

One for the ages – Manor House becomes history

Mimi and team retire
as TNDC scrambles
to find a new eatery

BY TOM CARTER

A SPECIAL chapter in Tenderloin history ended sadly March 1 when the low-cost Manor House restaurant and its beloved manager, Mimi Yee, called it quits after 17 years of unparalleled service to the city's poorest neighborhood.

The closure left hundreds of poverty-level customers — some of them damp-eyed — wondering if anyone who follows could equal Mimi, yet feeling lucky to have had it so good for so long.

Mimi and her husband John Yee, chief cook, were retiring because of his health, she told surprised customers over recent weeks. Plus she herself was “very tired,” she said, having been on her feet, moving constantly more than 10 hours a day, six days a week since 1996. Then she did the restaurant's shopping on Saturdays when the Jones Street eatery was closed.

“I'm tired,” Mimi said the day before Manor House closed. She's in her early 50s, her husband in his early 60s. “I'm not burned out, but if I don't do it now, I will get burned out. And I want to do this before something happens.” She plans to go to school to improve her English.

Among her six employees, her “team,” were her sisters May and Shirley, also well-known to Manor's regulars.

The last day, Thursday, Feb. 28, found a stream of well-wishers saying how much they will miss her, and others who hadn't known of the closure and were shocked, dazed, even distressed.

“What am I going to do?” one man demanded at the counter, sounding angry. “And what's my brother going to do? Does he know?”

Tenderloin Capt. Joe Garrity barreled through the door at 12:20 p.m. with an armful of roses, giving one bouquet to May and another to Mimi. He chatted with a few customers and was gone in five minutes. Later, District 6 Supervisor Jane Kim's staff showed up.

Manor hours were 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., serving breakfasts and lunch all day. Mimi did not want to be open after 5 p.m. because she feared the neighborhood after dark, she has said.

The Board of Supervisors will acknowledge her contribution to the Tenderloin in March, during International Women's Month, an aide in Kim's office said.

Don Falk, executive director of TNDC, which owns the Antonia Manor hotel, the building where Manor House occupies

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PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Mimi Yee, who elevated Manor House service to new heights, gets roses as just desserts from Tenderloin Capt. Joe Garrity on her last day, Feb. 28.

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A CBD AWAITS CITY HALL

Central Market
plan needs OK

PAGE 2



KOCI THE ARTIST

Bold, evocative
paintings for
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OBITS

Noted advocate
for legal grass;
Camelot Hotel
'royalty'

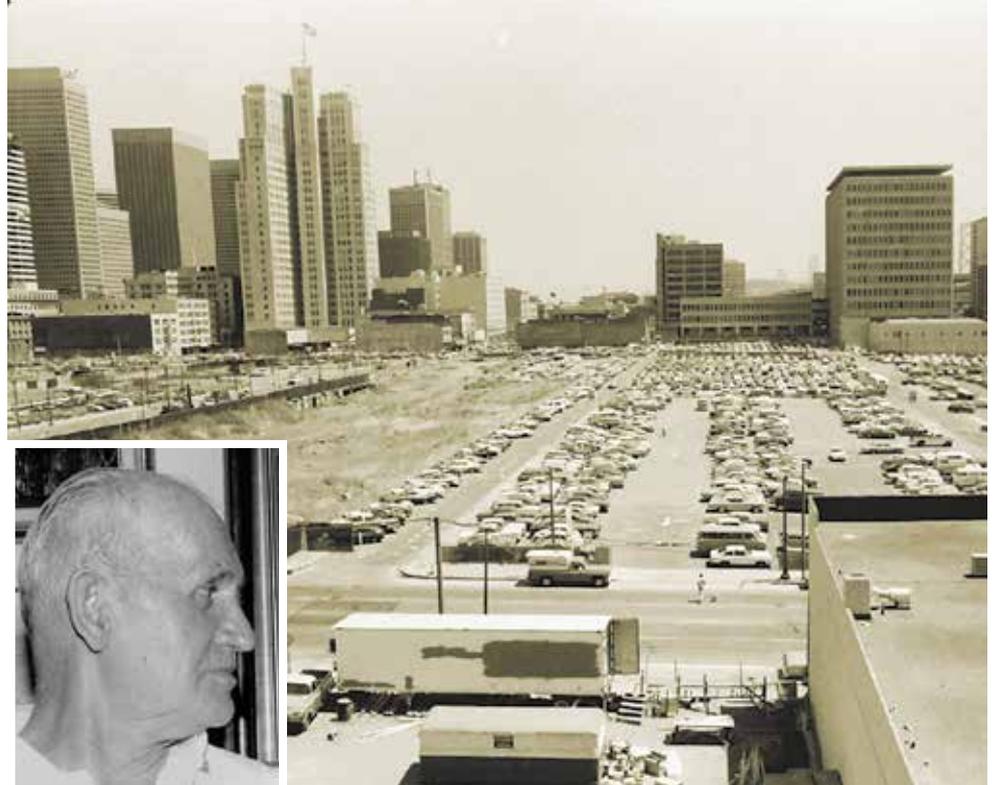
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CENTRAL CITY



S A N F R A N C I S C O

ORAL HISTORY



PHOTOS BY BILL CARLSON

The 1978 view from Frank Koci's apartment was a sea of cars and empty space where flats, small apartment buildings and businesses were razed for the Yerba Buena Center development that hastened the end of the old neighborhood and the beginning of the new. Inset: Frank Koci

Before it was SoMa

The transformation
of South of Market
— artist in 1978
minces no words

Neighborhood
ORAL
HISTORY PROJECT

THE WORK of San Francisco Beat-era artist Frank Koci, born in 1904 in Czechoslovakia, “represented a remarkable union of naivete and canny sophistication,” wrote Thomas Albright, reviewer and author of *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945-80*. Before he turned to painting, the young Koci, new to America, worked as a merchant seaman, cowboy, farmhand, silent film and theater extra. He was still actively painting when Oral History Project staffer Isabel Maldonado interviewed him in August 1978 at his Clementina Street apartment. A South of Market resident, he had watched as Yerba Buena Center construction got under way, displacing thousands of residents and hundreds of businesses, most permanently. Early on, the neighborhood was called South of the Slot because of the Market Street cable cars. When they were long gone, then it became South of Market. And, in the Eighties, in a nod to New York City's SoHo district, people in San Francisco started calling the area SoMa. Frank Koci died in 1983.

What's it like living South of Market these days?

Seven years ago, I was living at the Westchester on Third Street between Market and Mis-

sion. There's nothing there now — the city tore everything out, but it took them three years after I moved before they started knocking things down. And it took me a long time investigating to find this place in Clementina Towers. You have to buy your own furniture here, but I had the money to buy it, not like some of those bums who go from check to check, drinking it up, and then there are the misers and drunkards with a couple of religious fanatics thrown in, and also several pretty nice people. You'd be surprised how many practically geniuses you find on the skids in San Francisco.

Tell us about coming to San Francisco.

I came to this country when I was 17 and spent my first two years in Shiner, Texas, where I learned how to milk cows for \$30 a month. Then I moved to Los Angeles and that's where I got a few of these X-rated movie jobs and worked for Charlie Chaplin, a great guy to work for, and all that — I get a little tired of rehashing that in interviews. When I came up to San Francisco in 1923, I really didn't live anywhere, just bummed around. But I do remember South of Market then, all small, ramshackle, broken-down rooming

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