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"Brotherly Love"
Lawrence brother
more laughs the
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Last call at Ric's



A final toast to the
watering hole Ric Riccardo
left Chicago

By Rick Kogan
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Nobody gets drunk anymore," said the man. "That's the problem. That's why we are experiencing this profound, terrible tragedy."

This was one night a few weeks ago and the gray-haired man was caressing an unprepossessing building on the northeast corner of Rush and Hubbard Streets. He continued to talk, oblivious to the small crowd around him: "Good-bye, darling. I will miss you. You've been better to me than most of the women I have known."

The man then finished his declaration by planting a long, sloppy kiss on the building. Few of those who witnessed this thought it in any way odd. Each of them had, in less romantic ways, bid goodbye that night to the building.

"Thanks for all the good times and long nights," said a female public relations executive.

"Thanks for the hangovers," said a male newspaper reporter.

The building is, or was, commonly known as Riccardo's, or

Ric's, but its actual name was the Riccardo Restaurant and Gallery.

"It was a special place," said Jill Riccardo Allen. "A rare place."

She first set foot there in 1940.

"Where do I sit?" she demanded.

"On the floor!" said Ric Riccardo, who opened the joint in 1934.

From such a tart exchange a marriage and a daughter, Russia, were born. Unlike the rest of the crowd that showed up for Ric's closing night, wallowing in shared or collective memories, Allen had unique recollections.

There were 64 people—waiters and waitresses, cooks and bartenders—working for Ric when she met him. All were in attendance when Jill and Ric married. She is the only one who is still alive.

"I remember..." Allen said more than a few times, as she sat in a booth and observed the gathered mob.

"I remember..." she would say and what would follow was some lively, evocative tale, of games played on the bocce court that was once in the basement; of lion steaks served for selected friends upon Ric's

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**Ric's was in its
time—mid-1930s
to the late 1980s
—a remarkable
gathering place.**



In a 1947 expansion, Ric Riccardo (left), created a bar in the shape of an artist's palette. Above it were murals representing the lively



The Riccardo Restaurant and Gallery featured work by local artists in the original dining room (left). The side-walk cafe (above) provided a prime networking spot for many who called themselves journalists, artists, advertising and public relations experts and bon vivants.

Of all the joints
in town, journalists
called Ric's theirs

In the '30s and '40s, Ric's attracted singers, artists and such movie stars as Basil Rathbone, David Niven, Don Ameche, Tallulah Bankhead and, to hear the old waiters tell it, an always smashed John Barrymore.

Architect Harry Weese was a regular, as were Studs Terkel, bookseller Stuart Brent and the Rev. Preston Bradley.

But sitting conveniently a couple of blocks from two (once four) daily newspapers, Ric's was really a



At Ric's you could find Roger Ebert (left), John Fischetti and Studs Terkel.

journalists' joint and on any given day one could encounter Pulitzer Prize-winners Mike Royko, Bill Mauldin or Roger Ebert; on any day, you would find more ordinary scribes, myself included.

The room did not boast anything as preciously pretentious as New

York's Algonquin Hotel's round table. It had it better (and wittier): the regular luncheon booth of Chicago Daily News editorial cartoonist John Fischetti, who was usually joined by equally interesting and lively storytellers.

Rick Kogan

called The Faded Cell, and in Ric's three great Dances who wandered freely about the restaurant throughout the 1940s.

"I remember ... I miss ..." said the lovely Allen, who divorced Riccardo in 1949, but remained a frequent visitor to the restaurant. "... those dears [longtime waiters], Charlie and Bobby. But who are all these people? I do not know these faces."

They were the ruddy faces of reporters and editors. The faces of advertising and public relations men and women. The faces of some of the once young and angry reporters who founded the Chicago Journalism Review at Ric's in the wake of the 1968 Democratic convention. The faces of elderly blacks who continued to frequent Ric's because it was once the only downtown restaurant to serve blacks without hassle.

These lastnighters had come to pay respects, perhaps to get a youthful buzz, to recall an affair, to recapture something they didn't realize they had been missing or merely to be part of a scene.

"Is Studs [Terkel] here?" asked one young man. "I want to meet Studs. He's my hero. ... Is Royko here?"

Studs was not there. Mike didn't show. Neither did many of those who were once such regulars that they would qualify as loyalists.

Montmartre of Midwest

Some are dead and others, taken with the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous, shy away from places that remind them of once wayward ways. There were few youngsters about. They never developed a taste for the three-ounce drinks Ric's served.

"It's like a reunion of reprobrates," said one fiftysomething reporter. "I haven't been this smashed since 1967. I feel great."

There is a tendency to romanticize the past and its landmarks. But Ric's was in its time—from the mid-1930s to about the late 1980s—a remarkable gathering place for artists, writers, journalists, opera singers and movie stars, admen, drunks, scalawags and bon vivants, real and would-be.

It was called the Montmartre of the Midwest, and its final night—Aug. 25—was wonderfully colorful and raucous, a gathering of those whose spirits might not have been as free as they once were but who remembered, as one TV producer put it, "when being carefree was not a sin."

It was an impromptu, word-of-mouth affair. There was no formal announcement. The mid-August news that the building had been purchased, for purposes that remain uncertain, by the William Wrigley Co.—owners of the famous white Wrigley Building across Hubbard Street—simply made the rounds.

Ric's is closing!

No way. When?

Friday night.

See you there?

Wouldn't miss it.

