57. The Faculty Club

Carlos Stroud

The Faculty Club was a very important part of the optics faculty social interactions at least from the 1960s through the 1990s. At lunch time in the 1970s almost every day a group gathered outside of Len Mandel’s office on the third floor of B&L, including Len Mandel, Emil Wolf, Joe Eberly, George Sherman, and Carlos Stroud. They were frequently joined by other faculty, postdocs and visitors, including H. M. Nussenzweig, C. L. Mehta, Hank Carter, Robin Asby, Peter Knight, Les Allen, and others. The discussions ranged widely, but were seldom far from optics. The paper placemats were indispensable, by the end of lunch generally covered on both sides by equations and diagrams. Sometimes it was necessary to request extras. The waiters and waitresses joked about the “equations table.” The discussions carried over to coffee in the lounge and—sometimes when the weather was nice—walks along the river, always a favorite of Len Mandel and Emil Wolf. The discussions helped many of us get over blocks encountered in a morning’s research, and actually led directly to the only publication co-authored by Len Mandel, Joe Eberly, and Carlos Stroud. The fourth author was a student, Bill Lama, whose thesis project stimulated the discussion.

The club was also important in the afternoon and evening. Many quantum optics seminars were merely interrupted by the end of the seminar hour, and resumed almost immediately with continued lively discussion over beer and pretzels in the Faculty Club. For a while in the early 1970s there was a happy hour on Friday afternoons when beer and munchies were provided to the membership. Frequent attendees at these events included the junior faculty of the Institute, George Sherman, Ed Brody, and Carlos Stroud. More impressive was the gourmet evening fare.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Faculty Club was widely conceded to be the best restaurant in Rochester, with multi-course gourmet dinners scheduled occasionally and a wine list that was the envy of almost every faculty club in the country. The list was well enough known such that when Kumar Patel was invited to give a seminar, he agreed to come at his own (Bell Labs’) expense, on the conditions that the post-seminar dinner be held in the Faculty Club and he be allowed to pick Vintage wine from the Faculty Club cellar enjoyed and the label signed by Solid State Seminar speaker Kumar Patel and faculty members.
the wine. His host, Professor Eberly, happily agreed. There was no shortage of local faculty anxious to see that their guest receive proper hospitality, and the wine selected was Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1962. The Faculty Club sommelier, like the assembled faculty, had always wished for an occasion to sample the premier wine on the list. Somehow it turned out that when he had distributed the precious liquid to all glasses, just a small sample remained in the bottle. He offered that if he could have that sample he could make available with dessert a Madeira from the first decade of the century that was not on the list, an offer that was quickly accepted. Seated a few tables away in another party was University President Robert Sproull. He observed the seminar party taking an empty wine bottle with them as he was leaving the club and remarked that they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The bottle, signed by all participants, sits on Professor Eberly’s bookshelf to the present day. A few days later a new accounting rule was announced in the College of Arts and Science, capping the cost of a bottle of wine that could be charged to a departmental account. As a reminder of the rate of inflation, the ’62 Lafite was billed at $34.95! A similar bottle was recently sold at auction for more than $500. Fortunately there was no such rule restricting the range of tastes permitted to engineering faculty, so its imposition naturally encouraged collegial joint seminars.

The quantum optics faculty continued their regular luncheon gatherings through the 1980s, but the custom spread much wider. Particularly during the first part of Dennis Hall’s directorship, a large fraction of the optics faculty gathered each noon for lunch at the Faculty Club. There was little need for formal faculty meetings as everything of importance was hashed out over lunch and coffee, long before it could appear on a meeting agenda. On Fridays the conversation was unlikely to turn to such serious matters until the previous evening’s episode of Seinfeld had been thoroughly reviewed.

Unhappily, by the 1990s the University became serious about the costs associated with a facility that was no longer serving the same clientele. Evening meals at the Faculty Club were not attended with enough regularity for several good reasons, and the days of service were gradually reduced, each cutback stimulating a greater decrease in patronage. By then there were many excellent restaurants in Rochester, and newer faculty tended to live more remotely from campus and were not anxious to come back to campus after dinner. What was worse, many faculty members felt too pressured to spend time eating lunch with their colleagues at the Faculty Club. They either skipped lunch or brown-bagged at their desks. An institution was under siege. Some of the optics faculty were alarmed and tried to save the club. Joe Eberly and Carlos Stroud both served terms on the Faculty Club Board and on committees trying to save it. It was not to be: The Faculty Club closed and was replaced by a campus eatery shared with students.

While the old club is sorely missed by some of us, the luncheon gatherings are slowly coming back. Lukas Novotny’s entire group of graduate students and postdocs gathers every noon for a joint luncheon. There is no regular gathering of faculty for lunch, but often there is an informal gathering of one or sometimes even two tables of optics faculty at the new Meliora eatery. There are even paper placemats, but if we are to carry out research over lunch these days we will have to await a lunch room with wireless connections, and perhaps soup-resistant keyboards, for our laptop computers.