carhoppin' at Eat 'N Park
MANY LONG-TIME CUSTOMERS of Eat'n Park remember the carhops wearing roller skates, and it's certainly true that in the 1950s and '60s Western Pennsylvania's most popular family restaurant chain featured in-car service. In fact, waitresses on wheels are an indelible image of the era, along with "majorette" outfits, metal trays hanging from car windows, and Big Boy burgers. But former Eat'n Park workers say there were no skates here.

As Eat'n Park celebrates its 50th anniversary—part of the observance is an exhibit at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center—this is a good time to consider the real story of carhopping, which, say those who did it, was a job both harder and more unusual than regular waitressing.

Waitressing and carhopping had many similarities, but there were also key differences. Like indoor waitresses, carhops had to hoist trays with food for an entire shift, but the task was even weightier because outdoor trays were hefty metal. Carhops also had to brave the elements; during an 8-hour shift, many sunny afternoons turned into blustery nights. Customers would move their cars after ordering, or steal trays when they left. Teens could overwhelm a drive-in with loud music and mischief. And late-shift carhops stayed an hour after closing to clean the lot. As one Eat'n Park carhop from the 1960s said in a
newspaper article, "That was a rough way to earn 80 cents an hour plus tips."

Joyce Blackman, a hostess at the Avalon Eat'n Park who started as a carhop there 45 years ago, remembers the aggravations but says the work was a lot of fun, too: "Half price night was Tuesday and we were busy the whole time. But we wanted to work. It meant more tips.... I started at 4 p.m. and we closed at 3 a.m. [on weekends], then we'd be there another hour sweeping the lot and cleaning up. But I was young...."

Most former carhops do recall those days fondly. Lorraine Vilsack worked night turn at the Homestead Eat'n Park in the late 1960s. You'd expect to hear to join was Frisch's Restaurants in Cincinnati, where Eat'n Park founder Larry Hatch saw the concept in the 1940s.

Carhops were essential to drive-ins; at first, the outdoor wait staff would hop on the running boards of customers' cars—hence their name. Early carhops were male, but most drivers were also male, so drive-ins switched to female servers, profits increased, and females became synonymous with carhops.

Post-war affluence and the proliferation of cars made drive-ins the logical successor to the soda shop as a teen hang-out. They were the place to be late at night after football games and dances. But teens

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stories from that era about hippies and hot rods, but Lorraine says, "I enjoyed it, it wasn't even like work. The customers and my boss were great. It was a happy crowd. There were a lot of kids but they were clean cut. There were no fights or mean words. The bad thing then was kids smoking."

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CARHOP SERVICE EVOLVED in the Sunbelt, where booming populations, ample land, and sunny weather fed the fad. The 1930s were the apex for drive-ins, not the '50s as is commonly portrayed, with Los Angeles leading the way. By 1941, L.A. had more than 200 drive-ins. Bob Wian's drive-in was famous for its Big Boy double-decker burger, and the company began franchising the concept nationally. Among the earliest

became as much a problem as a blessing, for the circular lots were perfect for cruising, and crowds bogged down a business that depended on speedy service and quick turnaround. Many drive-ins, including Eat'n Park, hired security guards. As drive-in chronicler Jim Heimann points out in his book, Car Hops and Curb Service, "Teens didn't order large meals, yet they could make them last for hours, and they were a potentially volatile bunch. Radios blared and tempers flared."

Former Eat'n Park President Bob Moore says, "We were busiest between 10 and 12 [midnight] after the movies let out.... The guys, they'd drive around real slow and try to park next to a car of girls, but they weren't that bad. Besides, we gave them a place to go."
But even good kids could give a drive-in a bad reputation. Marlene Rouse longed to work at the Saw Mill Run Eat’n Park: “When I was a teenager in the ’50s, I wanted to be a carhop but my mother wouldn’t let me. She told me, ‘Those girls are too fast.’ But it just seemed like a fun job to me.” Indeed, Paul Crowe, a regional director who rose up through the ranks, says, “Most carhops were married with kids. They carhopped 10 or 12 years, then went inside as a waitress.”

