



Cook Continues

By Henry Wolff Jr.

Joe Reyna was cooking fajitas Sunday like they were going out of style at the Knights of Columbus cookoff in Riverside Park for the muscular dystrophy campaign.

Standing behind a grill is nothing new to him, worked for years before World War Two at Fossati's Delicatessen & Bar on Main Street, started out there as a dishwasher in 1928, when only near beer was being served across the bar, recalls helping tap the first keg of Shiner that arrived there after prohibition ended in '32, had the second glass.

Those were days when a man was expected to know how to do just about everything that could be done around a place, Reyna delivered Shiner, Grand Prize and Blatz beer in Kite Fossati's Model-A truck to other customers around town, worked in the kitchen making the deli's famous Dutch lunches, and the even more famous oyster loaves, says he fixed many a one of those.

He recalls the oyster loaves sold for \$2 at the time, but oysters cost only about 18 cents a pint, redfish could be had for 16 or 17 cents, says he used to go with Fossati to the Smith fishhouse in Port Lavaca in the Model-A to get the fish fresh from the bay, oyster stew was also a favorite at Fossati's.

Fossati's was a favorite hangout for farmers and ranchmen when in town, and during cotton picking time it really got hectic, Reyna says they used to cook 75 pounds each of chili and stew on Saturdays, the pickers would come in with pots and pans to be filled, and they also bought their share of suds, beer wasn't sold in grocery stores.

Reyna was so busy cooking the fajitas that I didn't get to talk to him much until it was all over, then we sat down on a bale of hay for awhile. He had been cooking with the family, including his wife, Mary, and sons, Joseph and Mike, and their wives, Chiqui and Connie, and a daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Ramos of Houston. They were in the booth with the parrot, belongs to Joseph and Chiqui, named Chito, didn't say much while I was there, but understand he's learning, started out by barking like

the family dog. They got a record to learn by, but he doesn't care much about talking to it, more fun to communicate with people. Doesn't care for birdseed either, but knows a good fajita when he sees it.

Don't know how many fajitas Joe cooked, but every time I looked his way it seemed he was behind the grill, must have felt at times like he was back in the kitchen at Fossati's.

The old delicatessen was known far and wide in its day for good service, a friendly atmosphere and food one couldn't find hardly anywhere else, like the oyster loaves, hear there are plans for it to reopen, will be looking forward to the day.

It was known for many years as the place where change was given in silver dollars, Reyna can remember going to the bank to pick up as much as \$600 in silver dollars at a time, if a customer bought a penny box of matches with a \$20 bill he'd get 99 cents in change and 19 silvers.

Reyna also recalls some of the beer drinking contests that went on there, how "old man Swanson" once won a mule and rode it home, and how Frank Bena downed 69 of Fossati's 12-ounce schooners at one sitting.

"And he was a small man," he recalls. "Best beer drinker around."

He says Bena came back the following week and downed a gallon schooner in four and a half minutes.

"Seen others try it," he says, "but none of the others could ever do it."

Another customer he particularly remembers is the preacher from Mission Valley who used to come in and pick up five pounds of Limburger cheese at a time, after Fossati had aged it well beneath the building in a five-gallon lard can, got it out of Germany, 100 to 200 pounds at a time.

In all the time he worked there, up until 1941, Reyna says Fossati never had a woman working in the place, and he says there never was any real trouble in the bar, when a customer got a little out of line Fossati would simply bang his salami knife on the counter for attention.

Got it.