

# Coffee Shop is Chapel Hill institution

By KIMBERLY MCGUIRE  
Staff Writer

Cars whir by in gleaming sunlight. A bus stops and people spill out onto the busy street. The cars halt for pedestrians in the crosswalk. A bicyclist weaves through the traffic. Shoppers walk and peer in the shop window panes and move on.

The door is propped open to let in the cool afternoon air. Light streams into the dim shop. It is quiet and empty. The floor is bare and chairs are stacked on top of the tables. The "closed" sign hangs outside.

In an hour, a line will begin to form outside. "I know most of the people who come here by now," says Bill Smith as he gestures with his cigarette holder. "We've had all sorts of characters." He has worked at the Carolina Coffee Shop for seven years, off and on. "I started as a salad boy in the morning and a bus boy at night. Then I was baker for a year. I used to have to bake bread and I'd never have a day off because I'd bake 13 racks a day and we'd use them all."

Now Smith is the Coffee Shop's head waiter and a fixture in the place. "I guess this is my fourth appearance. I always come and go. This place is great for that. People work and leave and come back. I'm a lifer — my profession is divided between theater and this, and Chapel Hill will always be my home."

The Carolina Coffee Shop opened in 1922. Before that it was a student post office. Byron Freeman, the current owner, bought the shop in 1958. As the story goes, he was an aspiring classical pianist, and he bought the restaurant as an investment. He met his wife there and has made a life of it.

It is close to five o'clock now and the tapes begin to play harpsichord, piano, flute and classical music continuously for the patrons. Waiters and waitresses scurry around doing last-minute setting up. The lights are dimmed and candles are lit.

A young bearded man in a chef's hat and apron comes out into the dining room. "Tonight's special is..." Sammy Loflin is the head of the kitchen and has been, off and on, since 1969. He was trained at the Savoy Grill in London and he offers 80 entrees at the Coffee Shop. He bakes 23 of the Coffee Shop's cheesecakes each week.

"The thing that I like best is that about a fifth of the present crew grew up with the Coffee Shop," Loflin says. "We started at the beginning of the boom." A council was formed of the headwaiters and waitresses and Freeman and other interested workers to discuss the future of the Coffee Shop. "Byron needed some help and there were enough 'lifers' to take over

some of the small stuff," Smith says. "We sit down to discuss things once a month. We met yesterday to decide on hours for Thanksgiving week. It always changes. We used to close for the month of August every year."

"People used to ask us when our coffee prices were going to go up like everyone else's," Loflin says. "They should have gone up a year ago. We literally gave away free coffee for a year. The coffee bill was between \$1,300 and \$1,500 a month." The coffee prices just doubled, from 25¢ to 50¢ for a "bottomless cup." No one has complained, they say.

The two-story building which houses the Carolina Coffee Shop is owned by the University. The upstairs is used by the campus police as a locker room. "Byron owns the business and leases the space from UNC," Smith says.

There are constant battles over health regulations. "The building is so old and the kitchen ceiling is so high that we can't get up 20 feet to clean it every day," Loflin says.

Freeman has spent \$10,000 on the kitchen in the last six months and pulled the health rating up from a B to an A.

Byron Freeman wanders through and turns up the Baroque music. "This place looked really different when I first opened it up. The booths were here, but not all the tables. We moved that long church pew outside and it became the people's bench. That area over there, it used to be the counter for an ice cream parlor. The speciality was always toasted pound cake with a double scoop of vanilla and chocolate sauce. One all the way, they called it. I changed that fast. Now it's cheesecake."

A waiter calls out, "Hey, somebody in here over Homecoming, last Friday night, some guy wanted that toasted pound-cake special."

"Yeah," Freeman says, laughing, "this place has been through a lot of changes."

"We were the only place on Franklin Street that closed for the first moratorium. But, this isn't a political institution as much as an example. There's sort of a working-class consciousness about the place. I can tell someone to leave if they're difficult — I couldn't do that if I were working at Howard Johnson's," Smith says.

"It's a livelihood for so many people," Loflin says. "We're a major employer, contributing a quarter of a million dollars to the payroll in this town. We've served over a million and three-quarters people in the last ten years."

"Sunday I felt like I waited on most of them," Smith says, laughing. "What was I expecting? I was expecting to eat breakfast on my day off and I was put to work."

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