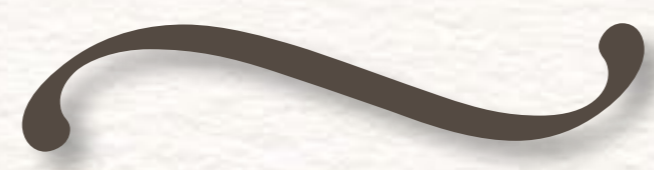


# THE EAT CAFE



*Brooks Jensen*

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**He responded,** “As a matter of fact, there’s a good place t’eat jus’ down the road. You can’t miss it on your right there, jus’ past the old Harmon place and up a piece from Dry Creek. It’s called the Eat Cafe. Order **HOT CAKES**. If you call ‘em *pancakes*, they’ll know you’re from the city.”

I’m now an experienced Eat Cafe customer, down dozens of roads. I heartily recommend the experience. It doesn’t matter what road you’re on, there’s *always* an Eat Cafe just ahead. If it’s still open, pull over and enjoy the hot cakes. I’ve never been disappointed.

Most mornings you’ll be waited on either by Debbie (who just works there) or Sue (the owner) who’s again trying to figure out what went wrong between high school and last night. She’ll tell you all about her search for the right man, a nice home, a car from the current decade, or a vacation beyond the state line.

Find an open booth and “Set a spell, honey. Can I git ya some coffee?”





While you're waiting for your coffee, take a moment to enjoy the wall decor. It will be a collection of, well, *something*. Frequently it's the "World's Largest Collection of . . ." It may be bottle caps or beer bottles, belt buckles or bullet casings, ashtrays, animal horns, dinner plates, old farms tools, license plates, livestock brands (a consistent favorite), coffee mugs, horseshoes, hubcaps, silver dollars, canning jars, or arrowheads. No matter how large the collection, it'll never completely cover the clear varnished knotty pine or the tattered *We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone We Don't Like* sign.

On her way to deliver a perfectly balanced armful of steaming hot eggs, hash browns, and bacon to the group sitting across the way, Debbie will swing by your booth with your thick ceramic white coffee mug, the coffee pot, and the menu, this last being tucked securely under her arm. "I'll be right with you, sugar." The aroma of down-home cooking and coffee always mixes into a wonderful saliva-producing incense.

