

AMERICAN

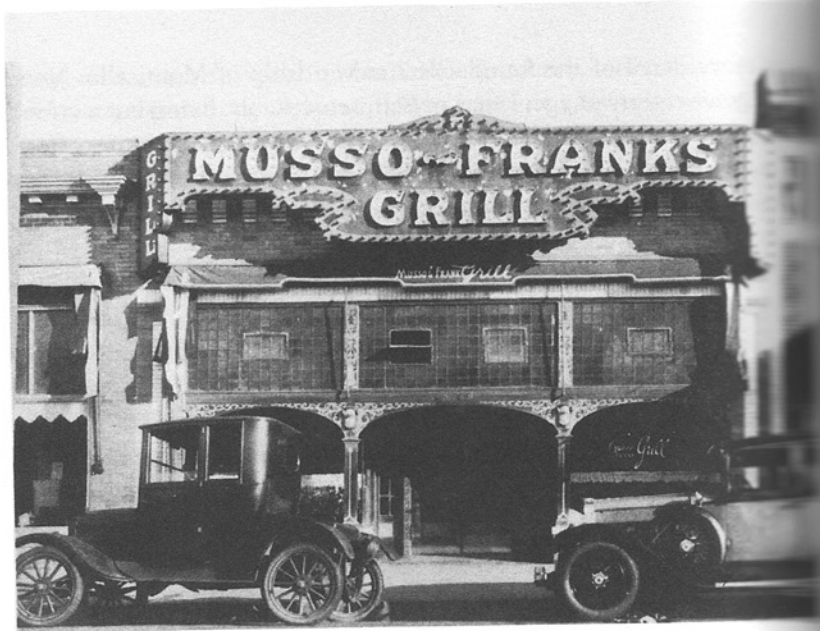


PLACES

Encounters with History

America's Leading Historians Talk about the Sites Where
the Past Comes Alive for Them

Edited by WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG



The Musso & Frank Grill, 1928. *California State Library.*



The New Room, built in 1956. *Musso & Frank Grill.*

Kevin Starr

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

I knew it the moment I walked in. This was it: the rich wood paneling, the red leather booths, the equally red-jacketed waiters moving to and fro at their own pace, the long and crowded bar alight with fine-stemmed martini glasses, the steaks and chops on patrons' plates, and, above all else, the joyous reverberations of the room. This was Hollywood, this was Los Angeles in its golden age! This was the Musso & Frank Grill at 6667 Hollywood Boulevard between Las Palmas and Cherokee avenues in the heart of Hollywood: at the center of a dream as well, at the center of my own hopes for an imaginative connection to the City of the Angels and the larger Southern California past. If I could understand this place, first encountered in 1977 when I was working for *trend-meister* Clay Felker on *New West* magazine—understand the way the room seemed alive with memory—then perhaps I could get to the *emotional center of Los Angeles itself*. Once arrived at such center, once having made this connection, I could better experience the LA/Hollywood dreams of another era. In the matrix of such a fusion of research and emotional/imaginative connection, I could then write a better history for my *book-meister* Sheldon Meyer, *auteur* of my *Americans and the California Dream* series.

Restaurants have by and large not received their full measure of regard in the writing of American history, despite the fact that they are paradigms of place. To enter such establishments as Durgin Park, Jacob

AMERICAN PLACES

Wirth's, and the Locke-Ober Café in Boston; Keen's Steakhouse, the Old Homestead, and "21" in Manhattan; Gage & Tollner and the Peter Luger Steakhouse in Brooklyn; Bookbinder's 15th Street Seafood House in Philadelphia; John W. Faidley Seafood in Baltimore; Joe's Stone Crab Restaurant in Miami Beach; Ratzsch's in Milwaukee; the Chop House and the Berghoff in Chicago; the St. Elmo in Indianapolis; the Buckhorn Exchange in Denver; Antoine's and Galatoire's in New Orleans; Sam's and the Tadich Grill in San Francisco; the Pacific Dining Car and the Musso & Frank Grill in Los Angeles—this is to encounter a density of ambience and collective memory that is of the essence of history itself.

