

A BURGER LEGEND

Former Chicagoans Jim and Angie Maroney took over a small greasy spoon in 1975; 34 years later, the number of burgers made in a day at Redamak's can surpass the number of people living in New Buffalo



By LILA CHANDLER
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NEW BUFFALO — Their hamburgers are promoted as legendary, yet Jim “Jimbo” and Angie Maroney, owners of Redamak's in New Buffalo, are part of local history themselves — and believe they are to be credited for some of the town's summer success.

After all, they serve about 3,000 hamburgers any given busy day during the summer — the town's population was listed at just over 2,400 in July 2008 — and with 150 employees, Redamak's is New Buffalo's third-largest employer (behind the casino and the public school system).

In 1975, the Maroney's bought a diminutive hamburger joint with a 10-foot by 10-foot kitchen. After four major additions, Redamak's now boasts a 3,000-square-foot prep counter within an 8,000-square-foot building that seats up to 400. Its cooler space is larger than the local grocery store's.

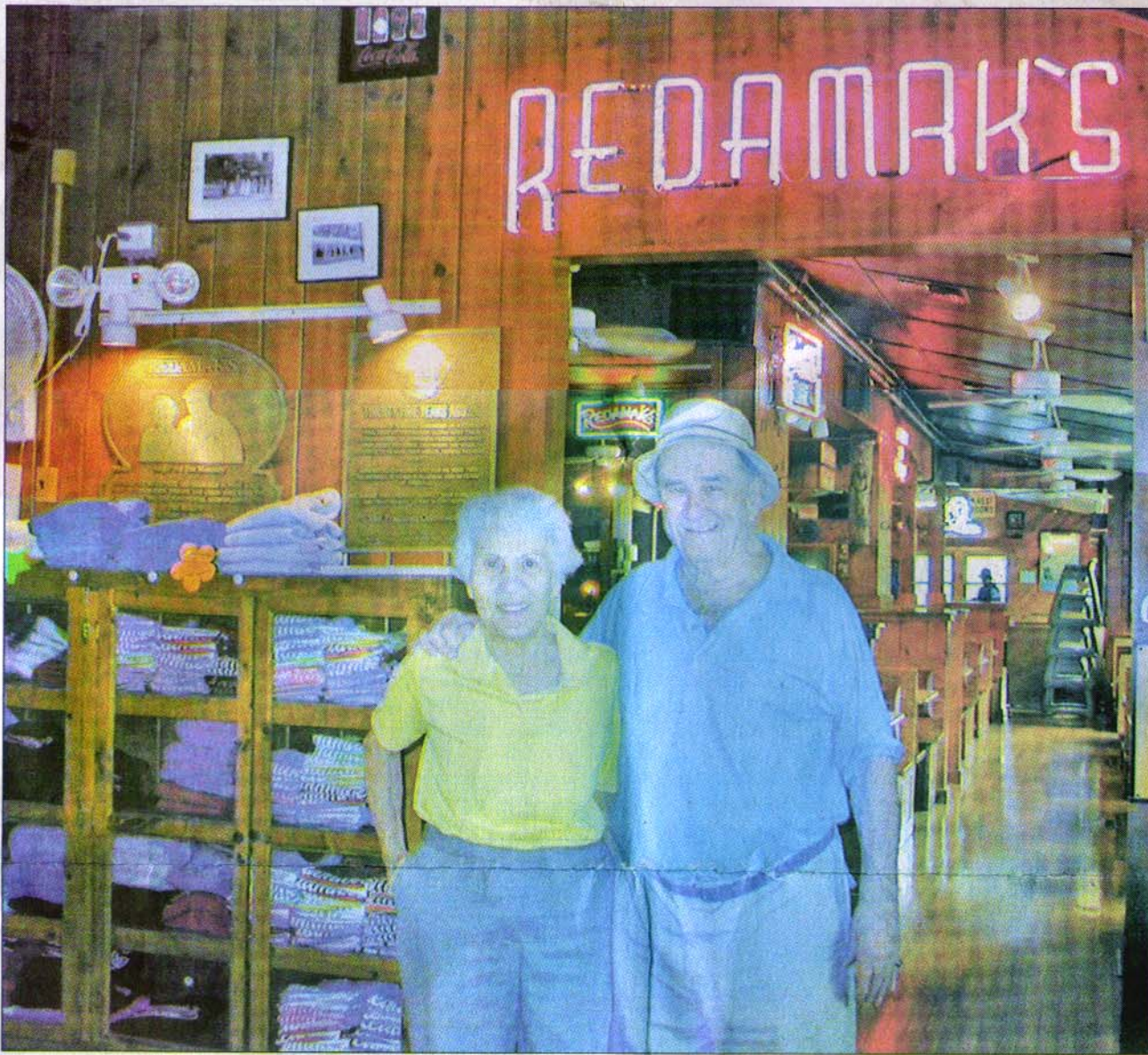
How it started

For years before they bought their own New Buffalo cottage, Jim and Angie visited friends in New Buffalo on summer weekends. They often ate at Redamak's, opened by George and Gladys Redamak in 1946 on the site of a former picnic grove.

