



## KEYSTONE CUISINE

By Reid R. Frazier

### 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



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



Above: The Black Angus menu featured Chopped Chicken Livers (50 cents), Roast Vermont Tom Turkey (\$2.50), Postum (15 cents), Baklava Pastry (30 cents), and a Pink Lady cocktail (75 cents).

Left: A postcard view of the Black Angus after its renovation. "The very best in Steaks, Oriental Shish Kebab and Seafood—and we do mean the very best!"





Senator Hubert Humphrey stopped in to the Black Angus for a steak sandwich and a hand of poker.

shift at the “B.A.” for a decade. “I used to say, we’ve got bank robbers and bank presidents in our restaurant, and the average Joe.”<sup>1</sup>

You might say that Harry was born into the business. His father Sam, a Greek immigrant who came to the U.S. when he was 13, opened the restaurant in 1958 with two cousins, Gus and John. The three Greek cousins started a steakhouse with what Harry remembers as “a Mediterranean” love of “food, companionship, good times.”

The décor underwent several renovations over the years, to varied results. One reviewer in the late 1970s thought the “subdued orange and gold color scheme” created “a relaxed mood.” *The Pittsburgh Press* in 1987 described its interior as “a mixed ’30s look” at around the same time the *Pittsburgh Business Journal* wrote the place resembled “an aging disco.”<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the menu evolved from strict steakhouse to include more seafood and later Greek and Italian fare. By the 1980s, there was even a “Waist Watchers” salad (red cabbage, cucumbers, pepperoncini, and roasted turkey strips). “They had excellent Turkey Devonshire,” remembers Frances Hanna, 73, Harry’s mother and widow of John, who took the business over as sole proprietor in 1977. John instituted “Greek Night,” with such traditional items as baklava, *stifado* (ragout of beef), *arnaki* (lamb), and fish *plaki*. (And bellydancers, even.)

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.” ☀

**Reid R. Frazier** is a freelance writer and radio producer. He is a graduate of Hampshire College and holds a master’s degree in history from the University of Vermont. He writes about science, medicine, environment, and culture. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife and two daughters.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews between the author and Frances Hanna between July 1, 2008 and August 5, 2008; interview with Harry Hanna August 11, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Pittsburgh Press* article, 1987; *Pittsburgh Business Journal*, 1983.