

BY MICHAEL KARL WITZEL

CARHOPS, CURB SERVICE, AND THE PIG SANDWICH



Drive-In Texas

“PEOPLE IN THEIR CARS ARE SO LAZY THAT THEY DON’T WANT TO GET OUT OF THEM TO EAT!” proclaimed candy and tobacco mogul Jesse Granville Kirby in 1921. At the time, he was trying to get Dallas physician Reuben Wright Jackson interested in investing in a new type of roadside restaurant. Kirby’s revolutionary new format would one day form the basis for all “fast food” stands.

His idea was simple: Patrons would drive up in their automobiles and make food requests from behind the wheel. Acting as an order-taker, a young lad would field requests for food directly through the window of the customer’s car. Before engines had a chance to cool down, hot food and cold drinks would be delivered right back out to the curb, lickety-split. The best part of it all was that diners could consume their meals while still sitting in the front seat of their cars!

Sivils “drive-inn” opened in Houston in 1938. In 1940, J.D. and Louise Sivil added this location in Dallas, a city landmark for years to come. POSTCARD COURTESY AUTHOR’S COLLECTION



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Pig Stands started the drive-in craze around the nation in Dallas in 1921. Several remain, this one (left) at 1508 Broadway in San Antonio. Ruth Forke (below) worked for Sivils in Dallas.



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IN THE FALL OF 1921, Texas “Pig Stand” Number One opened for business at the busy intersection of Highway 80 and Cockrell, in the Chalk Hill area of Dallas. Dine-in-your-car convenience had arrived, starring a newfangled creation dubbed the “Pig Sandwich.” Prepared with slices of tender roast pork loin, pickle relish, and barbecue sauce, the hand-held motoring meal gained a loyal following among Cowtown commuters and Dallas drivers. Most Texas counties were dry in those days, and an ice-cold bottle of Dr Pepper (invented at a Waco drugstore 36 years earlier) provided the refreshing pick-me-up.

But the portable BBQ cuisine wasn’t the only draw at America’s first curb-service café. The ener-

getic waiters who worked the curb—or “carhops,” as someone dubbed them—were a sight to behold. “They were all young boys, probably 12 to 15 years old,” recalls Richard Hailey, present-day heir to the Pig Stand throne and acting president of Pig Stands, Inc. “Hustle was the name of the game. As soon as they saw a Model T start to slow down and turn its tires toward the curb, they’d race out to see who could jump up on the running board first while the car was still moving.”

With a serving technique more akin to rodeo trick-riding than waiting on cars, the legend of the Texas carhop grew. And so did the notoriety of the Pig Stand’s signature sandwich. “Give a little pig a chance and it will make a hog of itself,” Kirby was known to say, and he was right: Driven beyond the Texas borders by one of the first franchising deals in the industry, the number of stands multiplied. By



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1934, more than 100 outlets were serving up “America’s Motor Lunch” in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Inspired by Kirby and Jackson’s triumph, restaurateurs in Fort Worth, Dallas, and Houston copied the alfresco format and cashed in on the ranks of hungry car-lovers for themselves. There was business aplenty. By the end of the 1920s, vehicle ownership had increased from 6 million to 27 million motorcars nationwide. From the Texas Panhandle to the coastal plain, potential customers cruised the highways and byways, eye-

“HOUSTON DRIVE-IN TRADE GETS GIRL SHOW WITH ITS HAMBURGERS” IS HOW A 1940 LIFE MAGAZINE COVER STORY DESCRIBED SIVILS—AND THEY WEREN’T EXAGGERATING.

ing the roadsides for a fast and flavorful place to eat.



IN 1938, Houston motorists discovered good food served fast after restaurant owner J.D. Sivil and his wife, Louise, opened their first curbside canteen. Before the first burger hit the griddle, Louise demonstrated a real knack for running a roadside stand.

