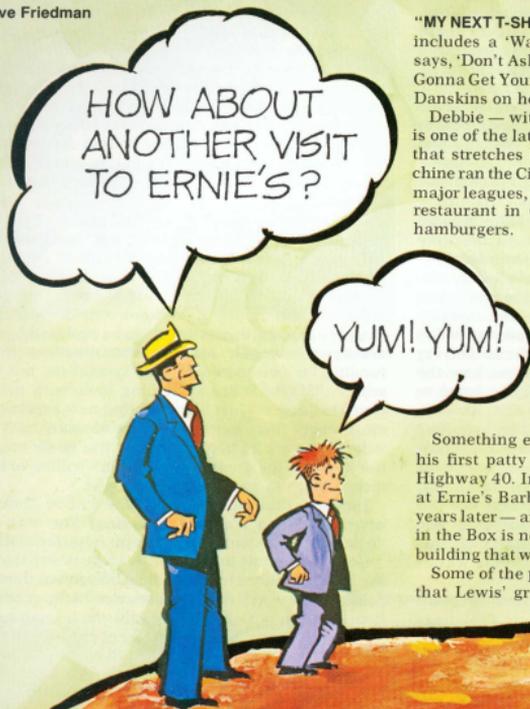


ERNIE'S...Columbia's Chopped-Cow Palace

By Steve Friedman



HOW ABOUT ANOTHER VISIT TO ERNIE'S?

YUM! YUM!

"MY NEXT T-SHIRT," says Debbie, whose collection already includes a 'Watch it, Buddy!' blouse, "will be one that says, 'Don't Ask Me Where Your Coffee Is, Or When You're Gonna Get Your Hash Browns.'" She also is wearing black Danskis on her body and dandelions in her hair.

Debbie — with Carleen, Gladman, Virginia and Cass — is one of the latest in a line of student-waitresses — a line that stretches back to a time when the Pendergast machine ran the City of Fountains, the Gas House Gang ran the major leagues, and a man named Ernie L. Lewis ran a tiny restaurant in Columbia that specialized in steam-fried hamburgers.

Today Debbie works at Ernie's legacy, the steakhouse at 1005 E. Walnut that bears his name. She is being asked where the hash browns and coffee are by Big Bob, who remembers building the steakhouse; by Wild Bill, who is too young to know the difference between Pepper Martin and Adolph's Meat Tenderizer; and by ("If you think Big Bob is something") Huge Bob, who is something else.

Something else again was Ernie L. Lewis, who flipped his first patty at step-brother Ralph's Drive Inn on Old Highway 40. In 1935 Lewis started greasing his own grill at Ernie's Barbeque, Garth and Old Highway 40. Twelve years later — after a brief stint at 218 S. Ninth (where Jack in the Box is now) — Ernie and his restaurant moved to a building that would become a cornerstone of North Village.

Some of the people who remember Ernie's as it was say that Lewis' greatest creations were his barbeque sauce

and its culinary companion, an extraordinary hamburger that Lewis labeled, the "Chopped Cow."

The chopped cow moved off the grill and onto the funny pages when another creator, Chester Gould, came to Columbia in the 1940s. ("I think it was to judge a beauty contest or something," a regular customer remembers.) Gould's daughter, a Stephens College student, took the artist to dinner at Ernie's, and when Ernie gave Chester a chopped cow, Chester gave the chopped cow a spot in his nationally syndicated Dick Tracy strip. Today an enlarged frame from that cartoon hangs above the steakhouse kitchen, inscribed, "To Ernie and his Delicious Chopped Cow! Yum Yum!" The sleuth and his sidekick, Junior, peek from the dog-eared corners of the steakhouse menus today, as they have for almost three decades.

ABOUT THE TIME TRACY moved onto the steakhouse menus, Ernie Lewis and his family moved west, to California. The man who gave Ernie's its name, its sauce and its chopped cow sold the steakhouse to childhood friend and Ralph's Drive Inn kitchen cronny, Charles Christman.

Christman and his wife, Lula Mae, who ran the restaurant from 1949 to 1963, kept the chopped cow, of course, but they added shrimp and steak, sausage with pecan waffles (made from scratch, with Alabama pecans), and home-baked pies.

And, no slouches, they whipped up some secret sauces of their own.

"I knew the ingredients, but not the proportions," says Charles Stone, who used his cook's wages to put himself through the University in the late 1950s. "Charles and Lula Mae used to throw everybody out when they mixed up that French dressing, and the ratios were the secret. That

dressing was out of this world." Stone speaks in a voice that's a blend of reverence and regret, with a dash of pride and a pinch of wonder.

