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THE DAILY STATESMAN

Dexter, Missouri ~ Monday, December 8, 2008

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From root beer & ice cream, local drive-in evolved into a major Dexter institution

Sunday, August 31, 2008

By Mike McCoy Staff Writer

It's hard to believe that a preacher on a national radio program could have been the impetus for what became something of an institution in Dexter. The concept was simple: You send him money and he would send you a prayer cloth.

In 1949 Leon McGarrity and his wife, Gwen, opened a small ice cream, fountain drink business on Highway 60 in Dexter. That was before the new highway and before there was much on that end of Dexter at all. In fact, the land south of the highway was nothing more than a field of popcorn owned by James William. McGarrity bought a small portion of that land to set up business. He called it Daisy Queen. He and his wife served soft ice cream, soft drinks and the real draw was a "root beer barrel."

"We served the root beer in an iced cold mug," says Gwen, "which was something that nobody had before."

Down the road, east of Daisy Queen, was the financial center for the radio preacher. All his collections flowed into the business. His connections to the area, as McGarrity recalls, was that he had family in Dexter. The employees would walk down to McGarrity's business for root beer and ice cream, and one day suggested that they serve some food because there wasn't a place for them to grab a bite to eat in that area.

So McGarrity bought a used grill and a hot dog warmer, and expanded big time into the food business. Now you could get a hamburger or hot dog with your root beer. The people down the road helped the McGarritys succeed. They often arrived, placed big orders and returned to their own mail-out business.

About that time complications arose over the name Daisy Queen. Another very familiar establishment felt that the named infringed on their own name. After several threatening legal communications, the McGarritys decided to change the name to the Dexter Queen.

In 1950 McGarrity decided to build a small, brick barbecue pit at the rear of the business. He had learned to smoke meat from his uncle, who just happened to have a recipe for a mustard-based sauce that he covered the pork shoulders with before cooking. The recipe wasn't his uncle's. His uncle a few years earlier had bought an eating establishment from an Indian in Dexter. The place was called the Wagon Wheel and the Indian passed on the sauce recipe to McGarrity's uncle. His uncle later would close that establishment.

McGarrity started out small. He smoked some shoulder "as needed" during those early years.

"It didn't take long for the tail to start wagging the dog," McGarrity says of the popularity of the barbecue at Dexter Queen.

He and Gwen worked 16-hour days. They added French fries and cole slaw a year later. In those days they made their fries from potatoes and the cole slaw was made from scratch.



Mike McCoy photo Leon and Gwen McGarrity opened the Daisy Queen in 1949 on Highway 60 in the middle of a popcorn field. The name was changed to Dexter Queen a year later. They sold the business in 1980 and retired. They are shown on the deck of their home in Dexter.

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circa 1960



The original "Daisy" Queen
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"We bought potatoes by the 100-pound bag," Gwen McGarrity says, "It was quite a chore to peel all those potatoes."

Obviously, the size of the barbecue pit grew as the business did. The meat was slow-cooked over coals made by hickory wood. That continued to be the practice until the late 1970s. Because of the intense labor involved, McGarrity finally went to a modern smoker that utilized gas for cooking while the meat rotated on a spit.

"It got so busy that we couldn't keep up," McGarrity says.

A lot of changes took place over the 32 years that the McGarritys operated the business. It was a constant battle for McGarrity to keep his place from becoming another high school hangout.

"I was rough on the teenagers," he concedes, "But I wanted a family oriented business."

Highway 60 by the 1960s was a teen Mecca. Teenagers burned up the road between the Dairy Queen on Business Highway 60 near Chrisman Tire Company and The Pig on the north side of the highway west of One Mile Road. The advent of the 1970s saw the teens shift to the A&W at the corner of One Mile Road and Business 60.

McGarrity compared the teenagers making the circle in those days to Indians "circling the Conestoga wagons."

As time went by, the potatoes were replaced with crinkle cut frozen fries, because it was easier. But the barbecue was by then famous, and residents who had long since moved away came back to Dexter Queen when they were came for a visit.

