

THE DAIRY FREEZE: TOWN'S MOST SUCCESSFUL JOB TRAINING PROGRAM



"It kind of reminds you of the television show "Happy Days."

—Bobo Jones (with Nita Schnepf)

If you want to see what life was like in the 1950s, you don't to go farther than the Dairy Freeze in Blackstone. While modern fast food restaurants compete by faster food processing and assembly line service, the old Dairy Freeze still makes fresh hamburger patties by hand and mixes its milkshakes like the old drug store soda fountains did.

"It kind of reminds you of the television show "Happy Days," says owner Bobo Jones, who came to work there a week after it opened in 1959. And nothing much has changed since then, either. Surrounded by plenty of parking space, the Dairy Freeze is the hub of the mobile youth culture. Three decades of teenagers have passed through their adolescence with the Dairy Freeze looking on. The oldest operating eating establishment (can you call the Dairy Freeze a restaurant?) in Blackstone under one management, the Dairy Freeze is a success story. Jones and his class-mate Bobby Daniels bought "the Freeze" in 1961 and began hiring kids off the street to keep the eight person staff filled. "There were no child labor laws then," Jones said.

"My Gosh, there must have been 1,500 to 2,000 kids who have worked here over the past 30 years." he said, leaning back in his chair with the realization. Nita Schnepf, who just retired after 23 years in the front room of the Freeze, looks back and remembers the laughter. "I'm the only woman in Blackstone 63- years-old that doesn't

have to take nerve pills... 'cause I worked at the Dairy Freeze," she joked. She had watched Blackstone grow up several times. Children would come barely able to touch the - order window, and before you knew it, they were leaving for college.

And if the kids weren't there eating, they were working inside. "Having four boys of my own, I could relate to them," said Mrs. Schnepf. "If I left a note for them to do something on their night shift and they didn't, they were called back in the morning. In fact, one mother sent her son back before breakfast to finish his job. " Mrs. Schnepf has a remarkable - memory and can roll back through the years.

You could measure time at the Dairy Freeze. Mrs. Schnepf recalled a little girl who always got a grape drink: "So I called her my little 'grape girl,' and that little thing couldn't even reach the counter, and now she's finishing college."

And the regular customers were not always loyal. There was a Lynchburg couple that for years always stopped for a barbecue, and their children thought enough of the Dairy Freeze Lady (which is what Mrs. Schnepf was called) to tell her when they would no longer be stopping because one, of the two had died. And there was the lady who brought Mrs. Schnepf a box of candy in gratitude for being given a towel to wipe up a drink she had spilled in her car. Mrs. Schnepf laughed: "I ought to write a book," she said.

But it was all the kids who had worked there that made the greatest memories. "Both Bobo and Bobby had to have loved young people to have endured all these years," said Mrs. Schnepf. Then she laughed again. "I always accused Bobby Daniels of always hiring young people because he was too cheap to pay adults." The Dairy Freeze was a place where you could poke fun at yourself. "You can work and have fun too," said Mrs. Schnepf. Remarkably, she had only one bad experience with a kid working there. "I asked Bobo to give this one kid a chance," and she told him that if he didn't work out, she was going to get blamed. "He did fine for a good while. But don't you know one night he emptied the cash register and never came back. Billy Abel caught him in Crewe."

Jones remembered another occasion when the cash register was coming up short every night. Jones Daniels watched from an empty house next door for four hours caught the boy stealing the money. But these were only two that anyone remembered being fired for stealing. For most, the Dairy Freeze was a chance to buy a car. "I'll tell you one thing, I've bought many a boy a new car" Jones said with a laugh.

In the '70's, Dairy Freeze Number Two opened up across town. "We were the only fast food place for years and business was real good" Jones said. When Daniels sold out in 1978 and opened Bevell's Hardware, Jones kept Dairy Freeze number One going, despite Hardee's coming to town.

"When Hardee's opened, business got real bad. It took me about a year to come back," Jones said. But his regular customers started coming again and when McDonalds opened, the business hardly changed.

Jones says his biggest asset is fresh hamburger and having the only foot-long hotdogs in town. That's why he thinks he has survived. Or maybe its just all those kids who've grown up and keep coming back for a taste of the past that keeps the Dairy Freeze going.