

The “named roads” era ended in the 1920s. One by one the era’s colorful road names were replaced by numbers. The Lincoln Highway was no exception. It became U.S. Highway 50, but still ran through Clarksville. A line got painted in the center of the concrete. Little else changed.

Madeleine Petersen ran one of Clarksville’s two service stations when Highway 50 was diverted to the current alignment in 1942, hastening the little ranch center’s demise.

Madeleine’s story

Madeleine Petersen was an asthmatic child in 1930s San Francisco. Her father had a good job in the industrial leather belt business. She fondly recalls accompanying him to some of the largest mining operations in the Mother Lode.



Her asthma prompted a family move from San Francisco to Clarksville in 1938. Arthur Petersen bought the Foothill Service Station and café in Clarksville, which offered gasoline, basic groceries, sandwiches and cold drinks. It sat right on Highway 50. Business was good.

The deal included the nicest house in Clarksville, a functioning well, the store, and several outbuildings.

The café became known as Petersen’s Café, its proprietress a bouncy 11-year-old named Madeleine who seemed to thrive on the hardships of small town life.

Her mother, accustomed to the comforts of San Francisco life, didn’t adjust nearly as well, and soon became despondent. Roughly six months after they arrived, she argued with her husband, went for a walk and was struck and killed on Hwy 50. The driver took off. Her death remains a Clarksville mystery.

Arthur Petersen could not bring himself to identify the body. The job fell to young Madeleine, who demonstrated the strength of character which became her hallmark.

“I really didn’t understand it,” she said. “She just looked like she was asleep.”



The café and store became a father-daughter affair. Madeleine recalls the early and mid-1940s in Clarksville fondly.

“Everyone came to the store... We had the only telephone and the only indoor plumbing in town.” They also had a pay phone and a generator for electricity.

The Petersens sold gas until Highway 50 moved several hundred feet north to its current alignment, bypassing Clarksville and the Petersen Café.

Sadly, a spark from the well pump ignited the shake shingle roof on their home in 1948, resulting in a major glow. Madeline caught it early, but her father couldn't hear her cries for help over the noise of the old “one lunger” well pump.

She fetched a ladder while her father struggled to hook up a hose, which failed. Father and daughter held hands and watched their home burn to the ground.

They moved into a three-room cabin on the property.

The café remained the focal point of Clarksville throughout the 1940s, with Madeline behind the counter as Clarksville's own “Gal Friday.”

When the cabin burned in the early 1950s, Arthur Petersen leased out the store and moved to Folsom. By then Madeleine had married Johnny Mosely. The newlyweds moved to Placerville, where Johnny tended bar at the Ivy House.

Tenants operated the store into the late 1950s or early 1960s.

The current residents of the old Petersen place constructed an out-building around the old café. Some of the interior features remain visible.