Writing in *American Heritage* for April 1997, restaurant historian J. M. Fenster described American restaurants as originating from four distinct sources: taverns, oyster stands, market eateries, and the French (and later German and Italian) restaurants which are the first to be considered restaurants proper, beginning with the opening of Delmonico's in New York on December 13, 1827. In the eighteenth century, very few people dined outside their own home, unless they were dining at the home of friends or were staying at a tavern-inn while traveling. Tavern-inns served no-nonsense fare and strong drink. They also provided something akin to a club for locals and in the case of the Committees of Correspondence helped bring about the American Revolution. Today, the direct lineal descendants of these tavern-inns are hotel restaurants (many hotel restaurants are distinguished by their cuisine as well as being convenient to travelers) and those delightful roadhouses which experienced a whole new burst of activity during Prohibition and which even today, bright and sassy in neon, the sound of a jukebox heard from within, bespeak people having more fun than they really should be having.

The oyster stands of the early nineteenth century led to later, more ambitious seafood establishments and help explain why so many venerable restaurants in this country are seafood oriented. Market-originated restaurants offered either seafood or red meat, depending upon the dominant product of nearby markets. Thus Durgin Park grew out of the Quincy Market near the wharves of Boston, and John W. Faidley Seafood in Baltimore, founded in 1886 (home of the all-lump crab cake), began as an oyster stand, while the Old Homestead in Manhattan was founded in 1868 to serve butchers and meatmen working in the old Washington Market. Jack's, the Tadich Grill, and Sam's in San Francisco

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

each has its origins in the city's California Market in the 1860s, with the Tadich Grill going in the direction of seafood, Jack's orienting itself toward grilled meat, and Sam's combining the two.

Fine dining—and the restaurant genre proper—belong to that day in New York City, December 13, 1827, when two Swiss brothers named Delmonico, Peter and John, began serving customers at twelve tables. The brothers provided well-trained waiters and printed menus that listed offerings in English and French. This simple establishment was the first of eleven increasingly luxurious restaurants to bear the Delmonico name, until the last one closed in 1923; and along with other establishments—Sherry's, Louis Martin, Bustanoby's—it bore witness throughout the nineteenth century to both the appetites and the preeminence of the New York oligarchy.

To experience such restaurants today, where they have survived, is to journey into the very historical texture of the cities and regions they serve. Like great hotels, restaurants are stylizations of place, connected to dreams of pleasure and transcendence. As architecture and menu, surviving American restaurants distill, hence carry through time, the memory of high moments in the urban past. From a number of perspectives, after all—the rooms themselves, most of them of a certain vintage, the photographs or other visual materials on the walls, the distinctive styles of crockery, napery, and silverware, distinctions of menu and wine service (not to mention the bar in which one waits before the meal), the commanding presence of the maître d', the venerability of the waiters—such restaurants present a stylized encapsulization of historical memory, indeed the very physical presence of time itself.

Thus Locke-Ober's evokes the Boston of Harvard, Old South Church, Ticknor & Fields, the *Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells. Here is the Boston of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, secure in its identity, its taste, its scholarship. Keen's Steakhouse, founded in 1885, still serves a gigantic mutton chop similar to the one that English actress Lillie Langtry was hungry for one night in 1901—but was denied because ladies were not allowed in Keen's. Langtry sued in court and won, and Keen's was ordered to admit women (into a separate dining room); and for the rest of twentieth century Keen's continued to exude the Anglophilic mood of David Belasco's and Victor Herbert's New York. By contrast, "21," which began as a speakeasy, continued through the 1960s to

suggest the sportiness, the sense of being on the town, of the New York of John O'Hara and Walter Winchell. Can anyone enter the busy splendor of the Berghoff in Chicago without recalling how Hurstwood leaned against the bar there in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), florid and amiable, feeling very much a man in control of his own life? To dine on an all-lump crab cake at John W. Faidley Seafood in Baltimore or finish a meal with Indian pudding at Durgin Park or savor eggs Sardou at Antoine's (poached eggs on artichoke hearts with hollandaise sauce) or a mutton chop at Jack's in San Francisco is to participate in a ritual of place that allows one, almost, to dine on time and history.

