



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

**1950s:** Businesses begin moving out of Old Towne Orange and into developing areas of the city including all along Tustin Avenue.

**1960s:** The Plaza declines due to new businesses establishing elsewhere and decades old businesses remaining stagnant as Kellar Watson Jr. nears retirement.

**1966:** Kellar Watson Jr. retires and sells Watson's to Jim Bowyer and Jay Delaney.

**1971:** Scott Parker shows an interest in ownership, and runs the Watson's for several years with business partner Carole Elder. Other community members are involved in the ownership and management of the store.

**1986:** Parker becomes the sole owner of Watson's. The 1980s see a rebirth of the plaza as a haven for antique stores. As the city transitions, Watson's remains a support beam for the original city of Orange, with its shops full of genuine antiques and memorabilia.

**1995:** Watson's is used as a filming location for the Tom Hanks film, *That Thing You Do!*, which tells the story of the rise and fall of a 1960s one-hit-wonder pop band.

**2011:** The drug store that began by selling medication, tonics and remedies undergoes its third re-brand and transition. Watson's moves its prescriptions to the nearby Walgreens on Chapman Avenue and Tustin Street. Parker tells the Orange

County Register in March 2011 that it is the best financial decision he's made. In place of the pharmacy, he adds a bakery.

**2012:** Parker expands the store by buying up the neighboring empty travel agency. He adds a "Made in the USA" themed gift shop that features greeting cards, key chains and other tourist trinkets.

**2015:** After running the store for more than 40 years, Parker sells Watson's to Bill Skeffington—owner of Rockwell's Café and Bakery in Villa Park, California. Skeffington puts together a team to complete a top-to-bottom renovation of the historic drug store—complete with an old fashioned candy counter.

Some longtime residents were afraid the legendary landmark would become a gastropub and that the old Watson's they'd grown up with would be nothing more than a memory. But Bill and Laurie Skeffington quickly made their intentions for Watson's public—despite changes, the diner would be here to stay.

"I didn't want to see [Watson's] go away," Bill Skeffington told the Orange County Register days before the grand re-opening. "I figured I could bring it back and help make it more profitable."

In March 2016, Watson's opened its doors once again.

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It was the first time I'd walked into Watson's since the renovation.

The walls are brick-lined, wood-paneled and decked with plasma televisions and neon lights.

The façade, booths, soda fountain and floors have all been updated, but relics from the pharmacy years still adorn the walls: Recovered cabinets lined with rows of different colored bottles that once held pills and tonics, the original telephone switchboard and a framed photo of a bygone city festival.

Despite the modern appeal, there's still an old world charm to the eatery.

An old episode of I Love Lucy played on one of several flat-screen televisions. Lucy Ricardo's high-pitched voice could still be heard through the chatter of laughter and eating.

Families sat by the entrance waiting for a table. Crooners belted out their smooth, olive-oil voices. Servers welcomed guests as they quickly moved between the tables as if walking in cursive.

"How long is the wait for a table for two?" I asked. The room was crowded and every seat was taken.

The young employee, tattoos up and down her arms, responded, "It'll be about 20 minutes if that's okay, but maybe you can find a spot at the bar?"

The counter that had long been the focal point of Watson's was now something new: a bar with alcohol. Kellar Watson and Kellar Jr. had never served alcohol. During prohibition they refused to discreetly peddle alcohol, though many others did and profited.

The new counter was inspired by the old one, with light marble on top and a warm brown wood lining the edges and base. The round stools wrap around the horse-shoe shaped counter where servers with beards and suspenders served various milkshakes. "Pharmacy Prescriptions" are now cocktails on the menu.

"Penicillin"

Scotch, fresh lemon, ginger, honey and candied ginger

"Soda Jerk Cocktail"

Blanco tequila, Campari, egg white, passion fruit puree, vanilla bean agave and cream soda

"The Jules Verne Martini"

Vodka, blue Red Bull, UV Blue, pineapple juice, Sprite, gummy fish and rock candy

Above it, a red neon sign in script ran across one side of the counter reading "Watson's Original Soda Fountain."

My date and I couldn't find an empty stool, so we walked over to the bake case and stood by the nearby candy counter.

After admiring the faux-newspaper wallpaper, we meandered over to a large wooden cabinet containing antique prescriptions.

A petite blonde server approached us. She welcomed us with a big smile and escorted us to our table.

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before that she was born and raised in OC and now calls Costa Mesa home.

Watson's Rexall Drugs storefront, located at 116 East Chapman Avenue, Orange, California. Image shows drugstore at street level and second story above. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.