

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

The Pig Stand

America's first drive-in restaurant

Shiny black Model-T's, carrying curious families and traveling salesmen, lined up a dozen deep at the curb beside the busy Dallas-to-Fort Worth Highway. White-aproned teenagers hustled the few strides between the Pig Stand and the cars, clutching handfuls of savory barbecue pork sandwiches and icy bottles of soda pop.

In September of 1921, on opening day of the first Pig Stand, locals and passersby alike delighted over this novel side-benefit of automobile ownership: eating in the privacy of your own car!

What a thoroughly modern picnic...a perfect outing for the anything-goes Roaring Twenties! Even before you braked to a stop at the curb (hence, the term "curb service"), a daring young waiter hopped on your side-mounted running board (hence the term "carhop") and took your order. In a flash, he raced back with hot food and cold drinks, transforming your car into a dining room on wheels.

While A&W Root Beer founder Roy W. Allen experimented in California with frosty mugs of foamy refreshment served to car-bound patrons, Dallas candy and tobacco merchant Jessie G. Kirby envisioned a new kind of dining

experience, one hitched to the nation's accelerating love affair with the motorcar. Prominent local physician Reuben W. Jackson kicked in \$10,000 to get the Pig Stand up and running.

The enterprising partners erected a small white-washed, wood-frame sandwich stand with barbecue pit, strategically located near the curb to serve people in their cars. Kirby's rationale for creating the world's first drive-in restaurant, while hardly sentimental, proved prophetic: "People with cars are so lazy they don't want to get out of them to eat!"

Sure enough, car-crazy Pig Stand customers in Dallas (and, later, across the state and nation) went hog-wild over carhops, curb service, and pig sandwiches that were quick to make and easy to serve. During the Twenties and early Thirties, Pig Stands sped ahead with practically no competition--first in Texas, then in some 60 locations from Florida to southern California. Jumping on the Pig Stand's successful joy ride, other restaurateurs opened competing drive-ins, and a new industry was born.

The Depression of the Thirties shrank families' dining-out dollars. In response, Pig Stand management discontinued its franchise operation, one of country's first. It concentrated on company-owned locations in Texas, where it prospered under slogans such as: "America's Motor Lunch," "Where a Sandwich is a Meal," "You'll Be Glad You're Hungry," and the trademarked "EAT a Pig Sandwich." At every business turn, the Pig Stand tried to remain leader of the pack with a phenomenal string of "firsts"...some served up by accident.

"Besides opening the first drive-in restaurant, we experimented with the first drive-thru window and installed the first drive-in car canopies," explains Pig Stand president Richard Hailey. "We were the first restaurant to use fluorescent lighting, back in the Thirties, and were one of the first to use neon lights and air-conditioning. We even created several menu items now found in many

restaurants--like Texas Toast, fried onion rings, and the chicken fried steak sandwich."

Richard especially likes rehashing the origins of Texas Toast. No wonder--his father, Royce, helped invent it!

As district manager of Beaumont's Pig Stands in the early Forties, Royce Hailey (who started as carhop in 1930 in Dallas, where he still lives) asked the local Rainbo Bakery to slice his bread thicker than usual, as an experiment. When the slabs wouldn't fit into kitchen toasters, a Pig Stand cook suggested buttering both sides and heating them on the grill. The resulting toast, crisp outside and moist inside, proved irresistible. Royce put it on the menu as Texas Toast, a bread big enough for the Lone Star State.

At a Dallas stand in the Twenties, another short-order cook was cutting fresh onions one day and accidentally dropped an onion ring into a bowl of breading batter. Out of curiosity, he cooked the serendipitous concoction in hot oil and was delighted with the result. Fried onion rings made it on the Pig Stand menu...and beyond.

Richard Hailey also believes the Pig Stand was the first to put chicken fried steak on a bun. "In the Forties, my dad entered a national menu competition," he explains. "He won first place with an item the judges had never seen before: a chicken fried steak sandwich, garnished with lettuce and tomato."

Today, a steady stream of regulars and nostalgia seekers frequent eight Pig Stands in San Antonio, Beaumont, and Houston (and one Hailey's Family Restaurant in San Antonio). They come for Texas Toast, fried onion rings, and chicken fried steak sandwiches--as well as the famous pig sandwich which, as always, is still barbecued fresh at each location and served with relish and a special sauce. They come for the Pig Stand's wide-ranging menu of breakfast, lunch, and dinner items, plus daily plate lunch specials--all made from scratch.