All this obtains, quite clearly, to the Musso & Frank Grill in Hollywood, founded in 1919, the takeoff year of twentieth-century Los Angeles. Restaurateur Joseph Musso had moved to the city in 1916 from Oregon when that state banished liquor service in restaurants. Three years later, with two other partners, one of them named Frank Toulet, he opened the Musso & Frank Grill. Just as the opening of Delmonico's prefigured the rise of New York to preeminence, so too did the opening of the Musso & Frank Grill coincide with the transformation of Los Angeles from a nice but negligible southwestern town to an important American city that, because of the film industry, had been jump-started into international recognition. These were the years in which Los Angeles absorbed more than a million and a half new residents, when it annexed the San Fernando Valley, San Pedro/Wilmington, Watts, and Venice, opened the Miracle Mile, constructed the Coliseum, the Biltmore Hotel, the City Hall, the Central Library, the Hollywood Bowl, the campuses of USC and UCLA. These were the years in which two formative industries—aviation and motion pictures—centralized themselves in the City of Angels and its immediate suburbs. Within one decade, certainly two decades, after Musso & Frank opened, Los Angeles had become, in *Los Angeles Times* columnist Harry Carr's terms, America's City of Dreams: an urban *tabula rasa* onto which, increasingly, Americans and all moviegoing peoples were projecting their longings and centering their subliminal aspirations for glamour and a better life.

Because the Musso & Frank Grill was in Hollywood, and not in the Downtown, it did not attract politicians and other deal-makers as did the Pacific Dining Car on Sixth Street. It attracted, rather, intellectuals and book men and—because both Paramount Studios and the headquarters of the Writers' Guild were nearby—it especially attracted actors

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

and screenwriters. In the 1920s, the Grill was a favored hangout of the circle that centered on Jake Zeitlin, a poet and bookseller with a gift for friendship. The circle included a literary law student from USC, Carey McWilliams, destined to become the finest nonfiction commentator on California in the twentieth century. Also on hand, and in the booths, could be found Paul Jordan Smith, literary editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Arthur Millier, art critic of that same newspaper, photographer Will Connell, architect Lloyd Wright (son of Frank Lloyd Wright and designer of the shell at the Hollywood Bowl), impresario Merle Armitage, designer Kem Weber, musicologist and radio commentator José Rodríguez, journalists Herbert Klein and Louis Adamic, architects Richard Neutra, R. W. Schindler, and Harwell Harris, librarian and critic Lawrence Clark Powell, painter S. MacDonald Wright, fine printer Ward Ritchie, and bookseller and Hollywood character Stanley Rose, whose bookstore next door later served as the model for the pornography-selling bookstore in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), Rose having once been busted for selling naughty books and pictures.

The Zeitlin circle constituted the creative bohemia of Los Angeles in the 1920s; and although its members frequented the Musso & Frank Grill, they were not as addicted to the place as the screenwriters from the nearby studios were in the late 1930s. Many of these screenwriters gathering at Musso & Frank represented the great names of twentieth-century American literature, but in those Depression days, they were more interested in making a buck than making undergraduate reading lists. And so, to the list of such actor regulars as Tom Mix, Charlie Chaplin (a daily luncher with a preference for martinis), Paulette Goddard, and Humphrey Bogart, together with studio moguls Harry and Jack Warner, must be added the names of such other Musso & Frank regulars as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Dorothy Parker, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Nathanael West, Budd Schulberg, S. N. Behrman, Lillian Hellman, Horace McCoy, John Fante, A. I. Bezzerides, Frederick Faust (Max Brand), and William Faulkner. So many screenwriters made of the Musso & Frank Grill their club that management provided them the exclusive use of a small back dining room for their Saturday lunches when another week of their servitude at the studios ended. There were other places—Sardi's, the Brown Derby, the Knickerbocker Hotel, the Cocoanut Grove (as it was spelled locally, with an

