

ADVENTURE

SIGNS



Courtesy Dorcas Hebery



Courtesy Dorcas Hebery

This sign outside Black River Falls warned motorists on Highway 12 that they were about to arrive on the doorstep of The Real McCoy's restaurant and gas station (pictured at top right in 1956). The creative marketing — including personal windshield cards like the one pictured at right — left an impression on many travelers headed across northwest Wisconsin.

The search to relive fond childhood memories of trips north on Highway 12 nets the story of creative business owners.

By TED SCHAAER • For the State Journal

OF
THE
TIMES

**We're Hoping This Clean Windshield Will
Make Your Trip A Bit More Pleasant . . .**

We have maps and road information for your convenience. Won't you make this your Highway 12 & 27 stop whenever you come through? Just come on in "Eat if it kills you, I need the money."

Believe me we'll try like the dickens to make you glad you stopped.

The Real McCoy's BLACK RIVER FALLS
WISCONSIN

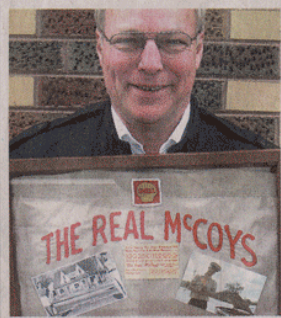
Mac's Shell Service
Martha's Cafe

Featuring Breakfast as you like it
with lots of darn GOOD COFFEE

Courtesy Ted Schaar

Before the Interstate superceded it, a primary way to and from Eau Claire was Highway 12, which runs from Michigan all the way to Washington. In the late 1950s and early '60s, my family traveled to Eau Claire occasionally from Janesville to visit family.

Automobiles were coming into their own then, people took to the road in great numbers, and billboards and signs lined the way. Some stood out. For many years, Beaver Dam had one that read "Home of 12,000 busy beavers"; a sign for a Kekoskee tavern located near a dam on the Rock River advertised it was "the best dam bar by a dam site." The witty Burma Shave series offered white-lettered rhymes on successive red placards to passing motorists:



Ted Schaar photo

Keith Brown, who framed the shirt he wore as a gas station attendant at The Real McCoy's, said Highway 12 through Black River Falls was known as "Gasoline Alley." "Mac put a sign north of town that read, '21 gas stations and then The Real McCoy's.'"

*The monkey took
One look at Jim
And threw the peanuts
Back at him
He needed
Burma-Shave*

On our first trip up Highway 12, I saw a billboard in the distance that appeared to display just two words — "Awful Coffee" — in red letters on a yellow field. Once we got closer, I could make out two much smaller words and the name of a restaurant up the road a bit in Black River Falls. The additional words wedged between awful and coffee were "darn good." I thought it was clever.

As the years went on, we traveled less and less often up 12. But when we did, I often commented on the restaurant as we approached BRF. Finally I told my wife we should go look for it, so we pulled off the Interstate near Millston, got on Highway 12, and drove completely through

BRF, but didn't find the colorful restaurant I remembered.

Because it was so unusual, I decided I had to discover its fate.

Working the phones

I phoned the BRF Chamber of Commerce and spoke with Kathy Martin, a friendly woman who had no idea what I was talking about. She said she would ask around, and soon called back after consulting an older resident who said the place I remembered was "The Real McCoy's" — a name that definitely rang a bell.

Next I spoke with BRF librarian Mary Woods, who supplied some clippings and before long, I was speaking with Donna Hulsey, daughter of the original owners.

Hulsey told me The Real McCoy's was on the northeast corner where Highways 12 and 27 form a T just south of town. In addition to the restaurant, it offered Shell gas from four pumps which stood about

two car widths from two entrances. The left one took visitors to the cafe and the right to the service station office. Behind the building were more billboards, all large and bright.

In a family history she is writing, Hulsey reports that in 1947 her dad and mom, Donald and Martha McCoy, "leased an old cafe and Shell station" and called their new venture The Real McCoy's. Under the McCoy's umbrella, the station was known as Mac's Shell Service and the restaurant Martha's Cafe.

Joe Thompson, who began working for The Real McCoy's in the early 1950s and believes he might be among the couple's first group of employees, responded in writing to questions about his experiences:

"My first job was working for Mac at 50 cents per hour. We called it working on the drive and pumping gas. Mac instructed us to say, 'May I fill it up, sir?' He wanted us on the drive ASAP. And not to ask to check the oil or water — just check."