First, she hired female “car-hostesses” instead of male carhops. For 25 cents an hour (plus tips), they served the car crowd a revved-up power menu that included fried chicken, sirloin steak, and trout sandwiches. Next, she called her place a

[CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT] After *Life* magazine ran an article about Houston’s Sivils drive-in, uniforms began carrying sleeve patches with the embroidered message “Enjoy LIFE at Sivils.” Buna “Johnnie” Van Hekken (pictured) met Sivils’ carhop hiring criteria: female, between 18 and 25 years old, with a high school diploma, health card, and “come-hither” look. Health Camp, on Waco’s famous traffic circle, has been a roadside fixture for more than 50 years for drivers cravin’ burgers, fries, and malts. Drive-in service became so popular in the 1950s that Coca-Cola ran ads in major magazines idealizing the serving style.

PHOTO © MICHAEL WITZEL; MATCHBOOK COURTESY AUTHOR’S COLLECTION



With two locations in Dallas, Kellers manages to pull in the beer-and-burger business in spite of competition from a nearby McDonald’s. Like many drive-ins, Sivils’ South Main location in Houston gave out matchbooks to the smoking public.

“drive-in,” because she thought “hamburger stand” sounded too low-class.

Louise was equally discerning when hiring her hostesses. Well aware that it was pretty girls who attracted the drive-in trade, she selected girls from an exuberant crowd of applicants, eliminating all those who weren’t between the ages of 18 and 25. But there was more to it than just age: To join the team, a prospective Sivils girl had to have a good figure and a “come hither” personality! Applicants had to have brains, too—along with a high-school diploma and a health card.

Only a lucky few were invited to join the Sivils drive-in spectacle. “Houston Drive-in Trade Gets Girl Show with its Hamburgers” is how a 1940 issue of *Life* magazine (with a Sivils carhop on the cover) described it—and they weren’t exaggerating.

Every night, it was the same revue: At shift change, loud music spilled from the loudspeakers as the entire crew of carhops filed in to end their day. Immediately thereafter, a new crew paraded out and assembled in a grand chorus line to wait for inspection. Louise personally checked them over to make sure their form-fitting satin uniforms were clean and their cowboy boots polished. Only then were they released to take orders and serve the food.

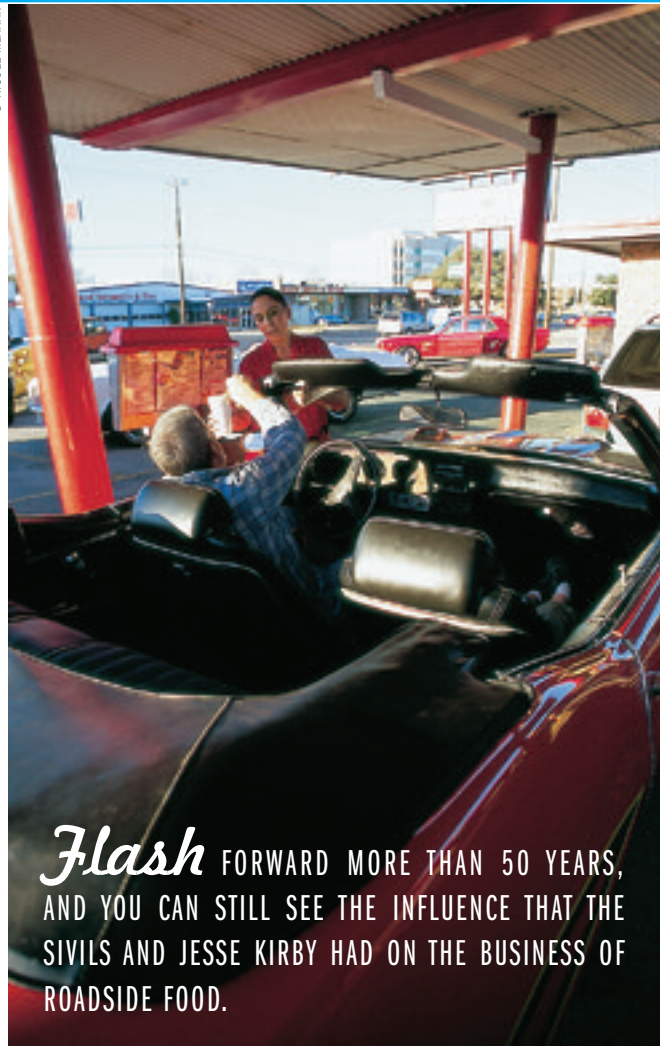
But this one-of-a-kind drive-in setup was only a preview of coming attractions. Two years later, the Sivils proved that “everything is bigger and better in Texas,” especially drive-ins.