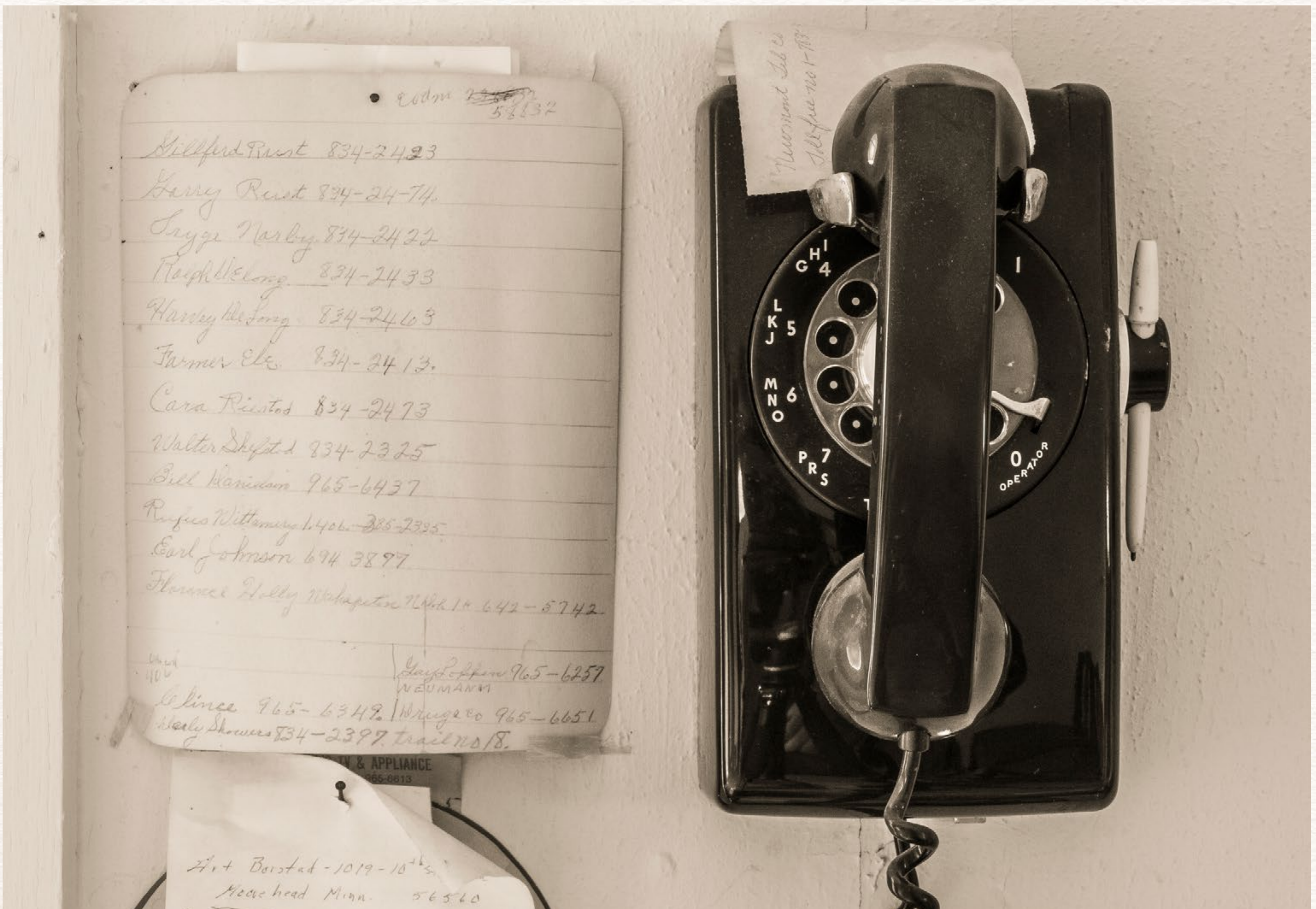


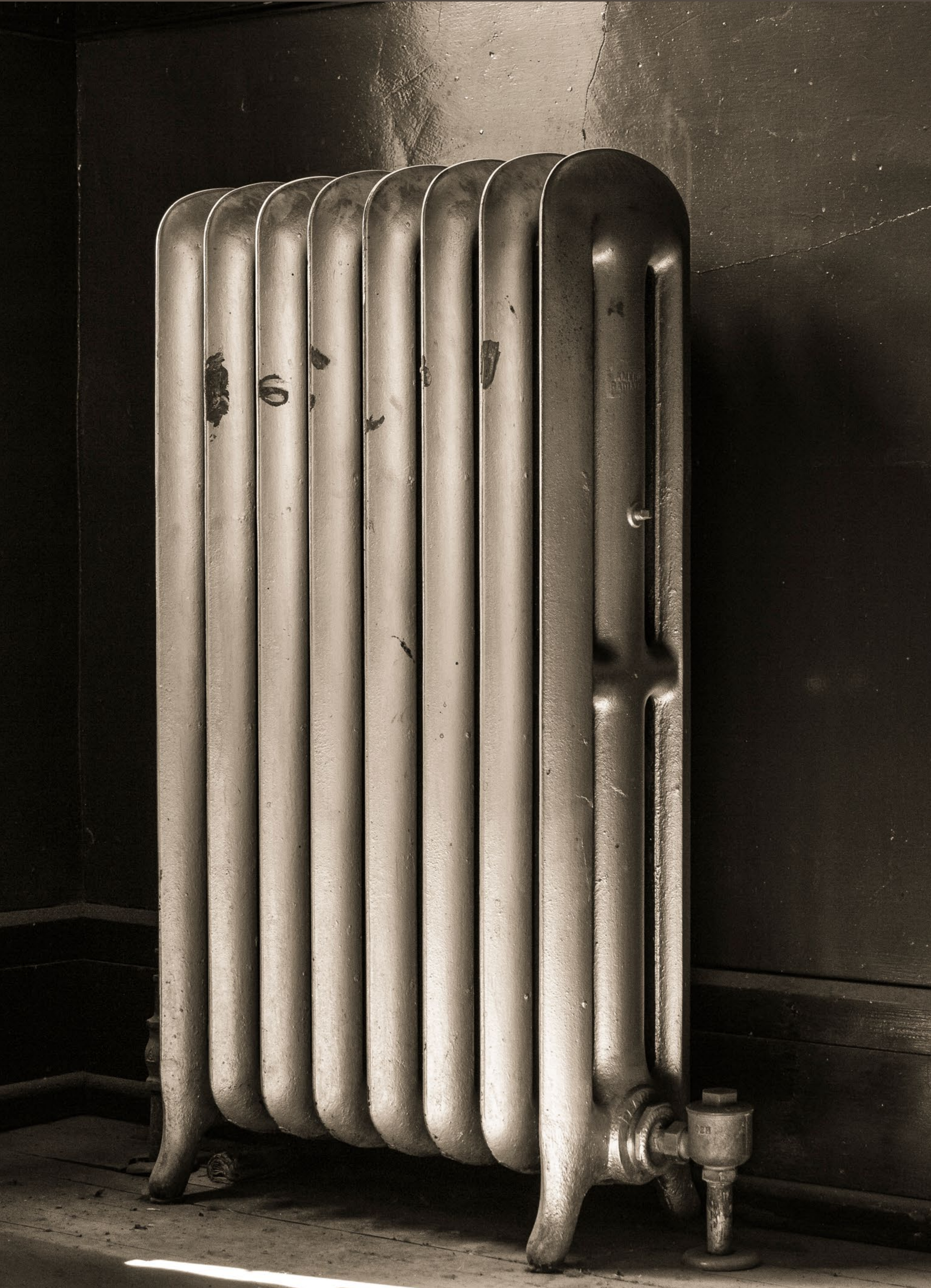
The typewritten page stuffed inside the plastic sleeve that serves as the menu will invariably include:

