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(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) Dining at NSA

(U) Should I brown bag or buy it? This question has plagued NSA employees for decades. Follow along now as we journey through the years of "dining at NSA."

(U) It is no easy job feeding a workforce the size of a small town, especially one that is as spread out as NSA's. In a survey sent to the 1955 NSA workforce (while the Agency still resided at Arlington Hall Station) regarding the food service, patrons complained that the tables were not being cleaned off quickly enough. About 70 percent of the responders felt that food prices were too high; 86 percent preferred bottled Coca-Cola. Individual portion sizes were acceptable; however, variety in choices was lacking. On the more positive side, 71 percent of the respondents indicated they were satisfied with the appearance of the cafeteria. Over the first ten months of 1956, records show that employees spent more than a half-million dollars eating in the Arlington Hall cafeteria.

(U) In November 1957 the Operations Building at Fort Meade opened, and cafeteria service became available to the workforce. Newsletter photos from January 1965 show food service available at the Training Center, the Supply Building, the IRC building, and the Operations building. As a matter of fact, a food service report in a Staff Actions and Correspondence memorandum dated 6 January 1964 indicated that seventy-two chairs and eighteen tables were purchased for the Sensitive Material Storage Building (aka IRC and SAB 2). Temporary service of coffee and sandwiches was briefly available to employees. However, on 17 February 1964 hot food service became a reality for the old C3 staff that occupied this facility. (It is interesting to note that the employees currently working in this building must brown bag it or make the hike over to the OPS 3 cafeteria for hot meals.)

(U) In 1966 the food service providers at NSA (of which there have been six over the years) attempted to swing the industrial cafeteria atmosphere to a more customer-select variety. According to an article in the March 1966 Newsletter, the new general manager of Canteen operations at NSA, Arthur Shea, ushered in extensive food changes. These changes included an increase in customer-select sandwich availability and a better variety of salad arrangements and dessert choices. Two additional serving lines were added to handle the growing volume of customers. Also available on some floors in some buildings was a snack bar area with cabinets for hot and cold items as well as a grill fryer. Shea was quoted as saying, "NSA people are like anyone else. They want their food - hot, hot, hot, and cold, cold, cold, and they want it fast." Future plans included self-busing in an effort to reduce customer wait and improve table cleanliness.

(U) As the Agency moved from the 1960s to the 1970s, the cafeterias again underwent changes to bring about a new look and increased efficiency. With the relocation of employees to the Friendship Annex, patronage at the main cafeteria declined. The resulting extra space was reallocated, and part of the original cafeteria area was converted into classrooms and offices. Customers found that these changes gave them wanted or unwanted access to "fresh air" via a courtyard when the Gatehouse 3 door was permanently closed.

(U) By October 1970, NSA boasted the following food service availability: cafeterias in the main Operations building, FANX II and III, S Building, and the Warehouse. In spite of the improvements that took effect the previous year, the Agency still had a few problems to work out. These problems consisted of rising food and labor costs, distribution of purchased and prepared food to the many locations, and antiquated kitchen equipment in the main facility. A food facility consultant was brought in to analyze the needs. In addition, a survey was conducted that resulted in recommendations for changes in food handling, personnel training, and improvement in snack bar service. Now an employee could get a quick cup of soup at the snack bar instead of venturing to the cafeteria. In addition to the survey, interior decorating changes were made courtesy of the National Park Service. At this time the training school staff at the old hospital site on Fort Meade relocated, and that cafeteria closed its doors on 23 October 1970. (The hospital site was razed soon thereafter.)

(U) The beginning of 1971 carried over some old headaches for the Restaurant Council and the Concessionaire Services. Complaints of cold food continued to be heard, as were comments about the cost of "dining in the cafeteria." In spite of the negatives, more changes were on the way. A canned soda vending machine was added in the main cafeteria, construction of a new warehouse cafeteria began, plans for improvement of the food handling in the S Building were considered, and, finally, the rehab of the main cafeteria continued. By February 1971, five new microwave ovens had been added to the cafeteria. To make shopping more convenient for employees, doughnuts and freshly made cakes were available in bulk quantities. Two months later, "dining at NSA" took on a whole new meaning when the outdoor gazebos opened in the north and south courtyards. The south side gazebo became known for its quick access to hamburgers, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, and some ready-made sandwiches.

(U) Since the inception of food service at the Agency, the cost of supplying food has been a bone of contention between the concessionaire and the customer. By the summer of 1972 the main cafeteria had undergone more changes. The necessary scullery repairs were made, and new equipment was added to improve service. In addition, changes were made to menu items. A diner could now expect to find summer salads, even some consisting of "slimming" ingredients. Also at this time, the cafeteria service staff applauded the NSA workforce on being responsive in returning the reusable items to the cafeteria.

(U) From July through December 1980, more changes occurred. The "Goodies Line" became available in July 1972 and offered donuts, cakes, and coffee for bulk purchase. By the end of 1972 plans were under way to convert all the snack bars to vending machines. This was a real boon to the shiftworker population. They would now be able to purchase hot sandwiches, french fries, and other hot items anytime during their shift.

