

The Community Page

Not Your Typical Restaurant

Linda Slavin, a waitress at Smitty's Pancake and Steak

House, once complimented one of her customers on the scent of his aftershave. Soon, the elderly gentleman began coming in regularly and throwing on an extra splash of aftershave just for her. When his health began to deteriorate, he moved to Salt Lake City. But then one day, he showed up at the restaurant again, this time in a wheelchair.

"I said, 'What are you doing here?'" Linda remembers. "He told me, 'I came here to have you wait on me one more time before I die, and I put on a splash of aftershave just for you.' Two days later, he passed away."

That probably doesn't sound like your typical dining experience, and there's an obvious reason for that: Smitty's, the little restaurant by the river, isn't your typical restaurant. Instead of the drive-thru window, Smitty's gives you the friendliest service in town. Instead of the paper-bagged burger, you get delicious food from a menu that doesn't shift with the fads. Instead of lots of marketing to get you to eat something you shouldn't, you get a place where the food and the service speak for themselves and keep you coming back.

Yet 40 years ago, Smitty's was an unremarkable franchise restaurant like the dozens of others you might visit on a weekend evening. Then, in 1971, Leo and Cleo Werner, a factory worker and a waitress from Washington State, bought the restaurant, and that's when it took a turn for the legendary. The Werners knew succeeding would take more than an investment of time or money. Instead, they brought three ingredients that made their restaurant great and solidified its place as one of the pillars of Idaho Falls:



Cleo and Leo Werner.



Smitty's provides great eating for every meal.



For almost 40 years, Smitty's has provided Idaho Falls with food and friendship.

Labor of Love

"[Leo and Cleo] would be here to open at 5 a.m., and then they would stay to do the janitorial work after it closed at 9 p.m.," says their granddaughter, Katrina Lott. "They worked from sunup to sundown to establish their business."

Eventually, the Smitty's franchise became Perkins, leaving the Werners to fend for themselves. But Leo and Cleo had a different strategy: earning and keeping customer loyalty. Between waiting tables, Cleo took the time to meet and talk with every customer who walked through the door. Those who arrived to be customers would leave as friends.

"People would come here just to see my grandparents," Katrina says. "Grandma would go from table to table just talking with everybody."

Loyalty

With that friendly atmosphere, Smitty's quickly became a mainstay of Idaho Falls restaurants. Each day it was flooded with customers: 800-900 each morning and 800-900 each night. Day after day, the same customers came back for more, some even lining up before the restaurant opened at 6 a.m., but Cleo kept meeting everyone and helping out with whatever needed to be done.

"[Leo and Cleo] were awesome people," Linda says. "They never asked you to do anything that they

weren't doing right alongside you. If somebody needed help in the dishpit, Leo was washing dishes. The only thing he couldn't fix in here was refrigeration and he was working on that when he passed on."

A waitress brings a smile and great food at Smitty's.

Legacy

Resting on Grandma Cleo's hip, Katrina was taking silent notes on how to make people feel at home, how to live, and how to do business. At 14, Katrina took her first job at the restaurant as a "sappy," someone who fills drinks for the servers. Two years later she began bussing and seating customers, and five or six years after that she started waiting tables. "I don't know anything besides Smitty's," Katrina says. "I love it; I love to come to work here. It makes me really proud to be a part of something my grandparents worked so hard for. I've never worked anywhere else."

Just last year, Cleo passed away and left the restaurant to her children and grandchildren who shared her passion for connecting with customers. Now, with Cleo's spirit alive in their business, the family is working hard to maintain the Smitty's legacy in a market where they're fast becoming the little guy. But regardless of what the competition brings to the table, Smitty's will always have love, loyalty and a legacy that give them a serious advantage over the competition.

Customers Surrounded by Art

Adorning the walls of Smitty's Pancake and Steak House, you'll find stunning original oil paintings signed by "W. Gisin."

Werner Gisin was born in Switzerland and studied at a private art school in Bern.

In 1948, Gisin immigrated to the United States and eventually found his way to Idaho Falls. In Idaho Falls, he found a fan and a friend in Cleo Werner, the owner of Smitty's.

Cleo loved Werner's work so much, she allowed him to sell his paintings through the restaurant. That arrangement didn't



Werner Gisin's artwork depict scenes both local and distant.

last long, however, as some of Cleo's favorite paintings left the restaurant to go to their buyers. Instead, Cleo began buying many of Werner's paintings to keep for herself.

When Cleo died last year, the walls of her home were nearly covered in Werner Gisin paintings, most of which were divided between her children.

Werner Gisin also passed away last year, but many of his aesthetic works still line the walls at Smitty's. A dedicatory plaque even hangs in his honor on the restaurant's coat rack.

While some of his paintings depict familiar scenes—the Idaho Falls Temple or the

Grand Teton—many of his paintings show landscapes and sights from other places Gisin traveled: a stone bridge over a babbling brook, a riverside cottage, gorgeous red flowers in full bloom, or a church in a peaceful European town. But no, those ones aren't for sale either.



Gorgeous artwork, among other things, sets Smitty's apart from the competition.



Peaceful scenes set the tone for two late-morning breakfast diners.