added a), Sebastian's Cotton Club, even the Clover Club on Sunset Boulevard in unincorporated West Hollywood, where the syndicate, crookedness, and Hollywood met—but the screenwriters preferred the Musso & Frank Grill for their Saturday afternoon get-togethers. “While drinking with me,” Twentieth Century-Fox script girl Meta Carpenter later reminisced in her memoir *A Loving Gentleman* (1976) of those Saturday afternoons with her lover William Faulkner, “smoking and laughing freely. He did not mingle much with his colleagues, yet he was happy to be among writing men.”

Today, sixty, nearly seventy, years later, the Musso & Frank Grill remains a throwback to this earlier era. The decor has changed little, if at all, since the 1920s, especially the great mahogany booths and red leather banquettes in the original dining room, where customers also dine at a long counter, reading *Variety* or the racing form. Red-jacketed waiters are middle-aged or older and are totally devoid, as Southern California restaurant critic Orlando Ramirez points out, of that “Hi-my-name-is-Jason-and-I’ll-be-your-server-tonight” greeting, usually uttered by aspiring-actor waiters in other Los Angeles bistros. These gentlemen and their few female counterparts are professional waiters in the old sense of the word (meaning full-time and for real), and they sustain the illusion of hauteur one frequently encounters in waiters and waitresses working in historic restaurants, from Sam’s in San Francisco to Durgin Park in Boston. The food they serve is equally old-fashioned. J. M. Fenster describes the Musso & Frank Grill as “a veritable safe house in the midst of trendy California cuisine. There is nary a poppy seed in sight or a blade of lemongrass. Instead, there is beef stroganoff. There are also scallopine, liver and onions, Welsh rarebit, and other dishes long past mere trends.” To this list, one might also add such other Musso & Frank favorites as corned beef and cabbage, oyster stew, lamb kidneys, a three-inch-thick prime rib, broiled squab with bacon, pork and lamb chops, and smoked tongue. The tavern/roadhouse dimension of the Musso & Frank Grill is evident in its long—very long—bar where martinis, Manhattans, Rob Roys, stingers, and other very direct and very alcoholic drinks have remained in fashion since the repeal of Prohibition. Its market origins are evident in its usually adequate offerings of fresh fish as well as red meat. Hollywood’s connection to New York can be detected in huge servings of Lindy’s-style cheesecake. The spirit of Los Angeles in the 1920s, the Los Angeles of Aimee Semple McPherson and the

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

alks, is evident in the fact that Musso & Frank still serves Postum as well as good coffee and Jell-O in many of its seven delicious flavors.

Interestingly enough, Hollywood continues to frequent the Musso & Frank Grill, despite the fact that the film industry has diversified itself elsewhere and that the Hollywood district itself has been a decidedly untrendy, run-down place since the 1960s. Admittedly, the Grill does not attract name actors in such numbers as it once did; yet the tradition remains. In the 1950s and 1960s Peter Lawford and Jack Webb were regulars; current regular Red Buttons survives from this era. Other recent Musso & Frank sightings include Henry Winkler, Sean Penn, Brad Pitt, Nicholas Cage, Al Pacino, Ben Kingsley, and David Lynch. The Rolling Stones have dropped by. Stones guitarist Keith Richards, in fact, hosted a dinner here for fourteen of his buddies during the Stones' 1997 Los Angeles concert. As recently as the *Los Angeles Times* magazine for February 6, 2000, former child actor turned biographer Tom Nolan testified to the continuing vitality of Musso & Frank as part of the Hollywood legend. Nolan's Musso & Frank's sightings, dating from his child-actor days and edging into the present, included Rita Hayworth, Orson Welles, Tony Perkins, Jason Robards Jr., Alan Hale Jr. (*Gilligan's Island*), director David Butler, pulp-noir writer Jim Thompson, novelist Joseph Heller (picking up some spare change as a writer for *McHale's Navy*), and singer-songwriter Phil Ochs.

