

Dad's Fast-Food Venture

By Clement S. Pepper

In February 1943, our dad was working for the Southern Pacific Railway in Tucumcari, N.M., a dry, dusty town of nearly 6,000 about 100 miles west of Amarillo, Texas. Dad was a fireman on a switch engine in the rail yards.

After Dad had been away from home and working there for several months, he moved his family from Wisconsin to Tucumcari to join him.

Shortly after we moved to Tucumcari, the hotel adjacent to the railway depot caught fire and burned to the ground. Because of wartime shortages, it was not rebuilt. The land was simply cleared and remained bare.

Dad was working a switch engine that spent its days shuttling cars around the rail yards. And he got an idea.

Four scheduled passenger trains came through Tucumcari each day, plus any number of randomly scheduled troop trains. Each train had a one-hour lay-over for servicing the diners and changing locomotives from the Southern Pacific to the Rock Island line, or vice versa.

During that hour, a lot of people scurried about in search of something to eat. The pickings were pretty poor. There was a small beanery at the depot, and the Florence Café was across the street from where the hotel had stood. That was all, unless you walked the half-dozen blocks to downtown, which some people did. But most of the passengers just stood around and complained.

Dad never bought meat from a store's counter. He always wanted to go back to the reefer and pick out what he wanted. Then, when the butcher cut it off for him, he would have part of it ground; no off-the-shelf hamburger for him.

He bought his meat from a butcher by the name of Harry Tomlinson. Harry was a chubby, good-natured guy, a bit on the short side, and he usually

could be found chewing on a dead cigar. Dad was in his store one day and remarked that if he only had a couple hundred bucks, he would put up a stand on that vacant lot and go into business feeding all those hungry people—sort of a fast-food forerunner, if you will.



I am pictured at the original stand. Customers stood outside at the front for service. The entrance was at the back.

Harry said he would put up the money if Dad would put up the stand and run the business. They shook hands on it.

And so it was that when my younger brother, Jim, and I woke up one morning in late June, Dad had work for us. We went with Dad to the lumberyard, where he picked out the wood. We spent the rest of the summer working with him to put the stand together.

As you can see from the photos, Dad was never satisfied with its construction. In between trains, he was always making changes.

But as soon as there were four walls and a skeleton roof, we went into business. Dad and Mom would be up early, making sandwiches and getting things together to take to the stand. We still didn't have a car—Dad never owned one all the time we lived in Tucumcari—but things got done even so.

He made a deal with the Florence Café to store things in their back room. But our storage arrangement had its shortcomings. One of our hottest-selling items was hard-boiled eggs. One morning, while cleaning up after a train pulled out, I dropped an egg—*splat*. It was raw!

Oh boy, our ears should have been red hot. Dad walked over to the Florence Café and found the cook cussing over a tin of hard-boiled eggs. He and Dad were using the same kind of large tins, and the hard-cooked and fresh eggs got mixed up somehow.

Pretty soon we took eggs off the menu. Perhaps someone reading this got one of those eggs. If it helps, we did feel bad about it.

Dad was on good terms with the café because he had done a good job cleaning and painting the interior—with the reluctant assistance of his two older sons—shortly after we arrived. There is no grease like the hardened residue that builds up year after year on a restaurant ceiling.

Back in Wisconsin when I went woodcutting with Dad, he would always begin by brewing a tin of “farmer-style” coffee. For the stand, he expanded the little tin syrup pail to a 5-gallon size. Jim and I had to fill the tin at the faucet on the curb out back, tote it in and hoist it up onto the gas stove to heat.

I should mention that this didn't happen until we had a roof on and the building had been outfitted with gas and electricity. But we never did have our own supply of water for coffee. Dad's approach to making coffee was to dump a pound of grounds into the tank, wait for it to boil, turn off the heat, and throw in

some ice to knock the grounds down. It tasted surprisingly good.

The first day, we sold \$75 worth of merchandise. People stood all around the outside, pointing at what they wanted. Dad always wore a white cap tilted toward the right at a crazy angle and high-top boots laced all the way up.

He, Jim and I wore carpenter aprons to hold the money. There was no time for fooling with a cash register. After a train left, I would pull money



Above: My dad, with his jaunty white hat and high-top boots. Beside him is Harry Tomlinson. Harry got called into the Navy shortly after we opened, exacerbating the employee difficulties. Note the new front entrance; service was now inside. Below: My mother pays a visit.



out of every pocket. This turned out to be a major problem as the business grew. We could not just hire someone and trust them with handling all that money—and there was a lot of it to handle. In a short time the stand was grossing more than \$4,000 a week.

As soon as the roof was done, Dad had a big sign made. It read: “PEP’S LUNCH.”



The final configuration. The front entry has turned the corner. The storeroom is at the left with the intervening space filled in.

After the doors were in place, he had another sign made. It read: “PULL GETS YOU PLACES, PULL AND COME IN.”

Later, a large, stand-alone billboard announced: “PEP’S LUNCH. LUNCHES WITH A ‘PEP’ KNOWN FROM SYDNEY TO SYRACUSE.” It was crazy, but fun.

As soon as the trend was established, Dad quit the Southern Pacific and went full time with the stand. He had little choice. We had hardly opened for business when the railroad changed all the day-time schedules to night.

Dad had it tough trying to get food—he had to first get ration stamps for everything and then hike around town to track things down. Then he had to be around when the trains came in. Dad had a really good rapport with the dining-car stewards, and he did a lot of wheeling and dealing.

Of course, Jim and I came in for a lot of the nighttime duty as well. Harry even quit his butcher job and joined us full time. But soon after that, the Navy grabbed him in the draft. Then his father-in-law, Chet Baker, joined us.

Dad, Chet, Jim and I were the entire staff. We were kept mighty busy. But for the first time in my young life, I was making some decent money. I bought my first bicycle and new clothes, and was beginning to enjoy Tucumcari more than I had.

When I showed up with the bike, Dad made a remark about working my legs to give my hinder a ride. But one morning when he’d had a call—he was still with the Southern Pacific then—he grabbed my bike and took off down the street on it. I was amused by the picture he made, pumping away, giving his hind end that free ride.

Whenever there was time, Dad added on to the stand. Once the first structure was complete, he started building a storeroom off to the side. When that was done, we filled in the space in between.

Once we had walls, people no longer had to stand around outside, pointing to

what they wanted. There were two doors in the front. Customers entered through one and fell in a line that moved along a counter. We stood behind it, took the orders, handed out the items, grabbed the money, forked over the change, and moved on to the next in line. No time for formalities.

We did catch a lot of flak on one account. We sold coffee in one-pint paper containers with lids. A pint is two cups. In those days, coffee sold for a dime a cup. We were often accused of charging double the going rate, so we had to keep pointing out that it really was *two* cups. But not everyone accepted that, and some customers walked out, saying that they were going to turn us in to the Office of Price Administration. If anyone did, we never heard about it.

As the business grew, Dad was making more money than he ever had. He put a lot of it to good use. He told me that at one time, he had paid off all his Depression-era debts. He was very proud of that. Then he bought a house on 20 acres of land. But that’s another story. ❖