During its last week, Ric's had been uncharacteristically jammed for lunch, and on its final day owners Nick and Bill Angelos distributed photocopies of the menu, autographed by Nick.

This was a dubious memento, for it had been some time since the food had been a main attraction. The menu was decidedly old-fashioned, with its veal dishes and green noodles—spumoni and tortoni for dessert. How could this match such *au courant* competitors as Tucci Milan or Avanzare?

"The taxes, they started to kill me," said Nick one afternoon during Ric's last week. "The taxes and the other restaurants and the fact that people don't drink like they used to."

Purchasing a reputation

The Angelos brothers bought Ric's in 1974, purchasing its reputation and, in many ways, the burden of its colorful past.

This was a place—much like the Pump Room when it was overseen by Ernie Byfield—whose early success and lingering legend was the result of one person's extravagant personality. The Angelos brothers, good and fine people, were more devoted to their families than to late-night revelers.



Riccardo's as it looked on its last day. "I hate to close," said owner Nick Angelos. "But I have no choice."

They were no match for the exuberant creature named Ric Riccardo.

Born Richard Novaretti in Italy, he was a ship's mate (and painter, dancer and musician) who abandoned the sea in New Orleans in order to marry a new acquaintance named Mimi.

After a short stint as dancers at a Georgia nightclub, he and Mimi arrived in Chicago and he began to try to sell his paintings. He tried his hand at magazine publishing and at a number of "straight" jobs before opening a restaurant/speakeasy on South Oakley Avenue.

With Prohibition's end, he bought the northernmost of the three small buildings—all of them once speakeasies—and opened his restaurant. In his first sliver of space, he allowed artist friends to hang their work (for sale) on his restaurant's walls, creating an environment that pleased both painters and patrons. He painted three large female nudes and mounted two of them on the ceiling.

Soon he expanded into the next building and in 1947 boldly into the southernmost building, creating a bar in the shape of an artist's palette and placing above it on the wall seven murals representing the "Lively Arts": Ivan Albright's "Drama," Aaron Bohrad's "Architecture," Rudolph Weisenborn's "Literature," Vincent D'Agostino's "Painting," William Schwartz's "Music," Malvin "Zsissly" Albright's "Sculpture," and his own "Dance."

After Ric Sr.'s death at 51 in 1954, the restaurant was run by his son (by Mimi), the dashing Ric Jr. But the kid's heart was never in it. He lived fast, his eye and attention always on a career in theater and his libido active enough to eventually collect three ex-wives (and the crunching alimony and child support payments to go along with them). As his troubles mounted, the murals began to vanish: Albright's "Drama" mysteriously in 1973 and the next year Bohrad's "Architecture" was sold to a gallery.

They were replaced by photographic reproductions, the Angelos brothers took over and Ric Jr. himself seemed to vanish. Some of the regulars felt a terrible irony when they heard of Ric Jr.'s death in 1977: He choked on a piece of food at a restaurant in a place called Buckeye, Ariz.

Newshounds' clubhouse

During the 1970s and most of the '80s, Ric's remained a popular hangout. It was a virtual clubhouse for reporters and editors during the Daily News' final month in 1978 and was home to annual Daily News reunions ever since. Certainly there were other spots that attracted the thirsty and ink-stained. The bygone Boul Mich, Corona Cafe and Radio Grill. Andy's, just down the block, and Billy Goat Tavern, just

around the corner, continue to attract their share of journalists. But Ric's was special.

It was not just because people drank at Ric's and drank a lot. This was the sort of place in which Mickey Mantle or Jackie Gleason would have felt comfortable. It was dark in the way all good saloons are dark. It remained a moody character as flashy, themed restaurants began to take hold.

It surprised few regulars in 1989 when the sale of the building was announced. That deal fell through. Another transformation—a group leased the place in 1992 and created a short-lived upscale dining spot with private club upstairs—drove many of the old regulars away for good and replaced what were left of the "Lively Arts" murals with a large, strangely dark mural featuring a nude man, and others who resembled Nelson Aigren, Royko and Terkel. The Angelos brothers came back in 1993 but there was no salvation.

"I hate to close," said Nick. "But I have no choice. Now, if I had crowds like this every night. ..."

Many people remarked on the final night's "huge crowd," but Sun-Times reporter Zay Smith said, "Huge? Sure, just about the same size as on any Friday about 10 years ago."

Over at Billy Goat, owner Sam Sianis was in a reflective mood.

"How's it going over there?" he asked and, not waiting for an answer, said, "It makes me feel older, Ric's closing. When I first come here 30 years ago, Ric's, it was the most famous Italian restaurant in Chicago. Friday, Saturday nights, the limousines pull up one after one. It was the top place. I eat there many times. I'm sorry it has to go."

Back at Ric's, the crowd was starting to thin. Jill Riccardo Allen was among the first to leave, with her husband, Bill Allen, who owns the Gold Star Sardine Bar, and an old friend named Marilew.

A concert erupted in the middle room, a Tribune editor on clarinet. Jose, the great bartender, said, as he had on so many less momentous evenings, "Drink up. Time to leave. You people go home." Someone lifted a box of matches. There were hugs exchanged. A few tears flowed. People promised to visit waiters Nick and Andy at their new place of employment, over on Huron. The gray-haired man kissed the building, and another fellow, an artist and Ric's habitue, carefully stripped the address—the 4 and the 3 and the 7—from the building.

"Great time," said someone.

"Ric's sure knew how to throw a party," said another.

And how to ring down a curtain.