Still, troubles persisted at drive-ins, and carhopping in some cities developed a poor reputation. When Bob Wian tried to open a Big Boy franchise in Dallas, he couldn’t find girls willing to work, and had to recruit 20 carhops from California. Employees were often unreliable, and the job’s sinking image made good employees hard to find. In 1948, a year before Eat’n Park opened, a couple of brothers in California addressed these problems at their drive-in. They fired the carhops, streamlined the menu, and opened walk-up windows for ordering: McDonald’s and speedy self-service were born.

**WEATHER WAS PERHAPS** the biggest unknown in the drive-in business. Eat’n Park devised a plastic cover that kept the food but not the hops dry. “Cold was not as bad as rain—that was terrible,” Lorraine Vilsack remembers. “It would ruin your hair and make your clothes soaking wet. But there wouldn’t be as many customers either because guys wanted to hang out and you can’t do that in the rain.” Winter reasonably dictated warmer dress, but Lorraine says the heaviest thing she ever wore was a sweater or jacket, and never boots: “No, we were too young and cool!”

Military-inspired outfits were standard at drive-ins. Eat’n Park’s carhop uniform remained the same for more than 20 years: burgundy pants with a gray side
That was a rough way to earn 80¢ an hour plus tips.
strip, white blouse, overseas cap, and short, fitted waist jacket (called an “Ike” jacket for the military uniforms popularized by General/President Eisenhower). Lorraine Vilsack also remembers the change-maker attached to the belt: “It was a pain, it got so heavy.” The company supplied everything except the blouse and shoes. Paul Crowe says Eat’n Park also provided raincoats, ear muffs, and gloves with no fingers, and cleaned uniforms weekly.

At first, Eat’n Park carhops were assigned particular spots in the lot. “The spaces were numbered and a girl would have, say, stall numbers 10 through 15,” Bob Moore recalls, “but it didn’t work because if all the cars parked together, one girl would be overwhelmed while the others stood around.”

So lots were divided into two or three sections, and carhops in each section vied for the arriving cars. To keep the competition fair, carhops could carry only two trays at a time. “It would be unfair if they took four or five trays,” says Moore. “That would mean they had too many cars and service might slip.” The original Saw Mill Run location was separated into the “peach orchard” and the “apple orchard.” At Avalon, carhops alternated every other night between the “slow side” and the “fast side,” where cars turned in from Ohio River Boulevard.

Says Moore: “Customers were self-trained to leave their headlights on. When the carhop took the menu out, she would leave her number on the windshield. When they gave their order, they’d turn off their lights. Then when her number came up on the grill, she was called on a loud-speaker, ‘Carhop number five, your order’s ready.’ I don’t think the neighbors loved it, but that’s how we did it.” Every Eat’n Park had two kitchens: one for in-car food which was wrapped, and one for indoor service served on china.
Post-war affluence and the proliferation of cars made drive-ins the logical successor to the soda shop as a teen hang-out.
Carhops weren’t allowed to encourage cars to move after eating, just as waitresses shouldn’t hurry customers along at a table. “If there was no room,” recalls Joyce Blackman, “cars would drive around until a spot opened. Some [at Avalon] even parked down by the river—they weren’t designated spots, but people would park there because it was connected so we’d wait on them.”

A 1953 article profiled carhop Winnie Wolkiewicz, a mother of three who worked night turn at Avalon every night except Friday. Going against the common perception of ‘50s stay-at-home moms, Winnie said she slept after work, prepared her kids’ breakfast at 7 a.m., slept until noon, then got the kids lunch, did household chores, cooked dinner, and headed to work. Teens kept her busy—“Dig me a Big Boy” was the preferred request—but if business slowed, she filled salt and sugar containers, opened cup boxes, and prepared her “set-ups.”

