

Corner Dog House: Preserving a 45-year tradition

Steve Willinger wasn't looking to buy a hot dog stand when he was driving down East Mary Street, on the Virginia side of Bristol. But he noticed the Corner Dog House was up for sale.

He did have some restaurant DNA. Steve's mother ran an Oregon seafood house, where he did hard labor peeling Brussels sprouts, and his grandfather ran a seafood restaurant in Washington state.

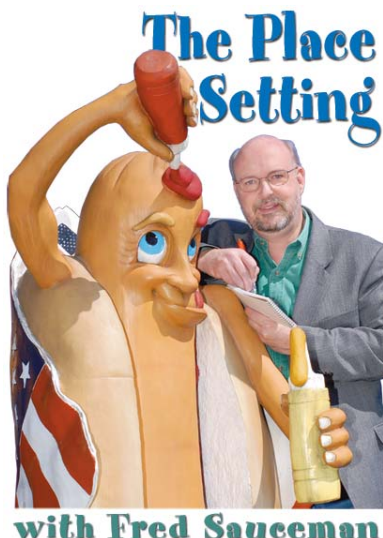
But a hot dog house? And one that had built a 45-year reputation on boiled red hot dogs, unlike any frankfurter Steve had ever encountered growing up in Berkeley, California? The match seemed unlikely at first.

But Steve, in my opinion, is the model "outsider," one who took the time to study Appalachia and came here not to reform it or exploit it, but rather to preserve a tradition. He took part in Kingsport's senior leadership program ENCORE last fall, learning about bicycle trails, water and air quality, servant leadership and Appalachian food.

Now, as owner-operators of the Corner Dog House, Steve and his wife Sherry view themselves as caretakers, as trustees. They didn't come to Bristol intent on altering red hot dog habits but to understand the popularity of the dish.

"It's a very local flavor," Steve told me while sitting at the picnic table in front of his walkup hot dog store. "So many people worked at the Valleydale plant over on Commonwealth. In the early days of the business, the hot dogs came from right here in town."

Betty Brown remembers those early days. She and her husband Joe, who worked at Raytheon, bought the Corner Dog House in 1963, one year after it opened. They ran the business longer than anyone. A lot longer than the later proprietor who applied



just enough chili to "stain the bun," in the words of longtime customer Bob Hobbs, and then "charged you a nickel for extra."

Betty recalls the dime-a-dog days and the time a Bristol policeman suggested adding some bread to the chili. With that, the practice of thickening it with breadcrumbs began. Betty says the chili is really more like a sauce.

She brought her grandson by the Corner Dog House recently, after the Willingers had taken over, and the grandson declared, "Oh, grandma, it's like it used to be."

For Steve and Sherry, Betty is always a welcome presence, and they'll ask her to taste-test the chili. The Willingers' hot dog algebra calculates that some nine million have been served at the Corner Dog House, most of them by Betty. Steve shared that figure with a Valleydale sales representative, who felt it was a valid estimate.

One of Betty's most enduring memories is getting telephone calls around Thanksgiving from people who had moved away from Bristol and were coming back home for the holiday. They



Corner Dog House co-owners Sherry and Steve Willinger view themselves as trustees, out to make sure that Bristol never forgets boiled red hot dogs. (Fred Sauceman photo)

wanted to make sure the Corner Dog House would be open the Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving.

"You wouldn't think that people would buy hot dogs after Thanksgiving," says Betty. "You'd think they'd have leftovers, but we'd be busy then. They were tired of turkey, I guess."

On lunch breaks from Virginia High School, Bob Hobbs' daily meal consisted of two hot dogs, one with chili and one with slaw, a peanut butter sandwich, and an order of tater tots.

Steve relates the story of a former Bristolian now living in Atlanta. Steve asked him what he thought of Corner dogs, since he had a lot of choices in Atlanta. Steve said the customer told him he never cared for them, but his mother would bring the family to eat them, and now, when he comes home, he still has to have one "even though I never did like them."

Talking with Steve and Betty at that picnic table out front, I realized what a strategic location 102 East Mary is. The bus stops regularly on the neighborhood street, and local train traffic diverts automobile drivers right by the Dog House.

The business is located near the Lee Street Baptist Church, a factor in its being closed on Sundays.

"We were going to open on Sundays one time, but the pastor came down and talked to Joe," remembers Betty. "He said if we did, kids would come down here and spend their money instead of putting it in the collection plate."

Steve will never replace the boiled reds, but he has added a Nathan's hot dog along with the Dixie, an 80-20 beef-pork blend, with a spicier, beefier chili.

Steve and Sherry knew they had done the right thing in leaving New Jersey behind and embarking on their Bristol hot dog adventure when a Sullins Academy alumna brought her grandson to the Corner Dog House for the first time and asked the Will-

ingers to autograph the receipt.

Steve declares, "We have a responsibility to bring this downtown landmark back to what people remember." **GTC**

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Morris Stewart spoons breadcrumb-thickened chili onto a Corner Dog. (Fred Sauceman photo)

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