



Post Card, 1950s

Lamplighter Beefhouse, Exterior view.

Adrienne Veach Fallon

On her family's Lamplighter Restaurant

A Narrative excerpted from an Oral History Interview
With Virginia Lillis Smith, January, 2019

VIRGINIA LILLIS SMITH

The Lamplighter Restaurant was a Greek family restaurant in Arlington for 27 years. It started as the Virginia Square Delicatessen, a small family diner in Virginia Square Shopping Center. My mother, Stella Skiados Veach, was manager of L. Frank Company, a women's clothing store in the same shopping center. She used to go to the deli to have lunch. Having come from a Greek restaurant family, Mom decided that she and her sister Renie could certainly run that place better. And they got my uncle, Louie Alexis, involved. It became the Lamplighter in 1960, at 3501 Fairfax Drive. They added a taproom, a small bar area with booths, and then they opened up a formal dining room with tables and a large fireplace. Eventually they remodeled the downstairs and made it into banquet rooms so they could do weddings and meetings, especially for the Lions Club, Rotary Club and Kiwanis, with a buffet meal service. There was a small kitchen down there and a food elevator.

My mother was the behind the scenes person. She did the books, payroll. She deposited the cash proceeds daily. In the early days she typed the menu, more of the operational things. My aunt and uncle were the faces there in the evenings.

Mom also took with her from L. Frank's her best salesperson, Jean Gibson, later Epperson. Jean became a waitress and because her skill set was so high my mother gave her many more managerial duties. Jean eventually did the ordering for all the food, opened in the morning, worked the full lunch shift and left in the late afternoon. She was there six days a week. Dorothy was the cook. She was there almost the whole time the restaurant was. She was excellent cook and she became part of the family. My aunt adored her. She adored the family. Dorothy's daughter named her child after my Aunt Renie.

Once we got the liquor license in late '67, Jimmy Frangoulis was the bartender and his wife Lucy came along as a waitress. He became a manager of sorts. He worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. He worked lunch to

This interview was done as part of an ongoing Oral History program at the Center for Local History. Transcripts and audio recordings are housed at CLH, Arlington Public Library.



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Lamplighter Beefhouse, Interior view.

dinner every day. He did all the ordering for the liquor and the beer. He was the reason that the family eventually was able to take a vacation after the business was 14 years old.

We used to see different suppliers at the back door: in the mornings: every day, Moe Drury with Murray's Meats; the guy from Schlenk's brought canned goods and frozen pies and samples of new products; the produce guy; a seafood delivery; the beer distributor; Adams Burch for paper supplies.

We would place a liquor order and then go pick that up. Jimmy would have to take an inventory of what he'd used the week before and what he'd purchased the week before. How much did you use? Was there a holiday coming? There was a lot more skill involved back then. It was certainly not the way it is now when they are able to calculate how many shots they get out of each bottle. We were freehand pouring.

I think that Mom, Aunt Renie and Uncle Louis tried hard to put some Greek items on the menu, but the Greekness was more about the way they did their business. They welcomed everybody, and I think that's why it became such a popular place. You could expect to be greeted by Renie and Louie every night.

Louis' Greek cousins were helped to get started in this country. George Alexis and his wife Froso, and their three kids all came over. All of them worked

in the kitchen at the Lamplighter. They were either cooking or bussing table or washing dishes, everyone had a job. Jimmy taught them to tend bar. Eventually, they all went on to own their own restaurants.

The Lamplighter helped a lot of folks. If the neighbor's son needed a job, Renie could get him a job, either bussing tables or washing dishes. Another story of their kindness was Miss Taylor. She was a regular who was no longer able to go out. Jimmy would take her food every day and visit her. Jean, the waitress, had a customer, Miss Hattie. Back in the day, there was a Clarendon Trust Bank [at the southwest corner Washington Boulevard at Lincoln Street]. And Miss Hattie would go every day and take \$5 out of her account and walk to the Lamplighter for lunch. She had a picture of Perry Como and she would sit it across the table from her, and she would order lunch for herself and Perry Como. Jean would bring out lunch: half for Miss Hattie, half for Perry. Miss Hattie would have lunch with Mr. Como every day, and every day she would tell Jean, "Perry is not very hungry today." Jean would then package the food to go.

Uncle Louis wanted an outdoor café as in his Greek heritage. While the District of Columbia was debating the issue, Arlington allowed the Lamplighter to open an outdoor cafe in 1961, the first in the area.

The format of the Virginia Square Shopping Center was a squared U. One side were the Fairfax Drive stores; then the stores facing Kann's, then around the corner was Giant.

There were good stores in that shopping center. On Fairfax Drive, alongside the Lamplighter was a laundromat Virginia Square Laundromat; Bill Barr Appliance Repair, a lamp and vacuum repair place that was always busy; a plumbing supply store; and a printer. On the side facing Kann's was Peoples Drug Store with a soda fountain and booths that we used to sit at and thought it was the coolest thing ever. I used to love Peoples. There was Herbert's, a children's clothing store, and Tanzman Shoe store, and Mary Baynes Gift Shop. You don't find stores like that now. It carried sort of high-end. You could buy beautiful Waterford in there. You could get small things that people probably don't put in their house anymore, a lot of beautiful gifts, wedding- gift quality. She had a well-trained staff.. They were very much salespeople.

You'd get the kind of help that you needed to get what you needed. Along the same side of the shopping center was a very large Woolworth Co., a 5 and 10 cent store, and a furniture store with toys, Kiddie's World Mattress Center. It was kind of an odd little mixture. They sold beds and furniture. I remember this only because my mother bought my bedroom furniture from there. Next to that was L. Frank. Then a hair salon, maybe called Virginia Square Beauty Salon. Then around the corner (facing north) was the Giant (Food Store) And Top Value Stamps, a redemption store. Remember we'd put the stickers in those little

books and then we'd pour through the catalogs to see what free stuff we'd get.

Across a parking lot that was lined with fuchsia crepe myrtles was S. Kann's and Sons Department Store. Kann's was an old-school department store, lots of customer service. They had animals. You could purchase an animal there, like you could in a pet store. They also had an entire wall of monkeys that you couldn't purchase. They were just for show. They were upstairs near the children's shoes and women's hats, and I just thought that it was the oddest thing. You could just stand there and watch them. They were behind a glass case, and they'd just swing. The store had a candy counter which I thought was fabulous.

Metro construction was tough on business. I remember the calendar to countdown with the big X at the end. I remember for probably a year and a half the only access to the front of the restaurant was a gangplank because Metro construction had torn up all the streets around there. There was no parking in front. I remember the huge party when the Metro was finished. But I also remember it being kind of a tough time, financially. I think there was a lot of stress. "Are we going to be able to stay open?"

"Will people keep coming?" I think the fact that it was a neighborhood restaurant that a lot of people could walk to was what sustained it.

After 27 years in business, seven years after Metro construction was completed the Lamplighter Restaurant closed on New Year's Eve, 1987. The



Lionel Freedman Archives, D.C. Public Library

Kann's Department Store, 1953.

shopping center's landlord accepted the offer for the property to be completely redeveloped for a new tenant, Federal Deposit Insurance Company, FDIC.

About the Author

Virginia Lillis Smith conducts oral history interviews about Arlington businesses for the Center for Local History, Arlington Public Library. She is a retired art dealer and a lifelong Arlington resident.
