

SNG-Father's Day at Denny's Restaurant-7-2-18

Father's Day at Denny's Restaurant

By Jim Nowlan

I was motoring down Illinois one recent Sunday and decided to stop at a Denny's for an early lunch. You know Denny's, the chain that "slings lots of hash," good hash[, big plates heaping with eggs, French toast, pancakes, bacon, and tall milkshakes in cream, pink and lime green hues, all topped with curly-cue mounds of whipped cream].

The joint was jumpin', it being Father's Day. All the tables were jammed with Dads, Moms and loud little kids. The cashier tried to comfort the impatient, yet polite families waiting for a table. 'Won't be long now.'

Alone, I motioned to the empty, eight-stool counter. "Sure," the harried cashier nodded. I plopped down right in front of the open kitchen, separated from the four waitresses by a high warming ledge. Heavy plates came sliding precariously from the grill toward the young ladies, waiting with their four-foot wide, I swear, brown trays, each holding enough to feed the Royal Air Force.

A trio operated behind the warming ledge: On the left wing of the kitchen was an older black lady of weathered, inscrutable age. She didn't move slowly, but rather deliberately—every motion expended had a purpose!

On the other wing was a 30-ish fry cook, who stoically went about his business. Dark of complexion, wearing a tight-fitting, flat-topped, black cap, similar to those I recall Chinese coolies wearing in old Westerns.

The guy kept a flurry of eggs, cakes and bacon coming. The fellow never uttered a word; he communicated with his eyes.

Behind the warming ledge, eyes darted up to the dozen or more computer-generated order slips, hanging precariously.

I saw precious few mistakes in all this (toast too done; forgot the bacon), and they were remedied without a nasty word. Indeed, nary a sharp word was uttered by the manager or any of the team throughout my stay at the counter.

In the center was the director, if you will, of this symphony, a trim, middle-age man. Like the younger fry cook, of black hair and dark complexion. He kept his eyes on the order slips, grunting short orders to his fellow fry cooks. This guy was good, and his team appreciated him.

Between me and the warming ledge lay the main pathway for the four waitresses. In their 20s-30s, I would guess, they were of varied shapes and sizes. The one African-American waitress had an angelic smile[, which she bestowed upon me from time to time, since I was almost in their faces at the counter].

The waitresses jostled for position at the warming ledge, bantering a bit among themselves, as they reached high to pick up their loaded plates.

Moving fast, they briefly scanned their orders before hoisting their improbably big trays onto one flat palm, balancing all, somehow, as they rushed to their waiting diners.

And, of course, the dishwasher. A short, wiry, maybe slightly disabled fellow, right out of central casting. His big smile never faded, even as the orders came flying from all directions. “We need plates!” “Get more ice.”

The “symphony director” didn’t have much directing to do. Everyone knew her job, and did it, efficiently. It was, to use a fitting cliché, poetry in motion.

Why do I write about this? I was much impressed with how well this team operated, of how much satisfaction they gave to the diners, getting them their hearty food as quickly as humanly possible, under difficult, hectic circumstances.

I have no idea what the respective members of the team earn; bet it isn’t much. [And I am guessing one or more of the waitresses may be single mothers, working this and maybe another job, to try to provide for their youngsters.]

They all deserve more, I think. Yet the restaurant can’t afford to be too generous; if it is, they have to raise prices in a brutal, intensely competitive business. [And a look around the restaurant gave me a sense that even these moderately priced meals may have been a stretch for some diners. But Hey, it was Father’s Day.]

After World War II (what a great time for a white, small-town boy like me to grow up), American manufacturers could pay middle-class wages to guys on the assembly lines, as Germany, Japan and much of the world lay prostrate. No more; that time was unique.

Government probably has to do it today. Increased Earned Income Tax Credits. Medicare for all (why is it just for us oldsters?). Work-based education and training tuition credits.

From all I read in the Wall Street Journal and the Economist, the rich are getting richer faster than ever. Maybe they can share more, so the gang at Denny’s can buy some of what the creative class has to market.

I fear some of my well-off friends look down their noses at these “unskilled” workers. But I’ll bet those same friends couldn’t come close to bringing off a similar, successful Father’s Day at Denny’s Restaurant.