

Chili-Ville due for demolition

The building which has housed one of Highland Park's most renowned restaurants for more than 40 years will be demolished within a few days, Northeast Newspapers learned Thursday.

Due to fall to the sledge and wrecking bar is Chili-Ville, a landmark for several decades at the junction of York Boulevard and North Figueroa St. The restaurant has been closed since last September.

The famed eatery was founded in 1926 by Tom Canning who sold chili from a push-cart at the junction. After constructing a building to house his kitchen and patrons, Canning sold Chili-Ville in 1929 to Paul Buscaglia who operated the establishment until 1960 when he sold it to his son-in-law, Ray Mortara, who had been a partner since 1948.

Mortara ran Chili-Ville for 10 years, selling it in November

of 1970 to a man who several months later closed the facility. Customers through the years included Mickey Rooney and Ben Alexander who gained fame as Jack Webb's partner in the old Dragnet television series and operated a Ford agency on N. Figueroa St.

Buscaglia expanded the restaurant soon after he bought it, adding a dining room and enlarged the counter area to accommodate the growing patronage.

"The first lock on the door wan't installed until 1941," recalls Mortara. "From 1929 to the beginning of the war the restaurant was open 24 hours a day. Paul couldn't have closed it if he wanted to. There wasn't a lock on the door."

The final addition to the building was built in 1957 by Mortara to house a kitchen in which frozen chili was processed for sale to major food markets in 14 ounce packages and institutions in 10 pound cans.

Chili-Ville was also the first restaurant to popularize the "chili size" dish, a portion of chili served over a hamburger patty and topped with cheese, Mortara said.

Chili remained the featured attraction on the menu for more than 40 years under Buscaglia and Mortara. The recipe was originated by Buscaglia and in peak years was made in 100 gallon batches which called for 500 pounds of meat.

The next chapter of the land at York Boulevard and North Figueroa St. is as yet unknown. The land has been sold but it is not known what will be constructed on the site.