Driving from Pittsburgh to Leechburg offers a 30-minute lesson in the economic history of Western Pennsylvania. Below the heights of Swissvale lie the rusted wreckage of Carrie Furnace and the glittering new “big box” stores across the Monongahela. Route 28 glimpses the growth in Fox Chapel, smatterings of woodland, and the new Pittsburgh Mills mall. Veering off an exit a few minutes later reveals an enormous glass plant, gritty rail yards, and an abandoned Montgomery Wards. Next comes the Tarentum Bridge, more restaurants and retail, and then, suddenly … nothing.

This is “the edge,” the border between city and country, the place where old-and-new, urban-and-rural, worldly-and-woodsy collide. No place defines this beginning-and-ending better than The Snyder’s Bonfire Restaurant and Lounge. Driving along the tree-lined road, I first encounter the Bonfire Driving Range, then Big Boys Beer Distributor and, finally, the restaurant itself.

Perched on a steep cliff overlooking a small lake, the Bonfire is a squat wooden structure. On this day, the two vehicles closest to the entrance are a glammed-up Mitsubishi street racer and a minivan decorated with two stickers: a Dale Earnhart, Jr., “8” and “GIT-R-DONE.”

Inside, I immediately sense everything in the eclectic mix belongs: the main dining room’s low-hanging chandeliers built on wagon wheels; the abounding images of John Wayne (one of 63-year-old owner Jerry Snyder’s heroes); the moose and elk heads that came with the restaurant when Snyder bought it in 1981; and the handmade picture of the “Gunfight at the OK Corral,” a gift from Snyder’s aunt.

Two other dining rooms Snyder added in the 1980s are equally evocative: the enormous set of bullhorns from a customer who demanded a coconut creme and a chocolate pie in return and two nicely-executed portraits of Native Americans from a waitress who later died in a tragic accident. Every piece has a story to tell.
A prominent local Italian family built the Bonfire in the mid-1950s, according to Snyder. He still possesses a few pieces of the original china emblazoned with the Bonfire logo, proudly pointing out it's Jackson China, made in Falls Creek, Pennsylvania. The Bonfire, ironically, burned in the late '60s, but they rebuilt. For a place on the edge of nowhere, it certainly developed a following. Snyder recalls when he took over, the bar (since moved downstairs) was lined with autographed photos from famous customers, including Cassius Clay and the entire Rat Pack. He laments that the previous owners took these with them.

Back then, the restaurant was open 24 hours. Snyder kept that tradition alive until a few years later when yet another late shift failed to show. He declared the restaurant closed—but not before tradition made one last protest: there was no lock. There had never been a need for one. Snyder had to park a pick-up in front of the doors to secure the building. “I had to go to the store the next day to buy a lock,” he recalls.

Now the Bonfire operates from 6 am until 9:30 pm Sunday through Thursday, until 11 pm Friday and Saturday. (The bar is open until 2 am.) The kitchen serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner all day. Jerry’s son, 39-year-old Jay Snyder, manages the restaurant. (Other son Corey operates the adjacent beer distributor.) Jay calls the cuisine Italian and American, and hastens to add that the local newspaper has judged the Bonfire’s fried fish #1 in the Allegheny-Kiski Valley every year since 1987. The sandwich ($5.25) is nearly a pound of premium cod, hand-battered in-house. “We went through 28,000 pounds last year,” Jerry reports. Fresh, perfectly fried—crisp but not greasy—it’s served on a soft roll well-sized for the task.

The bar, now on the lower level, has a big-screen TV, authentic Steelers gear, and an impressive array of NASCAR memorabilia (Jerry and Jay built the pool table light, an encased-in-plastic scale model of Dale, Jr’s car). Although the saloon regularly packs people in, Jay is quick to point out that does not detract from the Bonfire’s family atmosphere. His mother, Patty Snyder, cooks at the restaurant: “She goes downstairs, she doesn’t want to hear people swearing. And they don’t.”

Jerry Snyder celebrated his 25th anniversary as owner of the Bonfire this summer, paying homage to all the things it is and has been: a rural roadhouse serving working-class locals and class-A celebrities, a haven for late-night diners and early-risers, a family restaurant, and a saloon. That is a fitting tradition for an institution operating on “the edge,” where Pittsburgh ends and the rest of Pennsylvania begins.

**The Snyder’s Bonfire Restaurant**
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Jerry and Jay with vintage Bonfire china and a 1968 ad touting the “home of the $1.39 steak.”