The Black Angus
Oakland, Pittsburgh, Pa.

The Black Angus, an Oakland eatery that closed up for good in the late 1980s, beckoned guests with a cozy promise that if they stuck around long enough, they just might see or hear something memorable. Liberace came through once, as did the singers Paul Simon and Janis Ian. Dancer Paul Draper was a steady customer. Baseball greats Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell stopped in, while Johnny Majors entertained Pitt’s blue-chip football recruits. Many an attending physician leaned back into its chairs to enjoy a meal with a drink after a long shift on Cardiac Hill.

“I think that’s what made the Black Angus so great—it was the variety of the people that were there,” says Harry Hanna, 68, a former owner who worked the night

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The original Black Angus before its 1975 remodeling. Note the array of celebrity photographs posted above the booths. All courtesy Frances Hanna.

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Aside from food, what the Black Angus most offered was the air of a place where the owners were on a first-name basis with customers. The familial atmosphere was enhanced by the fact that so many of the people who worked there were, well, family. "Every son of a Greek restaurant owner is put to work almost from the time they can walk," says Harry, who started working for his dad around age 9. When the Black Angus opened, Harry was in his late teens, and worked weekends as a busboy. (He later met his future wife Rose at the restaurant; she was the night shift manager.)

Atmosphere and a touch of elegance made the Black Angus a great place to take a date. "We've met a lot people who told us they met their future spouse at the Angus," Frances Hanna says. "You had to have a very special date to take them there."

More than a few celebrities whiled away their evenings at the restaurant, owing to its location. A few blocks from Forbes Field, it was a hangout for some Pittsburgh Pirates. Actor Hal Holbrook paid a visit after a performance at the Syria Mosque, as did Montoya, the Spanish guitarist. "I think John made him put his guitar aside," says Frances. Hubert Humphrey was in town sometime in the late ’60s or early ’70s, Harry remembers, making a speech at one of the universities. "He came around 2 o'clock one morning, and we had been closed a while, and a group of us were playing poker. He had a state police escort, and they knocked on the door." After the kitchen crew whipped up a steak sandwich for the visitor, the U.S. Senator asked if he could sit in on a few hands of poker. "That was Hubert Humphrey. He ate his sandwich, played a couple of hands, and left."

In the 1980s the place was known as J. Hanna's. (John was the sole owner by then.) But rent and taxes were up as the neighborhood changed around them. Gone were the family-owned hardware stores and bakeries of mid-century Oakland. In came the fast food restaurants. "We couldn't compete," says Frances. Harry, who had by then moved out of the area, agreed the restaurant's time had come. "There's just a window of time when anything can be on top, and I had a feeling the Black Angus' time was closing."

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1 Interviews between the author and Frances Hanna between July 2, 2008 and August 5, 2008; interview with Harry Hanna August 11, 2008.