Charles and Lula Mae Christman closed Ernie's every summer for cleaning and remodeling and sent postcards to their regular customers the week before the first breakfast of the school year. The little barbecue grew into a little steakhouse; the waitresses wore skirts; the waiters, white shirts; and on Sundays more than half the restaurant's breakfast patrons came from services at the First Christian Church across the street.

"It was just effervescent," says Charles Stone's brother, Howard, who waited tables at the steakhouse from 1960 to 1962. "The Stephens girls used to come in on weekends and the boys from the University came to look at them."

"I loved the people and the kids and everything about it," says Lula Mae Christman Crull, 16 years after she died her last chopped cow. "We had beautiful murals on the walls then. We always had soft colors, and we tried to make everything pleasant and serene."

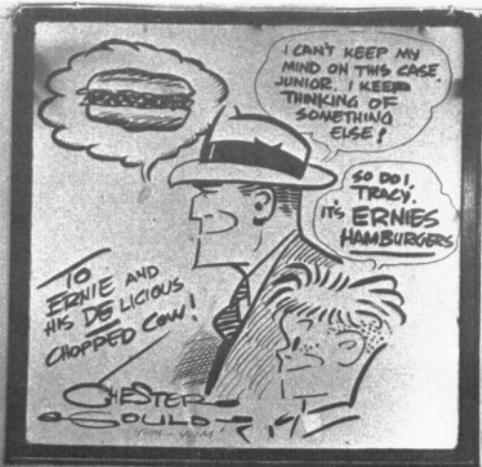
"Hi, what can I get forya? Coffee, a pair. Walking potatoes. A twin. Pecan ala. Dragging a liver."

That's Carleen (in jeans and a T-shirt with a fat lady on it) talking and yelling and running between a long table filled with about 40 people who look like they use solar energy and vote no on dam projects. Behind her is a formica and corrugated metal counter just right for a Marlon Brando in a motorcycle jacket to swagger up to.

Almost half a century after Ernie L. Lewis concocted his special sauce, the steakhouse is packed. But the formality of the fifties has been touched by something from the sixties. The ambience that the steakhouse has today is heavy on the hot sauce — hold the haute cuisine. Nine flannel shirts are swiveling on the counter's revolving chairs, two

Ernie's in the '50s featured soft, serene colors and murals on the walls. The waitresses were in skirts and the waiters wore white shirts.

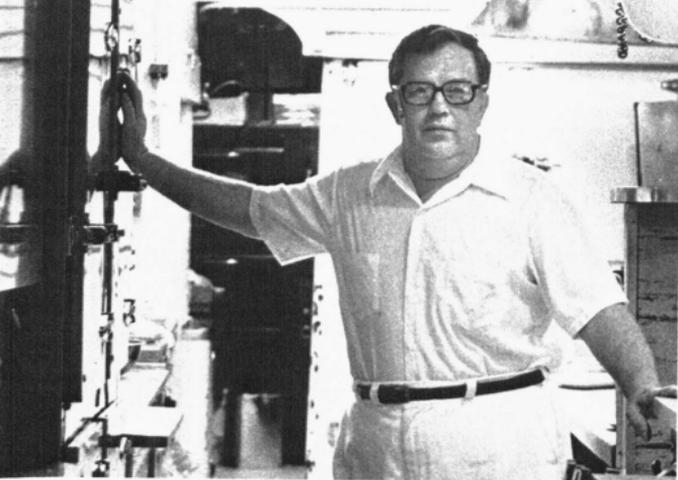




Here's the way Ernie's looked in the '50s, when some thought it was, "a classy joint."

Wayne Gladney owned the steakhouse for 15 years. Today, he still brings in his three small granddaughters for ice cream sundaes.

Alumni Kevin Laws, left, and Marty Freyer bought Ernie's from Gladney in 1978. They talk of remodeling, but the name will stay.



Ann Yow



score cups are being refilled with coffee, eggs are sizzling and everybody's talking.

"He freaked out so bad, he just couldn't..."

"Let's go to South America, Gary."

"...do his gig. He probably would like to get back to his old lifestyle."

"I don't know, man, I don't know."