And so I found myself dining with Mary and Sheldon Meyer on a rainy late winter/early spring night early in the 1990s at the Musso & Frank Grill in Hollywood. Each spring, Sheldon, accompanied by his wife, a senior translator for the United Nations, would conduct a grand tour of the Far West, spending quality time with his authors. Mary Meyer's presence was not devoid of historical reverberations as far as California was concerned; a member of her family, Michael Maurice O'Shaughnessy (1864–1964), the Irish-born city engineer of San Francisco in the first three decades of the twentieth century, was one of the re-founders of San Francisco, having played a major role in the rebuilding of the city after the Earthquake and Fire of April 1906 and having designed and built San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy water system.

As he does in so many other settings I have seen him in—the Century Association in New York, the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, Patina in the Hancock Park district of Los Angeles—Sheldon fit into the setting almost immediately. Indeed, Sheldon and Musso & Frank seemed made

for each other. Sheldon is a native Chicagoan, after all; and Chicago, more than any other city in the United States, was responsible for the re-foundation of Los Angeles in the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century. Time and Princeton, however, have made of Sheldon a polished easterner; and his longtime career at the Oxford University Press and an equally long residence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan (with summers on Fishers Island) have made of him a quintessential New Yorker. How appropriate, then, that Sheldon should be sitting in a recognizably midwestern or East Coast restaurant that continued to express in its ambience and cuisine the fact that Los Angeles in the takeoff year of 1919 was not an eccentric place, or even a Hollywood creation, but a colony of the Midwest and, more remotely, of the eastern United States. Boosters of the era, in fact, were claiming that Los Angeles was perhaps the last major English-speaking city that would be created on the North American continent. They were mistaken, of course; but the very fact that they believed this underscored the inner psychology and ethos of the City of Angels in these Great Gatsby years.

Sheldon and I could have gone to other historic Los Angeles restaurants for discussion of my continuing social and cultural history of California. Chasen's, for example, was still open, albeit in its last years, as was the Brothers Taix on lower Sunset Boulevard, albeit in reduced circumstances. But the Musso & Frank Grill spoke directly to the California that Sheldon Meyer had for the previous decade and a half been encouraging me to pursue: the California that somehow, for all its eccentricities, remained an important instance of American civilization, or at the least a recognizably American place, just as the Musso & Frank Grill, for all its storied movieland history, remained a restaurant that might very well be found in Chicago or Indianapolis.

Over the years, I have been frequently asked why my California series was being published by the Oxford University Press in New York rather than by, say, a California-based publisher. The answer is rather simple, but it will take some explaining. I am a native Californian who discovered the history of California at Harvard within the context of American literary, intellectual, and cultural history; and my work has been guided—no, more than guided, shaped and inspired—by a midwesterner who has become a quintessential easterner with an abiding love for the full range of American cultural achievement, including jazz and popular music. Sheldon Meyer is a big-city guy. Even his love of country-

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

and-western music has more of Nashville to it than the boondocks. His urbanism, however, is not merely a matter of New York, although New York is his *mise-en-scène*. Pure New York, after all, has a very narrowly defined range of American possibilities. Sheldon Meyer, by contrast, is urban in the sense that all culture in this country is, in the long run, city-centric: flowing into and out of cities, that is, from hardscrabble and out-of-the-way places. Sheldon Meyer is America staying up late at night in cities, as Sheldon likes to do, hearing the velvet voice of one of his authors, Mel Tormé, scatting to a jazz combo late of a foggy San Francisco night, or hearing in the mind a droll take by Bobby Short, recalled amidst the taxicab traffic on Fifth Avenue up from the Century. Sheldon Meyer is about knowing and understanding why Americans love neon lights, city skylines, fish-tailed Cadillacs, watering holes and roadside joints, port and good cigars, late-night jazz joints, Frank Sinatra, the taste of whiskey in the wee hours of the early morning, the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and cities with such improbable names as Milwaukee, Sheboygan, Chicago, Indianapolis, Mobile, Seattle.