Those who came of age after the oil crisis of the 1970s have no concept of what visiting a gas station was like before the advent of self service. Believe it or not, all the way into the '70s, an attendant would come to the driver's window, pump the gas, clean the windows, and provide other services. In addition, he might offer

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giveaways such as glassware, all in an effort to motivate a return visit.

Keith Brown, who also worked as an attendant, said Highway 12 through BRF was known as "Gasoline Alley." "Mac put a sign north of town that read, '21 gas stations and then The Real McCoy's.' Both former pump jockeys remember gas being priced at around 28 cents a gallon for regular.

Other signs Mac created were "Whoa! Stop and eat if it kills you, I need the money"; "Keep Wisconsin green, bring money"; "Gas, Grub, and Gab"; and "The Real McCoy's Welcomes U-2 Black River Falls — 4,102 swell people and a 'coupla' bad eggs."

McCoy daughter Mary Hanson said local artist Larry White painted them. "He was very talented and sometimes would sit in the restaurant, sketch patrons on napkins, and give them the drawings."

Unusual marketing

Mary Ann Jensen started working at The Real McCoy's as a teenager, making 60 cents an hour plus tips, which she and another former waitress, Marylee Doud, said were "nearly always silver."

Jensen saved a McCoy's menu, and it is a masterpiece of unusual marketing. From the "Good Merchandise, Lousy



Former employees gather in front of the building that once housed The Real McCoy's. Pictured are (from left) Mary Hanson, Mac Turner, Donna Hulsey, Greg Hanson, Marylee Doud, Keith Brown, Mary Ann Jensen and Joe Thompson.

Donna Hulsey photo

Service" headline on the cover to entrée copy such as the "Whipped, kicked, beat, but still good" description of buttermilk pancakes (85 cents) or the one for Stewed Prunes (15 cents) that are "Not half drunk, but really stewed."

It includes a slam at '50s diet aid Metracal across the center spread: "Help stamp out Metracal — Eat."

Mac's optimistic entrepreneurship peaks on the back cover where his copy urges travelers to hang around because, "People are friendly and even the fish and game are cooperative in trying to make your stay a pleasant one."

Martha McCoy ran the restaurant and is remembered fondly. "She was a quiet lady and a good person," said

former waitress Jensen. Brown added that she smoked Lucky Strikes, and Doud remembered she could be a bit salty.

"Martha was a reference for me after college, and she told an interviewer that in her experience there were three types of waitresses: One would see a mess on the floor and step over it; the second would step in it and keep going; and the third would stop and clean it up. She was kind enough to say I was the third."

Waxing the gas pumps

Business at The Real McCoy's was breakneck. Mac Turner, another former pump jockey, remembers bumper-to-bumper traffic on Highway 12 during the summers. Almost everyone paid cash.

"Sometimes station business was so good, we'd have to transfer currency to the safe because we couldn't get the cash drawer closed!" Brown said.

On the job, Mac insisted on a sharp appearance and always wore his Shell uniform,

including a small, black bowtie and visored hat. Brown recalled the lettering on the back of Mac's light brown shirt. "It said The Real McCoy, without the possessive." He was a taskmaster but fair, according to those who worked for him. "Most of the time we were in the bathroom scrubbing with Zud cleanser," Thompson said. Mac always wanted his help doing something. "We even waxed the gas pumps," Brown remembered.

If things got a little slow at the station, Mac would send attendants off to clean the windshields of parked cars, leaving a card that began, "We're hoping this clean windshield will make your trip a bit more pleasant..." and then promote Mac's Shell Service and Martha's Cafe.

A memorable man

The Real McCoy worked hard, thought creatively, and lived fast. On Oct. 30, 1962, Brown was working the drive when Mac pulled up in a

brand-new, 1963 Oldsmobile 98.

"Mac picked up some Winstons, mentioned he was going to Crandon to buy souvenirs, asked me to 'Take care of the place,' and squealed his tires out onto the highway. ... Mac died in his sleep of a heart attack early that morning. He was 43."

The family continued to run the business until 1968 when I-94 took traffic off Highway 12 and around BRF. Martha sold the place later that year and retired in 1970.

The Real McCoy's hasn't passed from memory. Hulsey writes that when she lived in St. Louis, some people would ask, "Are you related to that place in Wisconsin with all the signs?"

Former employees remember that the sign that got my attention also sparked criticism from someone — either a lady or a minister, memories vary — who stopped solely to complain about its use of a "bad" word.