



**City of San Bernardino
Historical and Pioneer Society
P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402**

LIBRARY NEWS SEPTEMBER 2010

By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

THE SISSY CAFE

When I was growing up in the 1940s and '50s, I did not have any personal experience with the Mt. Vernon area; that is, not until 1959 when I was an attendant at the Shell gas station, and later across the street at the Texaco station, both located at Fifth Street and Mt. Vernon Avenue.

During those decades the area had the reputation of being rough, a very dangerous place where you would not want to be after sundown.

Just how dangerous was it? It was so bad the police department only accepted volunteers for duty in the neighborhood, and, like the Pony Express riders on the frontier, only young, single men who had been orphaned were accepted. On Saturday night, the toughs in the cantinas ripped the tops off their beer bottles with their teeth, ground them into little pieces, and spit them out as if they were the shells of sunflower seeds. As the night progressed the light off the switchblade knives flashed increasingly as the effects of the alcohol took place. The bar room floors became covered with blood. On Sunday morning Tillie's Funeral Parlor, which conveniently was close by, sent out hearses to cruise Mt. Vernon Avenue and the back alleys in order to pick up the dead bodies.

Yes, that was entirely tongue-in-cheek and over the top, but I was in the moment. Seriously, though, if the area's reputation were true, then how—in the midst of all this machismo—did a cafe come to be called “The Sissy”? I began my search for the answer by getting in touch with the Baeza family patriarch, Juan Baeza, who managed the restaurant from the 1960s to the 1980s (Juan was a little unclear on the exact dates). It seems the building was owned by the Bottini family, and it was they who began the business in the 1940s, perhaps about 1942. The Baezas said the Bottinis had at least three children, and the two older sisters called their younger brother “The Sissy.” They did not have any more details than that.





Sissy Café on the right. Photo probably taken in the 1970s.



A current photo of The former Sissy Café. The building recently was remodeled.

However, it still remains a mystery why someone would give a restaurant a name that is generally taken as a pejorative. The top of the Sissy Café's sign is a figure of man in an effeminate pose, so it appears the name signifies just that—a sissy, or a “girly-man,” as our governor phrased it. Perhaps one of our readers knows somebody in the Bottini family who can clear this up.

I have been unable to find a good photograph of the sign on the Sissy Café building. The San Bernardino City Economic Development Agency recently gave our Society hundreds of pictures, including the black and white photo shown on the previous page, which fortunately shows the café's sign. The camera was aimed primarily to display the building and not the sign, but I cropped the sign, enlarged it, and you can get an idea here of what it looked like.



I have been told by more than one source that the sign was taken and preserved, so maybe it can be located and a good photograph taken in order to better preserve this era of Mt. Vernon's history.

PICTURES OF SAN BERNARDINO HOTELS DONATED BY THE CITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Among the many photographs donated by the Economic Development Agency are several of the downtown area taken in 1966 and 1967. Included are some of the old hotels along Third, west of E Street, which was a “hotel row.” I had forgotten how many fleabags there were in the area. I do remember that west of the bus depot there were hotels that advertised rooms for \$1.00 per night. I was never in any of these places, but it is hard to imagine a room at that price.



The Commercial Hotel, 525 W. Third Street



**The St. Bernard Hotel, the white building at bottom left.
This photo shows the side of the hotel, located at 577 W. Third, across the street from the Sunset Hotel.**



The Sunset Hotel, 592 W. Third Street



The Clayton Hotel, 604 W. Third Street



The Avalon Hotel, 767 W. Third Street. The Hotel St. Augustine, another fleabag, is on the right.



The Maryland Hotel, 801 W. Third Street



On the left is another view of the Maryland Hotel , and on the right is the back of the St. Augustine

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