But customers also come for the family atmosphere and sense of history they feel at Pig Stands.

"Most of our customers eat here everyday. You can set your watch by them, and they almost always order the same things. It's like one big family," says Rose Hoots, district manager of Beaumont's three Pig Stands. At #41 on Calder Street, middle-aged couples often stop by for burgers and malts, she adds, as well as a chance to sit together again in their favorite booth from high school days. Built in the Forties, historic #41 (which still offers curb service weekdays at lunch) remains perhaps the nation's oldest circular drive-in, writes Michael Karl Witzel in his classic *The American Drive-In*.

Driven by competitors nipping at its heels, Pig Stand management experimented almost from the start with new building designs to draw customers' attention and accelerate service, Jim Heimann points out in his new book, *Car Hops and Curb Service*. Whimsical Pig Stands looked like oriental pagodas with tile roofs and decorative corner columns topped with glass globes. Octagonal Pig Stands, covered with colorful tile exteriors and bright signboards overhead, paved the way for even flashier circular drive-ins that glowed with streamlined neon lights.

The circular design of the late Fifties put customers not only closer to service, but closer to each other.

"Back then, we didn't have malls to hang out in, so drive-ins were the places to be," recalls Richard Hailey. "Some other drive-ins had problems with rowdiness, but our managers really got to know the teenagers who hung out there, so they knew their limits, sort of like second parents."

Nationwide, however, teenagers overstayed their welcome. Tire-squealing, top-down hot-rodders congested parking lots, driving off the more lucrative family trade. At the same time, rising real estate costs and competition

from fast-food chains like McDonald's evolved the industry toward a popular new concept, the coffee shop, where diners enjoyed sit-down service in air-conditioned comfort.

In 1968, when the construction of Interstate Highways 35 and 37 forced the closing of San Antonio's Broadway Street Pig Stand (#29, built in 1921), the restaurant reopened as a combination drive-in and coffee shop, spiffed up with trendy fiberglass molded chairs and sleek laminated plastic countertops.

During the "classic car" era of the late Fifties and Sixties, Pig Stands numbered as many as 25 in Texas. The large avant-garde Austin location on South Congress Avenue featured six "car hostesses," inside seating for 84, and parking for 70 cars, 40 of which fit under what Richard Hailey believes was the first "rock 'n roll" car canopy--a wavy metal awning garnished with bright neon lights.

Houston's Washington Avenue location #7 stands today as the quintessential coffee shop...with a pigged-out attitude. Six years ago, when Jackie Wavra signed on as manager, long-time customer Margaret Cooley started bringing Jackie pigs--stuffed pig dolls, pig statues, piggy banks--and other regular customers followed suit. Jackie now displays some of the 2,000 donated "pig-mentos" in cases built into each window.

Texas author Larry McMurtry found Pig Stand #7 the perfect setting for scenes in *The Evening Star*, sequel to his Academy Award-winning *Terms of Endearment*. The eatery wound up on the book's cover and is featured in the newly-released **[note: apparently due out by November or December]** movie starring Jack Nicholson, Shirley MacClaine (whose character, Aurora, loves pig sandwiches), and Ben Johnson (in his last appearance before his death).

"Some of our employees and customers got to be extras in the movie, and the food you see is what we cook here," says Jackie, recalling how Shirley

McClain loved her milkshakes. The film's producers also liked the restaurant's pig sleigh and pig Santa decorations--so much so that they re-wrote one scene, setting it at Christmas, in order to use them.

Booth number six at Pig Stand #7 bears a plate proclaiming it as "Aurora's Booth," (Aurora was Shirley MacLaine's character) in honor of McMurtry and *The Evening Star*. **[the name plate should be in place soon; I'll confirm this before press time.]**

In the end, the drive-in restaurant business (immortalized in another movie, the 1973 *American Graffiti*) traveled the same route as the drive-in theater. It merged into American popular culture, then exited to near extinction (with the notable exception of Oklahoma-based Sonic Drive-Ins, located primarily in the South and Southwest).

But if you find yourself with "no particular place to go" (as Chuck Berry sang in his 1964 hit), there's still a place you can grab a hot pig sandwich and cold soda pop or a cheeseburger and hot-fudge sundae, a place you can still slide into a Naugahyde booth beside your sweetheart or even stay behind the wheel to eat. Just hop in your favorite car (classic or new), put down the top (at least roll down the window), and cruise over to the joint where it all began...the Texas Pig Stand.