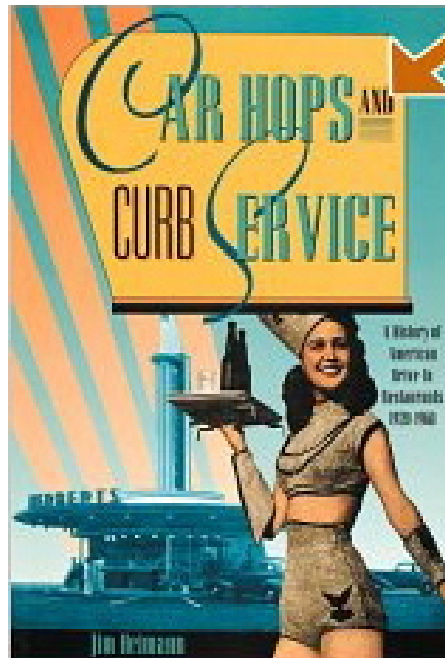


If You Remember, Just Say *Wow!*



I celebrate the days when one could pull up to many a roadside joint and order something to be delivered to the car on a clever little window tray. The cold Cokes or Dr Peppers wore a paper napkin girdle to soak up the chill beads. The Cokes back then burned one's throat as they went down. True "Original Cokes," you know, contained a bit of cocaine. Today they contain, well, who knows. I suspect Creomulsion.

This was a time when Neely's was in the old wooden building farther up on West Grand. The carhops announced their coming and going by the loud clap of the screen door. As they headed outside, we watched them closely to see if it was our order. If so, we knew to roll the car window up about the width of one's palm.

The French fries had enough grease on them that they too needed napkin dams. The grease made them limp—not crispy, and the limpness was what made them good. A little salt was already on them from the kitchen. I always added a little pepper too. Once, while visiting in Niagara-on-the-River Canada, I found some limp ones at a street carnival. The barker sprinkled them with vinegar instead of catsup. Not bad, but when I got home I resumed my Heinz.

World-Class were the French fries at the Lions Club trailer during 1950's-era home Maverick games. The paper cones that contained them were soggy from lard, but the fries could not be replicated. There was something grand about Lions fries when the chill in the night air made them give off that wisp of steam that caused a swell of saliva to flow down one's chin. I always bought two in case I reluctantly had to share, but I tried to empty one of them on the way back to the stands.

There was a dark side to drive-ins. I worked at the South Washington A&W Drive-In in high school. Mr. Neely's training regimen said I must work inside for a low hourly wage and earn my way up the ladder to carhopping for tips. I figured I was as well off staying inside, because who would tip a flat-top-headed boy versus the pretty blonde with the bobbing ponytail? My inside job was washing root beer mugs—an endless cavalcade of them. The mug sink had a continuous replenishment of very hot water flowing into it. My face was slick with oil from my pores, which fertilized my bountiful crop of pimples. That sink was like an all-evening steam bath, and sometimes punctuated with a soggy cigarette butt someone had extinguished in a mug.

I gave up the carhop dream—trading it for a job with a roofing company. The day we fiberglass-insulated the attic of the Methodist Church in its 110-degree environment had me desperately wanting one of those root beers I got to see going out on those car-hop trays. My root beer job didn't include all the free root beer I wanted. In fact, I can't recall ever getting a free one. Mr. Neely was not one to dilute a profit margin.

Sonic eventually took car hopping to a new level when they introduced their roller-skating gals. The skates must have met with mishaps because today they wear tennis shoes. I still tip the carhops though, because I know what it is like. The only downside is that today, we place our orders through a microphone and have to guess what the person on the other end is saying. "Will that be all?" is about all I think I understand. I always answer yes and hope the order turns out right and I don't end up with someone's corn dog instead of a Number One. There's no sweating Coke bottle at Sonic, only a Styrofoam cup that they say will remain in the planet's landfill for twelve centuries. Aliens, trying to unmask the remnants of our lost culture, will be perplexed. More advanced than we, they never abandoned carhops and green glass bottles.

All this talk has made me hungry. There's no curb service, and not even a hint of a carhop, but I'm heading over to Fugler's Bubba Burger. He's got a sandwich so big that it only takes 6 to make a dozen.

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