

Memories of the San Jacinto Inn

by Katy Oliveira

Nationally famous for its seafood and chicken dinners, the San Jacinto Inn served not only as a restaurant for its patrons, but also as a dining experience. Jack and Bertha Sanders established the restaurant in 1916 near the Lynchburg Ferry on the Houston Ship Channel. Originally a small lunch counter, the menu included fresh seafood caught by the Sanders served with freshly baked biscuits and homemade preserves. In 1917, the growing restaurant moved to its location in an old dance hall opposite the present location of the Battleship *Texas* near the San Jacinto Battleground State Park.¹

Soon the popularity of the San Jacinto Inn grew, and dining there became a tradition for many Houstonians and their families. The dining room featured an all-you-can-eat menu, consisting of primarily seafood and chicken. In winter the menu included celery, shrimp cocktail, oysters on the half shell, fried oysters, fried tenderloin of fish, fried chicken, French fried potatoes, hot biscuits served with strawberry or black cherry preserves, and dessert. The summer menu mirrored its winter counterpart in many ways, but featured iced crab and stuffed crab rather than the oyster

dishes. In the 1930s and 1940s, patrons not only enjoyed the hefty meal, but also a dance orchestra. During World War II, this live entertainment gave way to a need for more tables to accommodate the restaurant's growing clientele. In later years, the restaurant seated nearly seven hundred guests and it boasted serving 85,000 pounds of fish, 55,000 chickens, 200,000 pounds of shrimp, 1,700,000 oysters, 50,000 crabs, and 500,000 hot biscuits in an average year.²

The restaurant's reputation for serving large quantities of food was not limited to its dining room. During the construction of the San Jacinto Monument, the San Jacinto Inn served laborers coffee and sandwiches every four hours during the fifty-seven hour pour of the monument's foundation. Monument construction workers consumed nearly 3,800 sandwiches and a total of 5,700 cups of coffee provided by the San Jacinto Inn.³

Many Houstonians warmly recall eating at the restaurant, often citing the all-you-can-eat menu. Houstonian, Jesse H. Jones, II, son of John T. Jones Jr. of the Battleground Corp., joked that his father acquired the restaurant so he could enjoy its wonderful food while doing business. Jones spoke

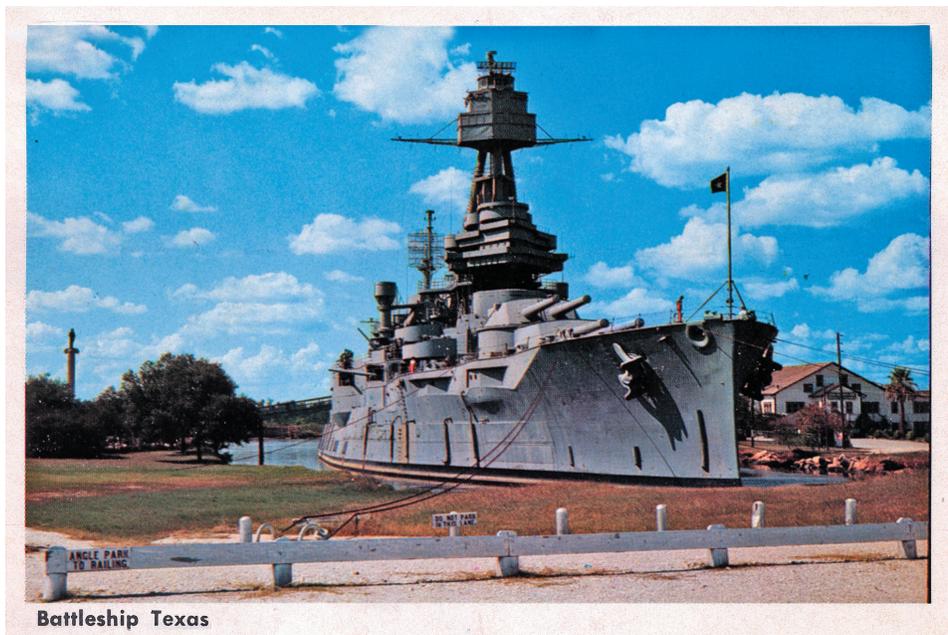


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Postcard of San Jacinto Inn. Courtesy Barbara Eaves