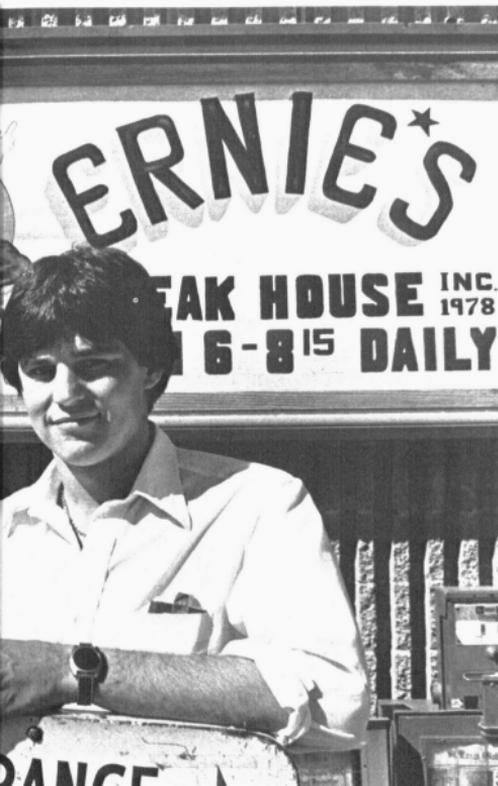
"I'm really not into motherhood."

"So this dude killed this guy who killed his dog. And the judge..."

"Hey, that's not my reality."

Today Ernie's is as fancy as eggs over easy. Inside, the steakhouse is shaped like the sausages the Christmans used to serve — long and low. The waitress standing at the cash register next to the door, the one wearing the "Guam is Good" sweatshirt, could slide a plate of Boone County Ham — an Ernie's specialty — the length of the counter, and it would land in the kitchen.

GONE ARE THE SOFT and serene colors of the fifties. Today the floors and walls of the steakhouse are the colors of hash browns, well done. Above the tables are giant yellow disks and brown slabs — toast and eggs — with flowers, mushrooms, rainbows and a fat lady who says, "Everybody eats at Ernie's."



"Ernoir's," as some of Ernie's younger eaters call their favorite steakhouse, today houses a crowd as different from the church-goers of the fifties as flannel and down is different from hose and heels.

John, in jeans, green LSD T-shirt and sunglasses, likes to whistle "Johnny Be Good" and eat Ernie's pecan ala. Betsy, wearing a long red skirt, hiking boots and black sweatshirt, reads *Heavy Metal* magazine between bites of her chopped cow.

But they're not the only ones who eat at Ernie's.

Early risers still squeeze onto the counter's round seats; businessmen still eat the steakhouse luncheon specials; and students still bring their dates for steaks. And those people — along with Carleen, Wild Bill, Gladman and Big Bob — make up a mix that, like the Christman's French dressing, is hard to characterize, "out of this world," and, as much as anything, the reason why the sausage-shaped building on East Walnut is more than a steakhouse to so many people.

"You could be smashed between a mailman and a hippy and a judge," Carleen says. "And this place isn't big enough to hold any tension, so the people get along. They have to. It's a real family here, like a second home."

Wayne Gladney bought Ernie's in 1963, and, in his 15 year reign as "chopped-cow king," turned Ernie's into a year-round restaurant, hired his mother-in-law to bake pies and introduced the Date Steak (for two), especially popular with Stephens women.

Gladney, who sold Ernie's last year to two 1976 University graduates, Kevin Laws and Marty Freyer, has a special feeling for the steakhouse that he ran, a spot in his heart as soft as the Pillsbury doughboy, whom Gladney resembles.

"I MISS THE PLACE," he says. "Yes, I miss it immensely. You know, today I could be in Atlanta or San Francisco or Japan, and someone might come up and clap me on the back and say, 'Well, son-of-a-gun, Ernie, what're you doing here?' And that's a pretty good feeling."

The building that North Village grew up around is becoming something most Ernie's aficionados would scoff at — a landmark. And like most landmarks, the steakhouse has become more than the sum of its parts, more than 44 years of Twin Chopped Cows and pecan ala modes and walking potatoes put together.

Maybe it has something to do with Ernie Lewis' barbecue sauce, or the postcards the Christmans sent every summer. Maybe it has something to do with Virginia's Superman T-shirt, or the dandelions in Debbie's hair, or the afternoons that Wayne Gladney still brings his three little granddaughters to the steakhouse for ice cream sundaes.

Or maybe it has something to do with the new owners, who, when asked if they might change the name of the steakhouse to "Kevin and Marty's," both look down at their steaks, shake their heads, and laugh. □