

Customers come and go, but waitress remains a constant for 40 years

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filling a soda glass to the rim with the other.

She still wasn't too weary to flirt a little with one customer, admire another's squirming kids and break into a little impromptu cha-cha in reply to a query about the tuna salad.

"You'll like it, you'll love it, you'll want some more of it," she chanted, snapping her fingers in cadence.

Sold.

"She's fabulous," confided a man in a business suit, licking a bead of pimento to cheese off the back of one hand. "Every time I come in, she knows what I want to order."

Ms. Rogers has trouble remembering names, but her databanks are wired to connect faces with food. Regular customers can ask confidently for "the usual" and get it, whether it's root beer or ham salad or a slice of toast. Experience and good nature have taught her the art of fine waitressing.

With a fluffy yellow hairdo and an inexhaustible supply of one-liners, Ms. Rogers is astonishingly reminiscent of the wisecracking diner waitress Flo ("Kiss my grits!") from the 70s sitcom *Alice*, a resemblance that is not lost on her colleagues.

"Oh, she reminds me of that character Flo," volunteered cashier Neva Ross without prompting. "She's always hoppin'."

"Here you go," Ms. Rogers said to a man in a city water department uniform, setting a frosty glass before him. "It's a Sarah-soda!" He smiled shyly, grateful for the little joke, happy to be noticed. It's Sarah-service.

Ms. Rogers' life has been far from effortless: She quit school and went to work at 12, helping her dad paint houses. She was a carhop at 13, then landed her first soda-fountain job at 14. She doesn't disclose her age ("Age is a number, and mine's not listed," she quipped with a resolute shake of the head that set her shiny turquoise earrings adangle), but doing the math from her work history puts her somewhere around 60. If so, age has treated her with remarkable generosity; she looks considerably younger.

She has no children; the husband she divorced long ago didn't want any, and he also forbade her from taking a job at a local utility company that would have offered retirement benefits that she doesn't have. A dearly loved sister died earlier this year, a loss that is still too painful for her to talk much about.

But she isn't lonely. There's country-Western dancing three or four nights a week (although she bitterly regrets the demise of the late Debonair Danceland), and there are colleagues and customers that have become her de facto family.

Even with the counter packed and a line waiting for seats, Ms. Rogers, three fellow waitresses and

a dishwasher work with the ease of people accustomed to working for many years in close proximity.

They dodge and swoop and reach in a graceful lunch-counter ballet in the narrow fountain walkway, and they know the details of each other's lives as well as their own: sick parents, new cars, vacation plans.

There's not a lot of turnover on the staff, said pharmacy owner Theil Bowlin. Ms. Rogers has been there the longest, but the other

"Oh, she reminds me of that character Flo. She's always hoppin'."

— Neva Ross, Highland Park Pharmacy cashier

soda jerks have worked there for at least 20 years. After all, you can't hire a kid off the street who knows how to make an orange phosphate,

or to mix a perfect fountain Coke, carbonated on the spot.

"If we were to do anything different, people would ride us out of town on a rail," Mr. Bowlin said. "When we get someone new, we have to teach them everything from scratch. And Sarah has a very unique personality — we couldn't replace her."

For Ms. Rogers, there's a soothing linear sameness to the fountain that offers enduring comfort. To a first-time visitor, the

Highland Park Pharmacy, with its original 1920s decor, is a compelling anachronism; to Ms. Rogers, it's blessed familiarity. If she has seen upheaval in her personal life, her professional life is largely unchanged.

"Well, those tables are new," she said, searching her memory for changes in the long room, with its crowded shelves down one side, the soda fountain down the other. "Mr. Bowlin put them in about 20 years ago. And there used to be a mirror

where that picture is now."

Mr. Bowlin still runs charge accounts for regular customers. There is still goose liver on the lunch menu, and people still order it. Messy little kids grow up and bring their own messy little kids in for ice-cream sodas, and Ms. Rogers still cheerfully mops up after them. "It's hard sometimes, but I love it," said Ms. Rogers, who has no retirement plan more specific than winning the lottery.

"What else would I do?"

COUNTER CULTURE



BFI

The Dallas Morning News: William Snyder

Sarah Rogers has a way with Highland Park Pharmacy customers, including 4-year-old Will Swinney.

By Jacquelyn Floyd
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Sarah Rogers switched jobs to save herself a boring cross-town bus ride. It made life easier, and it made lunch-counter history.

Forty years later, she's the senior soda jerk at one of the last authentic drugstore fountains anywhere, the Highland Park Pharmacy.

The customers have come and gone, the neighborhood went to seed and bounced back, and the traffic's a lot

DMN 11-15-97 1A
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makes you woozy with nostalgia, see Sarah.

"It's the only kind of work I've ever done," Ms. Rogers said nonchalantly, apparently unconcerned to be working in a line that pretty much dried up

the morning."

When Ms. Rogers was hired at the pharmacy, at the corner of Knox and Travis streets, you could order a grilled cheese sandwich with a little pile of pickles on the side and a Coke for 30 cents. That was March 10, 1957. Menu prices — still a bargain — have increased by roughly 1,000 percent.

The Sarah show is still free. "Oh, girlfriend, it has been wild today," she lamented Wednesday near the end of the lunchtime rush,