(U) In spite of all the aforementioned rehabilitation that had occurred in Agency cafeterias, July 1973 found customers gearing up to wrestle with more changes. Food service lines were discontinued, seating areas were expanded, and during the construction phase, hours of operation were increased slightly. Customers adjusted and survived. By the end of 1974, they enjoyed the following holiday fare: Swedish soup, French sole almondine, American turkey and dressing, Italian veal scaloppini, Turkish brown rice pilaf, Hungarian sweet sour carrots, Spanish green beans, American whipped potatoes, English dinner rolls, Norwegian sugar cookies, and International egg nog. Saga Food, the contract holder at that time, had risen to the occasion with an extremely diverse menu.

(U) But how does one go from plenty of food to makeshift meals at the Agency? Did you ever stop to consider what a winter blizzard does to food services at NSA? According to Brian Meddaugh's article in the May 1979 Newsletter, here is what happened in 1979. The announcement of blizzard conditions prompted the day-shift workers to remain at home. But what about the poor shiftworkers who were due to end their shifts? The blizzard forced them to camp inside NSA. The beauty of the falling snowflakes that Sunday afternoon diminished when they found themselves stranded at work. They called their daytime counterparts and cheerfully told them to stay put, and they would cover the next shift. Little did they realize how many hours that shift would be. By Monday afternoon food supplies were running low and the NSA kitchen was closed. An employee drove to West Laurel to pick up the Restaurant Officer, and then to Gambrills to get Saga's district manager. Finally, the NSA kitchen was opened and blizzard rations of cheeseburgers and Pepsi were available. The shiftworkers served food and ran the cash registers. The menu was not fancy, but definitely worth eating, especially since the last candy bar from the vending machine had been consumed many hours earlier.

(U) The shiftworkers-as-weather-hostages episode was soon forgotten. The Agency contract with Marriott was due to expire on 28 January 1988. The new contract was to be awarded based on these components: reputation, experience, sanitation and safety procedures, menu procedures, maintenance procedures and programs, proposed staffing, and, finally, proposed commission for the Restaurant Fund and profit for the concessionaire. Finally, Marriott was awarded a two-year contract renewable for one or two more two-year terms.

(U) And was this contract good for the Agency population? Here are some food facts with Marriott servicing NSA. The menus were planned about three weeks ahead of time.

Generally, pork, beef, chicken, and pasta were served at least once each week. Serving soup required about 100 gallons daily at the OPS 1 cafeteria alone. The most requested dishes were lasagna, chicken teriyaki, meatloaf, and country-fried steak. The favorite vegetables were fried mushrooms, fried cauliflower, and broccoli with cheese sauce. The popularity of food served was determined by checking sales receipts and customer requests. The November 1988 Thanksgiving luncheon required 4,000 pounds of turkey. A note for those health conscious folks: the cook did not use MSG in any of the foods and added only a moderate amount of seasoning.

(U) The new contract and improved service didn't affect the relationship employees had with Agency vending machines. Question: What consumes 17,400 cups of coffee, 14,000 cups and 29,400 cans of soda per week, in addition to countless packages of M&Ms; potato chips, assorted crackers and cold sandwiches each day? Answer: The NSA workforce. According to the March 1988 Newsletter, there were 325 machines, and each year 22 million coins were deposited in Agency vending machines. Generally speaking, the weekly calculations averaged about 420,000 coins and 37,000 bills. The favorite sweets were M&Ms; in second place were Snickers bars. Through the years coffee consumption has dropped; however, soda consumption has risen drastically.

(U) Somehow, the more things change, the more they seem to stay the same. On December 13, 1993, the NSA workforce thronged to the newly renovated OPS 1 cafeteria that had been two years in the making. Among the upgrades were Taco Bell and Pizza Hut concessions. During the first two days, 9,743 people were served, and over 21,000 items were sold in one day. Food consumption consisted of the following: 2,127 Taco Bell entrees, 1,300 bakery items, 176 pounds of salad, and 1,445 breakfast items.

(U) It seems that 1994 was another year for change: not only did the OPS 1 cafeteria get a much needed upgrade, but the new food service contract was put out for bid, and NSA welcomed the Wood Company on board. The Wood Company specializes in noncafeteria style food and prepares entrees in small batches versus the cook-ahead process of other companies. One of the changes instituted by the Wood Company was the upgrade of the FANX II vending area.

(U) In years past, there have been some additional benefits of cafeteria dining. For example, some older employees may remember that there was a time when an Agency diner could be photographed and if the photograph appeared in the Newsletter, he or she was treated to a free lunch courtesy of the Restaurant Council and the caterer.

(U) At this writing the OPS 1 cafeteria has been upgraded; it reopened on August 5. History has shown us how the NSA workforce will react. And every day employees must answer this question from decades ago: "Should I brown bag it or buy it?"

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