

Dish Omaha – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025

**Jeff:** It's time for Dish Omaha, featuring KVNO's resident foodie, Diane Watson. Good morning, Diane.

**Diane:** Good morning, Jeff. We're going to do a remember when today, looking back at restaurants that are no longer part of the Omaha scene, but certainly created an influence, and today we're talking about the Hilltop House. Their slogan was, "for good food that satisfies." And if you remember the Hilltop House, it was at 49th and Dodge, which was actually a hilltop at that point.

**Jeff:** Yeah, and the building is still there.

**Diane:** It's still there. It's pretty iconic. It became apartments, and now it's office buildings. But it was opened as a single dining room in 1941 by Raymond and Mildred Matson. The colonial-style decor was very homey, and a lot of people referred to it as kind of an English tearoom. It served comfort food, and it served it really well. There were big portions of baked chicken and pork patties, cream chicken on hot tea biscuits, cinnamon rolls, and tons and tons of desserts. But it was always operating on a shoestring, and you can think about times in 1941. There's a rumor that the owners had to borrow money to make change on their opening night.

**Jeff:** Wow.

**Diane:** But the popularity grew, and so did the space. So, there was a lot of turmoil around that time, and I'd never thought about this as it relates to a restaurant. When World War II happened, Omaha had to institute meat rationing for the general population and for restaurants in 1941. Can you imagine that today?

**Jeff:** Yeah, that's hard to imagine.

**Diane:** So, for three years, the hilltop house had to stop serving lunches, so they had enough meat to serve their dinner guests. But they persevered. They outgrew their dining room. They expanded two times within the first 10 years, which is kind of unheard of. They had rooms that were themed. They added a harbor room and a garden room. And they actually then joined the restaurant with their neighbor, the Mildred Apartments. One of the iconic things from the Hilltop House was the Red Rooster. You probably remember that from the top of the building, from the...

**Jeff:** Hmmm. Now that you mention it.

**Diane:** From the menu, and that was the bar. So, it was called the Red Rooster Bar. People said it was like being entertained in someone's home, just with the knotty pine and the captain's chairs. And it became a very, very preferred meeting place. The chef, Hub Pichetto, was there in 1946, and he worked there from 1962 until 1981. And his wife was the manager and hostess. And he won back-to-back restaurant tour of the year awards and was inducted into the Omaha Hospitality Hall of Fame.

**Jeff:** That's awesome.

**Diane:** Yeah. One of his signature dishes was the roast prime rib, which in 1974 was \$5.75. I know.

**Jeff:** Did you ever want to just get into a time machine and go back to places like that?

**Diane:** Absolutely.

**Jeff:** Not just because of the cost.

**Diane:** But just because of how amazing it would be. Now, you remember in the 70s, inflation became a hobbler for a lot of people, and the Hilltop House was no different. They had to do all kinds of things to try to stay open when inflation was 10, 15 percent.

**Jeff:** Yeah.

**Diane:** Not replacing employees who quit. They would turn off the power and the air conditioning when they could. They would even quit putting ice in water glasses just to save money and stay open. There were all kinds of rumors around that time that they were closing, that they were going to become a retirement home, that they were going to become a fast food place. But they didn't. But the Matsons did retire after 39 years in 1979 and actually sold the restaurant while on their way to London by the guy who was sitting next to them on a plane.

**Jeff:** Wow.

**Diane:** Yeah. Dr. Wally Duff was his name. He bought the restaurant. Didn't have it for very long.

**Jeff:** Huh.

**Diane:** They decided they were going to turn it into a place for a young, sophisticated crowd. It didn't do that great under the new ownership, and they closed in 1981. But it stayed a restaurant for a little while longer because the second location of Roberto's, which was a Mexican eatery in Omaha, opened and stayed open for a few years. But I'll tell you, even with \$500,000 in renovations, people came back and wanted it to be the Hilltop House. There were stories of people taking tables and moving them apart so they could have their table that they would go to.

**Jeff:** Wow.

**Diane:** I think my favorite story from the past is that a guy in the Chicago Tribune, he was a writer, Stevenson Swanson, talked about how he went to every Thanksgiving at the Hilltop House except one year. And his mother won a turkey when he was 11 years old and decided to prepare a feast for the family. And he was so excited, but he was absolutely disappointed. He wanted a hamburger from the Hilltop House. I know.

**Jeff:** That's awesome.

**Diane:** Quick programming note, we've got the Omaha Food Festival at the Kroc Center this Saturday. You can learn all about plant-based foods with samples, demos, and presentations. And a big shout-out to my foodie friend Warren. It's his birthday today.

**Jeff:** All right, Diane Watson, thanks so very much.

**Diane:** Thank you.