

The Passing Parade

At Lindy's

The 'little' restaurant's closing hurt. For thirty-six years it had mirrored Broadway.

By MEYER BERGER

LINDY'S first restaurant at 1626 Broadway, just below Fiftieth Street, went dark forever a week ago last night. It had been on the same spot thirty-six years less one month. A lot of guys and dolls of the Twenties, now middle-aged, all but wept at its passing. Leo Lindy had not been inside the place since 1947 (and has never said why), but he and his wife Clara went misty-eyed when 1626 shut down. Lindy said, "It was like a first-born had died."

The Broadway in which they launched the place was a different kind of Broadway, and they were different. Lindy—his real name is Leo Lindemann—was a blue-eyed, chestnut-haired young man of 33 and his fair-haired spouse was younger. He had been a bus boy in her Uncle Gertner's restaurant at 1446 Broadway when she was cashier there. When they opened 1626, she toiled in the kitchen and handled cash, too.

Opening date was Aug. 20, 1921. Jack Dempsey had beaten Georges Carpentier at Boyle's Thirty Acres only a month before. The Army was just beginning to lay out permanent graves in France for its World War dead. Pittsburgh was way out front in the National League, with the Giants second and Brooklyn fourth. Rogers Hornsby was batting .408 for the St. Louis Cardinals. Frank Bacon had just finished a three-year run in "Lightnin'" at the Little Theatre and Victor Herbert led Bacon and his troupe down to Penn Station in a joyous parade as they prepared to invade Chicago.

"**T**HE way I remember it now," Lindy says, "Broadway's lighting was all gold and silvery then, but mostly silvery—more like a Great White Way than it is now. Then there were no neon greens and reds and lemons. It had more legitimate theatres going—around fifty as against maybe thirty or so today. Prices ran from 50 cents to \$4 top and sold for less in Gray's Drugstore. 'The Ziegfeld Follies' were at the Globe and the Winter Garden was showing 'The Whirl of New York.' George Arliss was in 'The Green Goddess' at the Booth, Joseph Schildkraut and Eva Le Gallienne were doing 'Lillom' at the Fulton; Marilyn Miller and Leon Errol had a hit in 'Sally' at the New Amsterdam; 'The Bat' packed

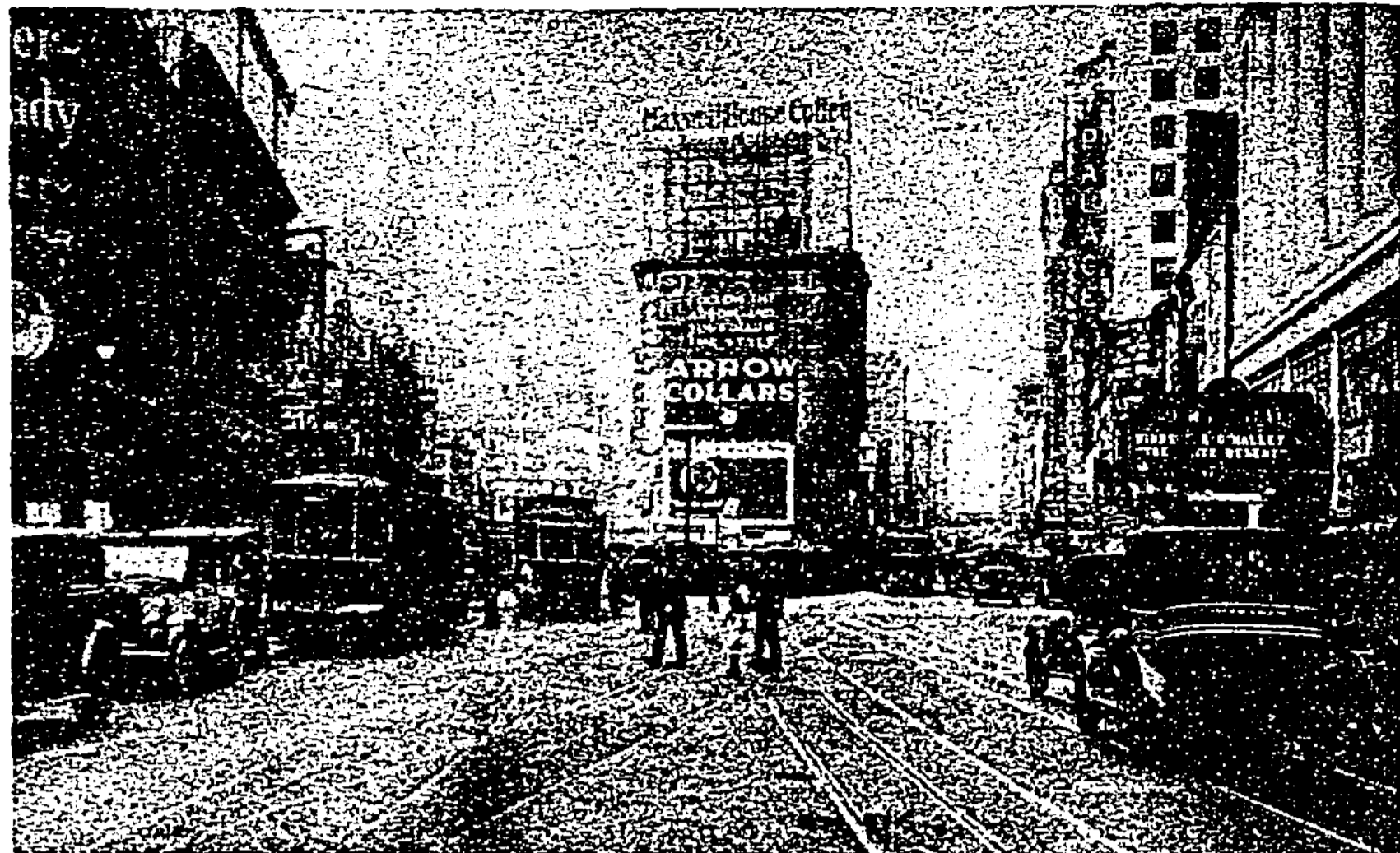
them in at the Morosco and Julia Sanderson was starred in 'Tangerine' at the Casino. For other names I must think deeper."