As the years went by, carhop uniforms went from elaborate to more relaxed, as in this photo of an unknown beauty in 1960s Dallas.



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Flash FORWARD MORE THAN 50 YEARS, AND YOU CAN STILL SEE THE INFLUENCE THAT THE SIVILS AND JESSE KIRBY HAD ON THE BUSINESS OF ROADSIDE FOOD.

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Serving you in your car is what drive-ins are all about. At Austin's Top Notch, George Forrester (top) enjoys friendly service in his 1971 Pontiac GTO Judge. Other classic cars sometimes gather at the Top Notch (top right). Above, a San Antonio Pig Stand has gussied up for Christmas.

© NICOLE MLAKAR



In 1940, they opened a second curb stand, in the Oak Cliff suburb of Dallas, at the intersection of Westmoreland Avenue, West Davis Street, and Fort Worth Avenue.

In the vernacular of the times, the Dallas drive-in would be categorized as the “cat’s meow.” It featured north and south curb service, three acres of parking, and a small movie screen. A serving staff of 105 carhops and three motor-scooter-riding cigarette girls tended up to 500 cars at one time. It was so big that a “general” manned the building tower to direct the carhops to new arrivals. “When customers pulled into their spots, a caller relayed their locations over a P.A. system,” explains Buna “Johnnie” Van Hekken, a former Sivils cashier. Sivils was the talk of the town; the drive-in was in full swing.



OVER THE NEXT HALF-CENTURY, the drive-in restaurant charmed the public. In Texas towns both small and large, it provided a venue for young people to meet, eat, socialize... and show off their wheels. As the art of curb service seduced California, Michigan, and other states, drive-in operators duplicated the successful Sivils and Pig Stands formula, spinning off multiple variations on the theme. Imitators tried all sorts of shenanigans to grab the motorist’s attention—hiring all blonde carhops or tall girls, installing air-conditioning tubes to cool your car... and even putting the gals on roller skates.

Flash forward more than 50 years, and you can still see the influence that the Sivils and Jesse Kirby had on the business of roadside food. To the good fortune of Texas motorists, a handful of Texas Pig Stands continue their porcine-BBQ rituals—in Beaumont, Houston, and San Antonio, and newer ones in Lytle and Seguin. “These days, din-

ers can still get an oversized piece of Texas Toast, giant onion rings, a milkshake, and a tasty Pig Sandwich,” explains Richard Hailey. “The best part is that we still sell the very same Pig Sandwich, made the same way that it was made so many years ago.”

Sadly, the great Sivils locations are gone now, but Sonic—America’s only national drive-in chain—carries forth the tradition with gusto. Today, it boasts more than 850 locations in the Lone Star State alone. Carhops still deliver food to cars the same way they did during the drive-in’s heyday. Although running boards are history and the uniforms are

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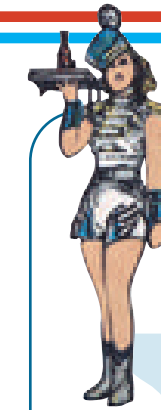


Before World War II, most carhops were male. This busy young man was photographed at Dallas’ Edgewood Pharmacy in the 1920s.