So, too, are the echoes and reverberations one experiences at the Musso & Frank Grill also big-city echoes and reverberations. They suggest Los Angeles as the Chicago of the Pacific, a city with big shoulders of its own sort. The bohemians of the 1920s and the screenwriters of the 1930s who frequented this restaurant had one thing in common: they were big-city colonists, exiles of a sort, spending time in a town which was itself trying to learn how to be big-city, just as Sheldon Meyer was always encouraging me to find how California had been trying to learn, over some 150 years of its American history, just exactly how to evolve for itself a regional culture possessed of the best American possibilities. Let others speak of California, Los Angeles especially, as the erasure of memory. Fascinated by the eccentricities of California, Sheldon was equally interested in the persistence of memory on this far American shore, the way California hungered for history and orthodoxy along with a sense of new beginnings. Sheldon perceived California as new, innovative, eccentric: the California, say, of Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh, lost from traditional history. But he saw it simultaneously, not just in the Bay Area but in Southern California as well, as an instance and reassertion of American civilization as valid and as shaping, in the long run, of our national culture as New England, the Mid-Atlantic, the Midwest, and the South.

The food upon which we were dining at the Musso & Frank Grill was obviously not nouvelle or California cuisine, as it would have been in Chez Panisse at Berkeley or the award-winning Patina in the vicinity. Such restaurants and such food underscored California as innovative, cutting-edge, even slightly precious. The food served at the Musso & Frank Grill, by contrast, was the food that had nourished an earlier (and openly imperialistic) generation of Americans who, sometimes quite ruthlessly, were creating an empire. True, even then, other nourishment was available. Mexican food, for example, had never fallen out of favor in California since its annexation by the United States in 1848. Even the regulars of Musso & Frank in that Anglo-Protestant year of 1919 when the restaurant was founded knew and loved Mexican fare: as if, one is tempted to speculate, they somehow knew, if only subliminally, that the past and the future—if not the present—of California was linked to Mexico. So, too, could they enjoy Asian cuisine, Chinese especially; but here even one's wildest speculations cannot bring about any linkage between the Chinese and Japanese cuisines of Los Angeles in the 1920s and the rise of California as Asia sixty years later.

And so Sheldon and I each enjoyed two martinis, straight up, accompanied by olives and a split order of herring and sour cream, followed by a small shrimp Louis salad, followed by oversize grilled pork chops, creamed spinach, a serviceable Louis Martini Cabernet Sauvignon from early in the previous decade, crusty French bread, and for dessert a wedge of that New York-style cheesecake. It was the food of empire-builders: the kind of meal which might have been enjoyed on these very premises sixty years earlier by engineers responsible for the Los Angeles Aqueduct as well as by screen stars and screenwriters down through the decades. Around the room and across it to the bar, we caught glimpses of the screenwriters, techies, and other Hollywood and television types of the present, their hair long, rings in their ears, no neckties, a lot of Hawaiian shirts, and there—over in a far corner—a gray-haired *Red Buttons* attacking a mound of tuna fish salad.

Ah, Musso & Frank! Ah, humanity! Time and life are fleeting, and of such occasions, such in-gatherings of dreams, are books and *cinéma* made. Like the neon lights illuminating Sunset Boulevard to the north, the food and ambience of Musso & Frank were saying something ephemeral yet powerful. I was in Los Angeles. I was in the company of *Sheldon Meyer* of Oxford University Press. I was haunted by America as I had

THE MUSSO & FRANK GRILL IN HOLLYWOOD

encountered its culture at Harvard: even more haunted by the California variation thereof. With Sheldon's guidance, I would pursue the story and the meaning of the vast and meretricious beauty that was all around me—to borrow a line from another midwesterner turned easterner who was also a regular at Musso & Frank.