The McGarritys watched three generations pass through the service windows at Dexter Queen and had countless employees during their run as business owners. The only change they made in the building was to add a covered area in front of the windows. They sold the business in 1980.

Leon McGarrity was born in Calhoun County, Miss. in 1920. When he was three years old, his family moved to the Burdette Plantation outside Blytheville. His father was overseer of the cotton plantation.

"We had to get away from the boll weevils," McGarrity says.

He graduated from Luxora High School. His father moved to Steele to run a cotton gin. Leon moved to Steele and became a cotton buyer for this father. McGarrity got his first crack at running a business when he bought a night club in Steele in 1942. It was at the club that he first met Gwen. She managed a Ben Franklin store in Portageville, and would come to the night club at Steele with a group of her friends. She met Leon there.

"We just kind of hit it off," Leon says.

They dated for a year, before being married in 1943. Leon went off to work in Memphis where he worked for Continental Bread Company.

He worked there for awhile before his health took a turn for the worse. His sister and her husband lived in Dexter, and it was this strange twist of fate that brought the McGarritys to the area. His health began to improve and he began looking for a way to earn a living.

On August 1, 1949, they opened Daisy Queen, subsequently to be known as Dexter Queen.

"Happiness is a barbecue and malt from Dexter Queen," was the advertising slogan that launched untold thousands of pounds of pork shoulder into the diets of Bootheel residents.

McGarrity didn't say whether he ponied up for one of those prayer cloths that were so critical in getting his business off the ground. Yet, the barbecue business certainly proved prosperous for the couple over the years.

Comments

Note: The nature of the Internet makes it impractical for our staff to review every comment. If you feel that a comment is offensive, please [Login](#) or [Create an account](#) first, and then you will be able to flag a comment as objectionable.

Here i sit, up in frozen northern Illinois. I just finished reading all of these comments and I am now ready to hop in the car and drive the 7-8 hours just to get a "Lotta Pig"

and fries...omg...my mouth is watering now. I remember back in 1965 when we moved to Illinois, the school cafeteria was supposedly serving BBQ one day at lunch. I almost ran to the cafeteria that day at noon eager to bite into a real bbq for the first time since leaving southeast missouri. Well, the bbq was a "sloppy joe"!!! I couldn't believe it!!!!!! Needless to say, I had to drive all the way back to Dexter during summer vacation to get the best bbq in the u.s.a.....man, is my mouth watering now...I will be there soon....wooo hooo!!!!

-- Posted by **bwkingdingo** on Thu, Oct 23, 2008, at 10:21 PM

Ah, the Dexter Queen. Makes me hungry for some good barbecue, and makes me a little homesick. There's no good barbecue in the doldrums of Ohio...

-- Posted by **bhunsaker2003** on Wed, Sep 3, 2008, at 6:46 PM

Greatest BBQ I've ever had. I tell that to everyone who may pass through Dexter and my wife and I ALWAYS eat there when we visit. I remember Leon from the 70's when I was a kid before there was a cover over the front windows...then came the dining area much later. The secret is definitely the mustard sauce. It's also a great dipping sauce for fries and onion rings. Now I'm hungry. Oh yea, the pineapple shakes are the best I've ever had. But, you used to have to get a straw from McDonald's b/c the pineapple chunks wouldn't fit through the skinny straws at Dexter Queen. Last time I had one, they had fixed that.

-- Posted by **Jim Morrison** on Wed, Sep 3, 2008, at 2:06 AM

Loved this story....brings back so many good memories. I no longer live in Dexter but I still stop in to eat a BBQ when I am in town visiting family. I've eaten BBQ in several other towns throughout the area and nothing compares to Leon's. To me it will always be Leon's place. Thank you Leon and Gwen!!!

-- Posted by **Bearcat '76** on Tue, Sep 2, 2008, at 2:55 PM

I lived in the St Louis area most of my life but I always stopped at Dexter Queen for a lotta pig sandwich every time I visited relatives in Dexter and would buy a jar of the sauce to take back home with me.

