

Ralph Morris

Era of the
EVER EAT

Every noon it was crowded to capacity. Students hardly had enough room to turn around.

The sound of the pinball machine competed with conversation of classes, the draft, World War II, or whether there was time for another 10-cent bottle of beer.

There was the din of the juke box playing "Three Little Fishes" or maybe "Star Dust" and "Deep Purple."

Mom sat behind the cash register visiting with customers and remembering where you were from and whom you were currently dating.

Ralph Morris was behind the horseshoe counter in one of the two rooms of the Ever Eat Cafe helping the student employees with the short orders.

The time was the late thirties and early forties.

The Ever Eat Cafe opened at six in the morning and usually did not close until one or two the next morning. Whether you were stopping in for a huge 5-cent mug of coffee between classes, a 30-cent plate lunch at noon, a 10-cent hamburger after a movie that cost 25-cents or for hours of just sitting playing cards and philosophizing, the Ever Eat was a second home to students – a place where you always felt welcome.

Two rooms were split down the middle, a beer parlor on one side and an eating place on the other. The appearance was modest. Bare marble slabs, 12 to 14 dark red booths, and a large picture of a tiger hung on the wall. Any atmosphere the Ever Eat had was due to the ownership and the customers who kept coming back.

The Ever Eat and the Morrisses were fixtures on campus from the thirties until the early sixties. "We were like a neighborhood place. We were their hangout, a meeting place where everyone knew everyone."

But small business means long hours. "It's hard for one man to make it. You do so much yourself." Ralph Morris names half a dozen other owners in Columbia who, like himself, have given up private ownership and now work for the University. Morris is food production supervisor for the Brady Student Commons. In 1962 he sold the Ever Eat and went to the Memorial

Student Union to supervise the Bengal Lair, later moving to the Commons when it opened.

Not only has Ralph Morris been acquainted with the restaurant business all his life but "My father and his father were in the restaurant business and my father's five brothers eventually were engaged in restaurant work. It's sort of a family tradition."

In 1909 Ralph's father left a Centralia restaurant, moved his family to Columbia and opened the Ever Eat Cafe on Ninth Street across from the old business school that is now the sociology building.

"We were in the middle of campus. Most of our customers were students from journalism, business and agriculture."

Ralph worked in the Ever Eat while going to high school and through three years of college at the University.

When his father died in 1938, Ralph and his mother took over the management.

"Ralph had a remarkable facility for remembering names and still does," Milton Gross, assistant dean and professor of journalism recalls. "People he met as students are friends for life."

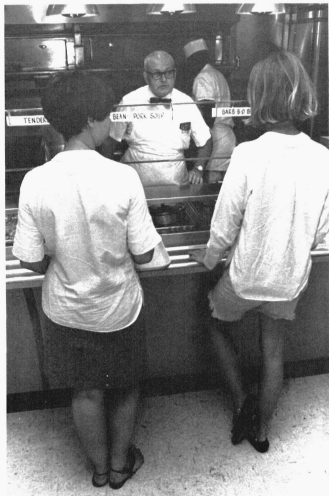
Morris is a shy, quiet man with a warm heart. He loves being around students and he's interested in their problems as much as their day-to-day experiences.

In reminiscing about those years at the Ever Eat, he lights up most in talking about former students and those who come back to campus for a visit. "Unfortunately they usually come on a football week-end and at the hours that I'm most busy so I don't get to visit much."

It's quite common for students today to look up Morris and tell him "My mother and dad were here 20 years ago and they said for me to come in and say hello."


One Friday afternoon 34 years ago, soon after prohibition was repealed, the Ever Eat ran out of beer. "We sent for more, but what was delivered was 25 cases of hot beer. They just drank it anyway," he laughs.

In the late thirties pinball machines were brand new and the Ever Eat had one of the first ones in Columbia. "Some got their master's degree in pinball," Morris says, remembering the noise of the machine, hour after hour.



Ralph says . . .

"Have you tried our Breakfast of Eggs, Toast and Hot Coffee?"
Hamburgers, Chili
French Fries and Soups



RALPH'S
EVER EAT CAFE
Opposite B. & P. A. School

Morris didn't mind the juke box going all day and night. "It was like background music; you get used to it. And actually if someone asked you if it was on a minute ago, sometimes you didn't even remember.

"One time they played 'Rambling Wreck from Georgia Tech' continuously for 25 times."

During the thirties and forties few students had money. Most of them needed to work as there were no government funds and loans available. The Ever Eat employed as many as 20 to 25 students on various shifts. But there were still times when students didn't have enough even to make it through the week.

Ralph Morris and Mom, as everyone still calls her, were known for lending small sums of money to students. "We also used to sell meal tickets for \$4.50 that were worth \$5. We used to let students charge the meal ticket."

In the fifties the University took an increasing hand in servicing the students; the community could no longer handle the numbers.

"I was closer to the students in a small business. But the University wasn't so large. It seemed large to us when there was an enrollment of 5000."

Morris got to visit more often with students then. There were few cars on campus in the forties, and even if you had one, it was too far to drive to St. Louis or Kansas City for a weekend. "You'd stop in for a beer after a movie or going to the library, or have a hamburger if you could afford it," Gross recalls.

Today's society is more affluent. Not so many students have to work for their education. "We only employ a few students a semester at the Commons," Morris says. "They don't have the time."

Morris misses the hours sitting and talking with students in the Ever Eat, "Everyone had more time then. There was more getting to know each other."

He got to know their problems, all about their families and their dreams for the future. Much of that rapport now is gone but Morris tries to keep as close to the students as he can in his post at the Commons, and the University is as important to him as ever.

This is the 39th year that he has not missed a home football game. □