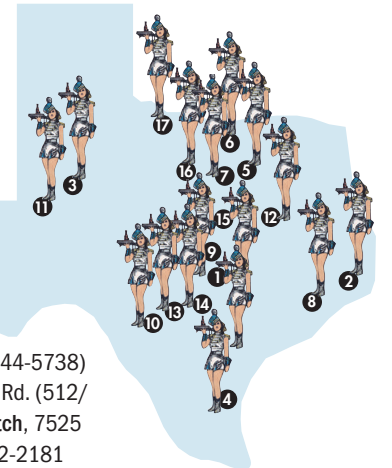
more casual, you can still see them gliding between the cars, sometimes on roller skates, delivering window trays stacked high with burgers, fries, and Cokes. The personal service that only a carhop can give—smiling and treating the customer right—never goes out of style.

The proliferation of cookie-cutter, drive-thru burger joints hasn’t affected the mom-and-pop drive-ins either (according to Richard Hailey, California Pig Stand No. 21 pioneered the “drive-thru” window in 1931). With names like BarL, Bun ’n’ Barrel, Chip’s, Fran’s, Frosty, Health Camp, Jo Jo’s, Keller’s, Snapka’s, Storm’s, Theo’s, Top Notch, Wagon Wheel, and yes, even Pig Stand, the Texas drive-ins we remember from the cruisin’ days of our youth continue to attract us with the buzz of glowing neon, the sizzle of grilled beef, and the savory aroma of beer-battered onion rings.

The fact is, Texans still love to eat in their cars. For drive-in aficionados, nothing can compare with having breakfast, lunch, or dinner while seated in that favorite dining room: the front seat of your car. Cool cars, great food, and good times define the Texas roadside—birthplace of carhops, curb service, and the Pig Sandwich.★



TEXAS DRIVE-IN RESTAURANTS



- ❶ **AUSTIN** Fran’s, 1822 S. Congress, (512/444-5738) and 6214 Cameron Rd. (512/458-6007); **Top Notch**, 7525 Burnet Rd., 512/452-2181
- ❷ **BEAUMONT** Texas Pig Stand #41, 1595 Calder Ave., 409/813-1444
- ❸ **BIG SPRING** Wagon Wheel Drive-In, 2010 Scurry St., 432/267-2851
- ❹ **CORPUS CHRISTI** Snapka’s Drive-In, 4434 Weber Rd., 361/855-8355
- ❺ **DALLAS** Kellers Drive-In, 6537 E. Northwest Hwy. (214/368-1209) and 10554 Harry Hines Blvd. (214/357-3572).
- ❻ **DENTON** Frosty, 1002 Fort Worth Dr., 940/387-5449
- ❼ **GRAND PRAIRIE** Theo’s Drive-In, 2626 E. Main St., 972/262-3309
- ❽ **HOUSTON** Texas Pig Stand #7, 2412 Washington Ave., 713/864-4041
- ❾ **LAMPASAS** Storm’s, 201 N. Key Ave., 512/556-6269 (also in Burnet, Hamilton, Kingsland, and Marble Falls)
- ❿ **LYTLE** Texas Pig Stand #35, 19525 McDonald St., 830/709-0466
- ⓫ **ODESSA** Jo Jo’s, 3506 E. University Blvd., 432/366-2941
- ⓬ **PALESTINE** Chip’s Burger Ranch, 908 W. Palestine Ave. (US 79), 903/723-1016
- ⓭ **SAN ANTONIO** Bun ’n’ Barrel, 1150 Austin Hwy., 210/828-2829; Texas Pig Stand #24, 801 S. Presa St. (210/225-1321) and Texas Pig Stand #29, 1508 Broadway St. (210/222-2794)
- ⓮ **SEGUIN** Texas Pig Stand #10, 1832 W. I-10, 830/303-1331
- ⓯ **WACO** Health Camp, 2601 Circle Rd., 254/752-2081
- ⓰ **WEATHERFORD** Malt Shop, 2028 Fort Worth Hwy., 817/594-2524
- ⓱ **WICHITA FALLS** Bar L, 908 13th St., 940/322-3400

Sonic-America’s Drive-In, the only national drive-in chain, has 861 Texas locations (see www.sonicdrivein.com).

MICHAEL KARL WITZEL of Wimberley has written more than a dozen books on American road-trip nostalgia, including *The American Drive-In*, *Soda Pop*, and *Route 66 Remembered*.