



Small Towne Short Stories
Watson's Soda Fountain & Café: Part II
By Alma Fausto

August 20, 1949

Kellar Watson Jr. sat on one of the 20 new stools lining the shiny lunch counter inside the drug store. In five days a new era would begin with the Grand Re-Opening of Watson's Super Drug Store.

It was bright outside as 42-year-old Kellar feverishly wiped down every surface in sight inside the store: Shelves, glass cases, tables and of course that lunch counter. The remodeled store was bigger, modern and would draw a whole new set of customers, Kellar hoped.

But the thought made him anxious.

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Kellar Jr. had run Watson's side by side with his father since 1928. But now it would just be him. He felt like he had to work up the courage his father must have mustered all those years ago. Dad had always been a risk taker, opening up Watson's Drug Store in 1899 when the little town of Orange was nothing more than a post office, bank, blacksmith and office where people could buy lots of land.

Family and friends had characterized Kellar Sr. as a born entrepreneur. He eventually taught his son the trade and shared his insights into the various business investments he'd made, both successful and unsuccessful.

Watson's had been one of his proudest achievements among being involved with the political and civic development of the city. Though they became his competition for a time, he was also proud to have trained some of the other successful druggists in the area who had eventually opened stores of their own.

When he finally retired he passed down the store to his son. Kellar Jr. added new products and drew in additional customers, but the young apprentice and new business owner wanted to build more, make his own mark on the world.

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Kellar Jr. took a break, maybe the first he'd taken in months of remodeling. Parchment paper covered the large front doors and windows, but the light showing through the edges had dimmed. He suddenly noticed the day was nearly gone. The bright morning sunlight had faded to dusk, signaling dinner. He realized there was nothing left to do but take one last look at his handiwork and head home.

The covered entrance and windows had hopefully created interest among passersby who might have speculated at what was behind the parchment: A new-and-improved drug store with a better selection of products, state of the art soda fountain and larger food counter with an expanded menu.

A small counter had been installed a few years prior. Kellar Jr. had served basic lunch items to accompany the sodas then, but he imagined the new counter would make Watson's a food destination, now serving breakfast, lunch and added dessert items.

Breakfast

Hot Cakes with Syrup.....	.35	
* <i>Served with ham or bacon and fried egg</i>		<i>add .65</i>
Waffle.....	.25	
Cereal with Milk.....	.30	

Lunch

Hamburger.....	.25	
* <i>Cheese</i>		<i>add .10</i>
Hot Dog.....	.25	
French Fries.....	.20	

From the Fountain

Coke.....	.10
Ice Cream Soda.....	.20
Malt Shake.....	.25
* <i>Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry</i>	
Hot Fudge Sundae.....	.25

Kellar Jr. walked around the store, which had become a labyrinth of shelves and small aisle displays filled with hundreds of bottles containing various cures or temporary reliefs for seemingly any ailment.

He mumbled to himself as if to check off items from an imaginary to-do list.

"Finish putting in shelf and drawer liners, hang the Rexall sign, hang the Vitamins lettering..."

He stopped at an empty spot on a shelf and remembered the delivery of Murray's Pomade that would arrive in the morning. Kellar Jr. had this nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something, but kept getting distracted as he surveyed the store.

"What am I forgetting?" he asked himself aloud.

He looked around for the answer. The store was cluttered with furniture that hadn't yet found a home, boxes and debris.

* * *

Earlier that year Kellar Jr. had jumped at the opportunity to expand Watson's once Alpha Beta grocery store had moved to a new building on South Glassell Street. It doubled the size of his store. But after the excitement of acquiring more space subsided, there came the dread of furnishing and filling it all.

Watson's had not been exempt from the Depression's impact, but it hadn't met the same fate as many of the other drug stores either. It had seemed to survive as a staple of The Plaza. Watson's had legacy customers who relied on Kellar Sr.'s advice for their health and pharmaceutical needs. Now they would rely on him.

Many of the new things in the remodeled store were remnants from other nearby drug stores that had closed. Kellar Jr. had watched some of them over the years succeed briefly, but then move to another part of the growing city or just go out of business altogether. He'd taken to going to bankruptcy sales and had gotten good deals on items other stores had lost: Gumball machines, aluminum signs and fixtures, and furniture.