San Jacinto Inn dining room. Courtesy San Jacinto Museum of History



Battleship Texas

Postcard of Battleship Texas with the San Jacinto Inn in the background, ca. 1950.
 Courtesy William H. Kellar

fondly of driving down as a family all through grade school and even during college to enjoy the Inn's wonderful oysters in winter and crab in summer. He recalled having to contend with "San Jacinto Inn Syndrome," or the great thirst and inability to remove one's rings experienced after eating the enormous amount of seafood served at the Inn. According to Jones, the only cure for the great thirst experienced in the middle of the night after a meal at the Inn was a really cold Coca-cola, but it had to be real Coca-cola, diet soda did not do the trick. Often, Houstonians rave about the Inn's delicious homemade biscuits and bowls of preserves when sharing their memories of the restaurant. Many patrons speculated about a special biscuit recipe, but Jones believes that the biscuit recipe actually came from the back of a Gold Medal Flour bag.⁴

Thomas D. Anderson, a long time Houston attorney whose father, Frank E. Anderson and uncle Monroe D. Anderson were founders of Anderson Clayton and Company, recollected:

The San Jacinto Inn was the best seafood restaurant I ever attended. The meal started with shrimp cocktail, then boiled crabs that you had to crack open, and then fried chicken, biscuits and gravy. When I was a young attorney, Frank Andrews, founder of Andrews-Kurth

law firm, chartered a yacht and took us to the San Jacinto Inn for a special occasion. They had a grotto on the first level for private parties. Unfortunately, the land was sinking and at high tide the parking lot often was under water. I guess that spelled the end of it, but it was a wonderful restaurant in its day.⁵

Natural calamity seemed to plague the San Jacinto Inn. The restaurant's original building was destroyed by fire in 1926. A replacement building was quickly constructed and survived several hurricanes until 1977, when sinking land beneath the structure required its demolition. A new building was constructed one hundred yards away; the new structure was such an accurate reproduction that many patrons were unaware that the structure was a replacement and often suggested that the building had simply been refurbished.⁶

Like the buildings it was housed in, the ownership of the San Jacinto Inn also changed hands several times. Upon her divorce from her husband Jack, original owner Bertha Sanders acquired sole control of the restaurant sometime during the 1930s. She ran the restaurant until her death. The Inn remained in the family until Bertha Sanders' niece, Gladys Poe, sold it to the Battleground Corp. in 1967. The Battleground Corp. managed the

San Jacinto Inn in the same style as its previous owners until it closed its doors on Sunday, February 15, 1987.⁷

The decision to cease operation of the restaurant came just two weeks before its doors finally closed. Longtime manager, J. Frank Bobo attributed the decision to declining revenue. According to Bobo, in its last two years of operation the restaurant did about a third of its traditional business. Bobo cited the poor economy, the restaurant's long distance from the city, changing eating habits, and the growing number of restaurant's on Houston's west side as the most likely factors in the decline in business. Bobo said, "People are more diet conscious, eating lighter foods than in the old days." The following year John T. Jones Jr., one of the firm's owners, sold the San Jacinto Inn property to The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission acquired the property to provide additional access and working space for the restoration of the Battleship *Texas*.⁸

The late 1980s was difficult for many of Houston's old-line restaurants. Family-style meals served in enormous all-you-can-eat portions, like those served at the San Jacinto Inn, began to fall out of style in the 1970s and 1980s as eating out became a convenience rather than a luxury. In the same year that the San Jacinto Inn closed its doors, similar restaurants like Herberts and Phil's also succumbed to changing eating habits and a declining economy. While other establishments, such as Angelo's Fisherman's Wharf, Kaphan's, and Vargo's survived by adapting their menus and dining formats. Surviving restaurants opted for a la carte entrees and specialized menus with prices ranging under \$10, rather than all-you-can-eat fare. Today the Monument Inn, which is located just down the road from the San Jacinto Inn site, features a "San Jacinto Inn All-You-Can-Eat Special." It seems that over time the very novelty which brought the San Jacinto Inn great success contributed to its end, but the famed restaurant lives on in the memory of its patrons and successors.⁹ ✦