Jim told the Redamaks more than once, “One of these days I'm going to buy this place.”

In 1974 Gladys, by then a widow, called the Maroneys. They signed a deal the next day. But Gladys called a week or so later with regrets. She wanted to keep some of the 4.8 acres. The Maroneys called off the purchase.

Thirty days later, Gladys resigned herself to selling the whole plot of land, but she wanted more money. They worked out a new deal. This time, Gladys hired Angie as manager for six months while the Maroneys went through the process of obtaining a license.



Jim and Angie Maroney pose at Redamak's, the popular summer restaurant in New Buffalo. They bought the restaurant in 1975 and have expanded the business from a small mom-and-pop diner to the much larger facility that serves 3,000 hamburgers on a busy summer day.

Lila Chandler photos / H-P correspondent

Gladys was apprehensive that they wanted to retain the name, Jim recalled. She was afraid her family name would turn to mud if the Maroneys failed in the business.

She needn't have worried.

How it grew

“We started with six employees,” Jim said. “I worked nights and Angie worked days. ... We'd pass each other. It was like a gold rush. We couldn't handle it.”

About a year after they opened, Jim and Angie called their sons for help. Jimmy was managing a bar

in Florida; Chuck was working in Chicago. Both came to New Buffalo within a week.

Chuck took over as general manager. For 10 years Jimmy operated a smaller Redamak's in Chicago, in his parents' old neighborhood at the corner of Wells and North Avenue. “It got too small for us” as the customer base expanded, Angie said.

“If we could've expanded, we'd have still been there,” Jim agreed.

After that, Jimmy opened an antiques business in the Redamak's adjacent barn. Additions over the years

include kitchen and prep area expansions; a patio, now fully enclosed and rentable for parties with a seating capacity of 200; and two sizable additions of the original paneled restaurant.

The Maroneys also “did two things we said we'd never do,” Jim admitted. They paved their parking lot, and they installed air conditioning.

“You've got to keep your customers happy,” Jim said. “Repetition of people coming built the legend. They come back if the price is right, service is very good and the food is exceptional.”

Family business

Jim and Angie grew up a few miles apart in northwest Chicago's Old Town. Now married 59 years, Jim said their priority in life is to “sit back and reap on our success. ... Our kids are here and we have plenty of help.”

Angie has taken care of Redamak's books for some three decades, and Jim is on the premises daily for about four hours.

Their son Chuck met his wife Linda in Redamak's kitchen. Their grandson Charlie and his wife work there as well.

Two former Redamak's employees just got married earlier this summer.

Debra Robertson of Three Oaks has waitressed and hosted at Redamak's for 28 years. “It was smaller (when I started), only 16 tables and a jukebox and a pinball machine.”

“When I started one girl had been there 10 years, another 12 years, and I thought, ‘You've got to be kidding. I'll never last that long.’ One year goes by after another. ... I'm a lifer. I love the Maroneys. They're like family, wonderful, wonderful people.”

Robertson remembers the origin of the grinning face gracing Redamak's menus and promotional items. Jimmy sat down at work and sketched the face one day. The Maroneys “fell in love with it,” Robertson recalled. “They trademarked it. ... I've always said it's like a take-off of his brother Chuck. It looks a little like Chuck did with the round face and brown hair.”

Fruits of success

It's a family hamburger joint, and the goal is to keep it that way. They're not out to be the next McDonald's. “We cut and grind our own meat on the premises, every other day,” Jim emphasized. “None of it's ever frozen.”

They process 130,000 pounds of hamburger in their eight-month season, from March through October.

Recently Redamak's was featured in an Associated Press article that ran nationwide. Friends from Florida and all across the Midwest mailed copies from their local newspapers or telephoned to congratulate the Maroneys. Angie said several television stations have called.

“I guess all that is a pat on the back,” Jim acknowledged.

More information is available at www.redamaks.com.