



MICKEY'S DINING CAR

MICKEY'S

NER

NOW PLAYING

NOW PLAYING

July 16, 2006--

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- When a cold wind blows over the prairie, there is a place where hearts are warm and comforts are cozy. The port is Mickey's Diner. The diner has been a St. Paul icon since 1939 when it arrived like a friendly hobo on a railcar from New Jersey.

Mickey's is featured in the hit film "A Prairie Home Companion," based on the radio show taped one block east of the diner and one block north at the Fitzgerald Theater, 10 E. Exchange St.

Mickey's, West Seventh and St. Peter, has been unique since the day it was born.

The prefabricated porcelain diner with plate glass windows was built to look like an old railroad car by the Jerry O'Mahony Co., but in truth Mickey's was one of the first Art Deco diners. Previous diners had been white, where Mickey's has a bright red and cream streamline design. The menu still has 1960s type items like Mickey's Sputnik (double-decker hamburger on a sesame bun with shredded lettuce, dressing and melted cheese) and Mulligan Stew, made from scratch with carrots, beef, celery, onions, tomatoes and grilled Texas Toast on the side. The diner's Seeburg Wall-O-Matic jukeboxes no longer work, but if they did you would be hearing Perry Como's 1958 smash "Magic Moments."

Movie-related tourism is a growing business and Mickey's is no exception. The 24-hour diner has been busy this summer. Mickey's also has been featured in Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Jingle All The Way" and "The Mighty Ducks" trilogy. Mickey's was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and at the time was one of only two diners to receive such designation.

Mickey's owner-operator Melissa Mattson conducted a 1999 survey that revealed nearly 5 percent of her customers were attracted by the Hollywood connection. Mattson is the granddaughter of Swedish immigrant John "Bert" Mattson, who co-founded the operation with David "Mickey" Crimmins.

" 'Prairie Home Companion' has really made a difference for us," Mattson said during a recent Saturday afternoon conversation at Mickey's. She now operates the diner with her brother Bert. "My grandfather and Mickey were business partners," said Mattson, 39. "They went to the national restaurant convention in Chicago. The O'Mahony company had a booth promoting diners and all the stats on how to deliver them." She nodded to an empty space and said, "This diner was delivered with a cigarette machine and they even broke down how much you could make based on how many cigarettes you sold in a month." A June 1922 monthly statement from one of the O'Mahony standard cars promised a \$69.52 gross profit on tobacco. Those were different times. Mickey's is now a non-smoking diner as are all bars and restaurants in St. Paul. But Mickey's still has a public telephone, which is good news for cell-free people like myself.

O'Mahony was based in Elizabeth, N.J. -- the boyhood home of crime writer Mickey Spillane. O'Mahony also manufactured the since-demolished Equinox Diner, which was part of the popular Aspen Motel in Manchester, Vt., and the stainless steel Yakkitty-Yak Diner in North Apollo, Pa.

"Mickey's is one of the few diners still standing in the state of Minnesota," said Daniel Zilka, acting director of the American Diner Museum in Providence, R.I. "That's part of its importance."

Mattson and her brother often find it difficult to find the parts to keep the diner chugging. The diner is open 365 days a year. "This was built to be efficient," she explained. "The grill. The deep fryer, everything has to be a certain specification. You don't have the room to change anything. My father has an attachment to all of the older cash registers." Mattson pointed out a clunky, remedial cash register affixed with a black Johnny Cash bumper sticker and said, "That doesn't go back to 1939, but it goes back to 1960. There was one man in town who knew how to operate them and he recently

passed away. So we're on our own. You encounter things like that when there are things you want to keep traditional."

I stayed in a hotel a few blocks away from Mickey's. Late on a Friday night I walked over to Mickey's to take a three-scooped, hand-dipped raspberry shake back to my digs and write a bit before going to bed. But I learned that Mickey's has a no-carry out policy. "We try to get everybody in and out as quickly as possible," Mattson explained. "When the diner fills up, carry out people have to wait so long. We were never designed for that."

"A Prairie Home Companion" director Robert Altman filmed his scenes at the diner last July. "We put some food out and you'll notice in the film there's some extras at the end of the counter," she said. "But we served them mostly coffee. Garrison Keillor and Robert Altman came in a couple times beforehand for breakfast. "Prairie Home" actors Lily Tomlin, Meryl Streep and Woody Harrelson all came in. When they were filming at Fitzgerald's, the cast and crew were coming in pretty regularly." The diner's peak times are Friday and Saturday nights and Saturday and Sunday mornings. Like all great diners, Mickey's is known for its kick ass coffee, roasted in St. Paul and ground on the premises. The diner also serves bean soup with liberal doses of diced ham hock from a Navy recipe that Bert Mattson brought back from World War II.

Mattson grew up in the diner. She began working at Mickey's at age 15 behind a cook named Rose, who was hired by her grandfather. "I'd work behind her because they needed somebody really small," she said with a laugh. Mickey's only has four booths. Most regulars sit at the 17 swivel stools along the diner counter. The entire diner holds 36 people.

Mattson looked out the diner window as dark clouds formed in the western skies. "The diner has pretty much stayed the same since I was 15, but everything around us has changed. We used to have the 24-hour Greyhound bus depot across the street and now we have the Children's Museum," she said. "As was the case with most cities during the '70s there was an urban decline and everyone was moving to the suburbs. So clientele has changed a lot."

Ironically, the premise of the "Prairie Home Companion" film is that the performers have gathered at the Fitzgerald for the last time as the theater is being torn down to make way for a parking lot.

Besides the "Prairie Home" companions, other famous diners at Mickey's include Cubs fan Bill Murray, co-owner of the St. Paul Saints baseball team; Roseanne Barr, and Liv Tyler. "About 10 years ago, Julio Iglesias got down on his knee and serenaded 'To All the Girls I've Loved Before' to one of our waitresses," Mattson said. "Then my mom got tickets for her and her friends to go to his concert."

But to really get the scoop, you have to bug Paul Jirasek. He can be found in his regular spot at the far east end of the counter. Jirasek has been coming to Mickey's for 22 years. He likes his spot because he can look out on the street to see what is going on. "I moved to St. Paul in 1984," he said over a cup of coffee. I wondered where he moved from. He answered, "Across the river in Minneapolis."

Oh.

Jirasek is retired after teaching 20th century British and American literature at the University of Minnesota. He looked like a retired Prince Valiant in brown saddle shoes. Jirasek dines at Mickey's four or five times a week. He probably lives alone but you don't ask those questions in a small diner.

"It's all good," said Jirasek, who does reside three blocks from the diner. "What I generally order is a quarter-pound bacon cheeseburger and the breakfasts are outstanding. Mickey's has a huge following. This is a very traditional place."

It has begun to rain outside of Jirasek's favorite window, but there is calm over his coffee. He can

count on that. That's why people keep coming back to Mickey's Diner.