- Hot cakes (2) \$1.45
- Hot cakes (3) \$1.90
- Hot cakes (2) and bacon \$2.90

There's no quiche or crepes to be found here. Go ahead and try the hot cakes. They're filling and affordable, even on a traveler's tight budget.

Sometimes, when Sue goes to bed in a stupor and forgets to set her alarm, the boys just let themselves in. They know where the extra key is hidden. That's not unusual, though. The whole town knows where it's hidden. Gus'll make the coffee (stronger than Sue does) and Tom will turn on both the radio (louder than Sue does) and the heat (higher than Sue does). They'll even serve you coffee, as long as you don't ask for cream. They're glad for something to do because it makes them feel useful, and it'll earn them a free pat on Sue's behind (without protest) when she arrives from her beauty sleep.





Just about the time you're digging into your hot cakes and starting your fourth half-cup of coffee (Debi's tenacity in making sure your cup never gets farther down than half full makes you wonder whether or not this is a spiritual matter with her), in will walk Opal with her daughter Jenny. Opal is a seventyish-looking fifty-year old with smoky, yellow-gray hair and a jacket that looks as though it came from Gus' closet. Jenny's hair is long and curled and her choice of blouse calculated to make the most of her figure — tight, sparse, and not quite covering her navel. Billy, her first-born in the booth next to her, is too young yet to be embarrassed by his haircut or the way it emphasizes his cowlick.

Jenny has just come from the clinic and is wondering why the good Lord made it her lot in life to be pregnant — again — now that she just got her figure back. It's plain to see that Opal is glad her time has passed. Opal orders tomato juice and sneaks herself a Bloody Mary with a flask she removes from her inside pocket next to the stick matches.



Jenny orders coffee which she cools down with an ice cube from her water glass while distractedly drumming her artificial fingernails on the tabletop in time with the music. Billy gets milk, which instantly makes a white mustache above his lip which more than likely will remain there for the rest of the morning.

Opal's conversation generally runs along the lines of canasta and bingo, grocery prices and game shows, what Mabel said June said about Henrietta's cousin, and "My Lord, is it never gonna end?" Jenny's conversation centers around what Billy broke yesterday, how Matt is getting such a raw deal at the plant, and how he's going to be pissed when he finds out what the doctor said. Although each is looking at the other during the entire interchange, you'll have to apply yourself to remember that these two are talking to each other.

Yup, the folks'll all be there at the Eat Cafe, or the Toastmaster Cafe, or the Hilltop, the Valley, the Riverside, the Cowboy, the Sunnyside, the Calico Cupboard, the Blue Rooster, the Red Hen, or the Wagon Wheel. I've been to them all and remember them well. You can always count on the entertainment to be brisk, the coffee to be strong, and the hot cakes to fill you up. Say "Hi" to Sue and Debbie for me. Best to hurry, though, before you miss the opportunity.







**Brooks Jensen** is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

He and his wife (Maureen Gallagher) are the owners, co-founders, editors, and publishers of the award winning *LensWork*, one of today's most respected and important periodicals in fine art photography. With subscribers in 73 countries, Brooks' impact on fine art photography is truly world-wide. His long-running podcasts on art and photography are heard over the Internet by thousands every day. All 900+ podcasts are available at [LensWork Online](#), the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with *LensWork Extended* — a PDF based, media-rich expanded version of the magazine.

Brooks is the author of seven best-selling books about photography and creativity: *Letting Go of the Camera* (2004); *The Creative Life in Photography* (2013); *Single Exposures* (4 books in a series, random observations on art, photography and creativity); and *Looking at Images* (2014); as well as a photography monograph, *Made of Steel* (2012). His next book will be *Those Who Inspire Me (And Why)*. A free monthly compilation of of this image journal, [Kokoro](#), is available for download.

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