-- Posted by **mythought** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 8:59 PM

I can still feel those potholes around the Pig...you bet we slowed down. Another thing about the Dairy Queen was that there was so much room to park also. You didn't usually circle all the way around. You would come in from the West side as you came from the Pig or the A&W later. You would either go on around from back and out the East side or else pull back around front and park.

The owner during the late 60's early 70's used to give free milk shakes to the guys on the football team during the 2 or 3 weeks of summer practices before school actually started...(helped put on the pounds)

I was lucky enough to have one of the few convertibles..1965 Mustang...so sometimes after a pep rally I would take the cheerleaders through town and out to A&W...and then back to the Dairy Queen. Yes shannonhoon, that was the '71-'72 season.

Jerry Jarrell, the sports reporter...had a '69 Camaro R/S 396 (Maroon and black)..and later a gold and black Olds 442. That boy was living right. HI JERRY!!!!

I may not remember yesterday but my long-term is doing just fine. :-)

THANK YOU MR. AND MRS. McGARRITY!!!!!!

-- Posted by **Bearcat72** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 3:35 PM

Dexter bbq has about the best ribs in Dexter.They are so meaty and tender.....I know other places have good ribs,but this is just one persons opinion

-- Posted by **MOGAL** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 2:08 PM

Goat lady we left the mud holes around the Pig on purpose so the kids would slow down going around.

-- Posted by **MOGAL** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 2:00 PM

My Father-in-law first owned the Pig for several years then we bought it from him. The kids loved the circling around and honking for drive up service. We had juke box music piped outside and they sure liked that. We peeled 21 to 23 hundred lbs of french fries a week and they were peeled by hand. We bbq'd 125 shoulders a week, so food must have tasted pretty good there in those days.

Our french fry oil was changed ever 3 days so the fries were always crispy and tasty..

Kids would spend their last quarter on a large fry and drink before they went home late at night.

That was the good ole` days!!!

-- Posted by **MOGAL** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 1:24 PM

I love Dexter Queen and miss being able to go there daily. My sisters and I all had the honor of working there. It was the best job I had as a teenager. My whole family still continues to eat there on a regular bases. The food has always been consistant and you know when you order just what you will get...AWSOME FOOD..

Just one bite and it takes you back to all those memories of years gone by.

Not many places can do that anymore..

-- Posted by **mommas_bluerose** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 11:57 AM

Jim Bland owned it for awhile and now Bob Thrower does.

-- Posted by **BonScott** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 9:03 AM

Who bought the Dexter Queen after Butch Beard died?

-- Posted by **goat lady** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 8:25 AM

Don't recall the Dairy Queen being a part of the circle in the fifties. Then it was The Pig and Leon's place - around and around and around. I can still see those mud holes in the parking lot at the Pig! It was more popular, since we could park three deep and visit (and they had car hops), but Leon's had better food.

Good memories and good story! Thanks, Mike! The Statesman needs more stuff like this!

Has anyone done a history story on the Hickory Log? I don't remember when or how it started.

-- Posted by **goat lady** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 8:23 AM

"Highway 60 by the 1960s was a teen Mecca. Teenagers burned up the road between the Dairy Queen on Business Highway 60 near Chrisman Tire Company and The Pig on the north side of the highway west of One Mile Road. The advent of the 1970s saw the teens shift to the A&W at the corner of One Mile Road and Business 60."

Don't say anything bad shannonhoon...(I know you will) but I sure have great memories driving around "The Pig" and then on down to A&W and then down around the "Dairy Queen"and then up through town.....and then start all over again. We didn't circle the Dexter Queen at the time..

'68-72.

I love going back to Dexter and always go get a Lotta Pig in the Basket...and, of course, some Hickory Log ribs.

Dexter is a great place...and always has been.

-- Posted by **Bearcat72** on Sun, Aug 31, 2008, at 7:03 AM

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