Paul Crowe remembers, “Daylight shift any time of year would be slow, so to make sure the carhops were visible, management got them beach chairs where they’d sit and keep busy with stemming strawberries or folding napkins.” The job of an indoor waitress was also different than it is today. Dorothy Duchai remembers working at the East McKeesport Eat’n Park on Route 30: “In the morning,
the waitresses did all the cooking. We'd make eggs, bacon—until the manager came in before lunch.”

Helen Kitchen did the same, and she says the work continued throughout the day: “Later, we'd mix the salads, help make the pies and soups. And of course, there were no busboys. We did everything.” Like Joyce Blackman, she's a hostess at Avalon, where they both started four decades ago. At 77, Kitchen still enjoys working at least three days a week, especially since her two daughters and three grandchildren work at the same restaurant.

WHEN THE SEVENTH Eat'n Park opened in McKeesport in 1952, the round-front building was superceded by a square California-style coffee shop with booths along the front windows. Car service was still the focus, but ads began touting coffee shop and take-home service, too. Coffee shops were supplanting drive-ins with good reason: they appealed to a similar customer and used the same marketing tactics but could do so without the land and large staffs needed at drive-ins. They also drew customers inside, where youthful exuberance could be kept in check. With fast-food the rage, drive-ins were waning, and so were carhops.

To cut labor costs and increase speed, many drive-ins adopted electronic ordering systems in the early '50s, with names such as "Aut-O-Hop" and "Fon-A-Chef." Eat'n Park came late to the trend, but in 1967 outfitted most of its drive-ins with "Teletray," one of the most popular systems. Like today's drive-throughs, customers ordered via microphone, saving the carhop trips with a menu and to write orders. Canopies also were installed with Eat'n Park's Teletray to shield cars and hogs from sun and rain.

“Switchboard girls wrote the checks and put stall numbers on them,” explains Paul Crowe. “Carhops picked up and took the order out and got the money. Trays swung out from menuboard. But it didn't last long. It still didn't do anything to control the lots.” In addition, orders—and all other comments—directed to the switchboard operator were overheard by customers dining inside.

He says the shift from drive-in service was inevitable and welcome: “The image we started to create with kids hanging out discouraged older folks. Seven, eight, nine p.m. was okay, but then everybody had their car hoods up [showing off their engines].... We had to hire policeman, 90 percent of the restaurants needed uniformed police.... As a manager it was tough. Not too many guys wanted night turn. Besides, eating in your car was uncomfortable.”

Bob Moore points to a different predicament: “The main thing that killed drive-ins was McDonald's. They got the food out faster because it was cooked ahead, there were no tips, and it was a lot cheaper. Eat'n Park had to decide: go with fast food, stay a drive-in, or change the image to family restaurant—and that's what we did.”

Eat'n Park began phasing out drive-in service in 1971. The chain had grown to about 35 locations, all
with some form of sit-down service, so hostesses were added to greet diners. Menus had also been sparse to make service easier and speedier; now, childrens' menus appeared, along with adult entrées such as spaghetti and roast beef. But those restaurants would hardly be recognizable to today's customers—still in the future were busboys, TV commercials, a standardized logo and image, salad bars, the dropping of the Big Boy franchise, and of course, Smiley cookies.

However, some of the past survives—not just at the original locations (five of the first 10 remain) but among employees. Paul Crowe now heads Eat’n Park’s 25-year club, which honors workers who stay with the company for a quarter-century or more. That’s a long time in an industry where turnover can be chronically high, and Eat’n Park’s club has more than 125 members. Many have 30 or 40 years of service; Lester Ray, for instance, is in his 49th year working and training others in the kitchen.

There were once thousands of drive-ins along America's highways employing millions. Joyce Blackman, Helen Kitchen, and Lester Ray are rarities. Then again, few drive-ins have survived 50 years. Most folded after the fad or, like Eat’n Park, saw the future in sit-down, full-service food.

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