* * *

Kellar Jr. again surveyed the shelves all around him and remembered what his father used to tell him as a child, before he'd started earning money for helping to run the store.

"Turn the bottles so the labels are pointed out," Dad would say. "That way I can find what I'm looking for right away and things stay organized."

Kellar Jr.'s initial duties had seemed menial at the time, but now the little details reminded him of the care his father had taken in everything he'd done, even into his elderly years. As young Kellar grew, so did his responsibilities.

He remembered how embarrassed he was when Dad had given him the task of cleaning the soda fountain during his first high school summer. His friends had all come to the store for sodas and he'd been stuck behind the counter cleaning.

Now Kellar Jr. really felt nostalgic. Everything had been different back then. In some ways simpler. To a degree Kellar Jr. worried about making so many changes that his father's loyal customers wouldn't come into the lunch counter at all. But Kellar Jr. knew that if Watson's was to survive, it had to move with the times.

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Tomorrow Kellar Jr. would stock more cosmetics, toys and candies; clear away the empty boxes; move the furniture around; hang signage..

"I guess I'll remember it in the morning," he muttered of the "something" he was forgetting.

Resigned, Kellar Jr. relaxed his shoulders. He looked up, adjusting his neck, and finally saw the answer to his question.

"Hang signage.. The marquee!" he said loudly, exasperated.

Above the drug counter was a long strip of empty space that ran from one wall to another. Kellar Jr. hadn't hung anything else there and remembered why. The space was reserved for the giant, light-up Watson's logo and signature red lettering, which would greet customers brightly as they walked in: "Oldest Pharmacy in Orange County" and below, "Established 1899."

A car horn honked in the distance, startling him. He heard voices and laughter outside that grew louder before lingering at the entrance to the store. Kellar Jr. opened the door and was met by a group of six young people in their early 20s from what he could tell.

One young man with sandy blonde hair walked up to Kellar Jr. and asked, "Is it closed?"

"Well, er, yes, but we're opening back up in a few days. We've made some renovations." He quickly added, "Ten cent hot fudge sundaes all day Thursday at our Grand Re-Opening—and it's our 50th anniversary," he smiled widely.

"Nifty," the young man said.

"Are you all with a group or something?" Kellar Jr. asked.

"Yeah, kind of. We graduated from Orange High in '43," the young man replied. "We were in town and thought we'd have a soda for old time's sake."

Kellar Jr. was a little disappointed he couldn't let them in. "Well, sorry about that," he said. "But we're going to have breakfast now and some new lunch and dessert items, so make sure to come back."

The young man looked at the others then at Kellar Jr. "I think we will," he said and smiled back. "We'll make it a regular thing." His friends nodded in agreement. "Well, see ya!" he said and waved.

Kellar Jr. closed the door quietly behind them and stood with his back against the parchment, his arms akimbo. He looked around one last time at his store that was finally coming together and sighed with a combination of pleasure and relief. The public was ready for Watson's Super Drug Store, he thought... It was the next wave of the future.

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Alma Fausto is a reporter at the Orange County Register where she covers crime and breaking news. When not reporting on grisly crimes, Alma spends her time reading and visiting bookstores everywhere. She is also board member of the OC Press Club. Alma has a Master's in journalism from Columbia University in New York City. Before city life, she studied and reported in California's rural Central Valley, receiving a bachelor's at UC Merced where she was editor of the student newspaper. And way before that she was born and raised in OC and now calls Costa Mesa home.

Southwest corner of East Chapman Avenue and South Orange Street, Orange, California, early 1950s. Image shows bird's-eye view with Van de Kamps's Bakery on the corner (120 East Chapman Avenue) and Watson's Rexall Drugs to the right, west of the bakery (116 East Chapman Avenue). Before the intersection on East Chapman, "NO-U-TURN" is painted on the street. A woody station wagon is parked in front of Watson's, and three other automobiles are parked along the curb, with a street lamp and mail box visible at the corner. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.