Gwen" Koen Larsen

August 30, 1929-July 21, 2021

The MM&HS would like to honor Gwenlyn "Gwen" Koen Larsen who passed away July 21, 2021 at the age of 91. For many years, Gwen volunteered tirelessly for our organization. Specifically, Gwen worked on our Press & Pub Committee contributing on publishing articles for our *Stanislaus Stepping Stones*. She helped in the writing of many McHenry Museum works including authoring a coloring book for children titled "The Magic of the McHenry Museum: A Coloring Book for Children. Thank you Gwen for all of your hard work, you were irreplaceable.

Updates



The McHenry Museum is temporarily closed once again.

- *Due to the precarious nature of the pandemic, it has been difficult to procure enough docents to volunteer.
- *Volunteers will be needed three days a week, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 12-4pm.
- *We will be recruiting more docents and any volunteers willing to help in the museum and the gift shop, please send a message on the website www.mchenrymuseum.org or email david@mchenrymuseum.org if you are interested.
- *The McHenry Museum did open August 6, 2021, as scheduled, that weekend both the Museum and the store saw in upwards of thirty people a day in a three-day span.
- *The following weekend, the Museum was opened, but the store remained closed.
- *We hope to be open again in September, stay tuned. The Board of the MM&HS will be holding our regular in-person meeting September 21, 2021, but this may be moved to zoom, the safety of our board and our members is our top priority.

*Membership renewals to the MM&HS have been mailed and returned invoices are being processed. To become a member please visit our website at

www.mchenrymuseum.org