Bootleg violence had just about started. Then, too, Lindy recalls, speak-easies were thick as mosquitos out of the Jersey meadows, from Fortieth Street up through the Sixties. The silk-shirt madness had begun to recede, with prices down from \$10 and \$12 to \$5 and less. A good straw skimmer sold for \$1.50 and a reasonably good suit could be had for around \$25. There was a hint of post-war hard times, but Lindy's sandwich shop prospered from the start. He got the half-starved little dancers from the near-by Winter Garden and from other hits in the neighborhood. It was Al Jolson, an early customer, who suggested that Lindy put in small tables for people instead of making them stand up.

THOSE first customers have remained loyal. They crowd the big Lindy's at Fifty-first Street every night—Blossom Seeley, Jesse Block and Eve Sully, Eddie and Ida Cantor, the Jack Bennys when they're in town and George Burns and Gracie Allen. There were Ted and Ada Lewis, Fred Allen, Belle Baker, Sophie Tucker, George Price and Irving Berlin. The list stretches on and on. Clara remembers them as young folk just starting up the grade, as she and



A caricature of Lindy, by artist Van Riel.



LINDY'S BROADWAY—Here is the street in the Twenties, looking north from Times Square.

Leo were. Damon Runyon was among the early ones in the little restaurant. It was Runyon who found a place for it in American letters: "One evening about 7 o'clock, I am sitting in Mindy's," a Runyon story would begin, and pretty soon the whole country knew that when he wrote "Mindy's" he had changed only the initial.

BY and by, Lindy says, the big movie theatres came to the street and legitimate theatres took a buffeting. The Capitol had been built two years before his opening. Loew's State was ready a week or so after he branched out for himself. The Paramount went up five years afterward. And it was Lindy's customer, Al Jolson, who helped unwittingly to hurt the theatre in 1927 when his pioneer talkie, "The Jazz Singer," opened at the Continental; that and the depression in 1929. Not a single new theatre went up on Broadway or its midtown side streets after 1928.

The nightclub madness changed the street a lot. It brought the Palais Royal, the Silver Slipper and the Hollywood among countless others. Old-time eating places that had drawn the carriage trade started to fade—Churchill's and Shanley's, along with the famous hotel dining rooms—as first the young bloods and then their elders took to carousing all night in the speaks. Clara and Leo remember that period as a stretch of evenings that had no end. When drinkers stumbled out of barred-door establishments, they'd stop in for cake and coffee, often at dawn. Old Captain Churchill, who took his breakfast in Lindy's, too, would shake his dignified old head at such behavior.

Lindy never served liquor himself in the Volstead days, but bootleggers and the gamblers took over the street and the town and were thorns in his righteous side. The Lindys even tried closing at midnight to shut out the likes of Arnold Rothstein, but he stuck like a burr. "You are giving our place a bad name," Clara scolded one night, but Rothstein laughed. Lindy warned Harry, his cashier, that if he ever took messages for A. R. he would have to find another job.

But the cashier feared the gambler and on the night of Nov. 4, 1928, he got a telephone message from a man who wanted A. R. to go at once to a certain suite in the Park Central (now the Park Sheraton) Hotel. Rothstein left

his table. Twenty minutes later he was mortally wounded. The grapevine said he had been knocked off for welshing on a major bet. Damon Runyon's influence helped the Lindys live down that incident when the cops came. Clara never forgot that kindness.

Vaudeville died as radio grew, and a lot of the customers knew bitter days. Then the depression came and more theatres were darkened; pigeons flew through broken panes and made stage lofts their roosts. The older Broadway shops closed and soon shooting galleries and frankfurter stands, souvenir booths and honky-tonks transferred from local beaches to the Great Square. Years later, television took over many theatres for its studios. It also kept customers from tables in Lindy's on fight nights and during seasons when there were night baseball games.

SO, the little Lindy's passes, but its legends remain. It will be remembered for the fictional characters Runyon drew from living Lindy types—Milk Ear Willy, Nicely Nicely, Sorrowful Jones, Harry the Horse and Sleep-out Louie. And Lindy, who will be 70 next June, will go on listening to fragments of yesterday, about how Abe Lyman was pointed out to an innocent tourist as the very Harry the Horse of Runyon's fiction and good-naturedly accepted the role; how a gray-haired lady visitor kissed an acrobatic dancer's hand after she had been told the girl was Mary Pickford; how the violinist Fred Fradkin horrified Lindy by pulling wet trout flies out of a sugar bowl, pretending they were real.

And Clara Lindy will dream her dreams of the days when she and Leo were young and Broadway was different. She will retell stories of Damon, whom she truly loved. She will think how, when death was near, in 1946, and cancer had closed his throat, she took great bowls of crushed strawberries, smothered in rich cream and sugar, to his bedside at the Buckingham Hotel, and how, when he had eaten, he would raise clasped hands in a gesture that said, "Well done, my good and faithful," and how he smiled.

Maybe Broadway will forget the little Lindy's that was so much a part of it, but, again, it may be true, as one of Runyon's characters says in "The Big Street": "It is well known on Broadway that a citizen never loses what he's got filed away in his ticker."

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