

Dave McKay

Where: King Tut Drive-In

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Dave McKay (b.1946) is the owner of King Tut Drive-In in Beckley. He lives in Atlanta. In this interview he speaks about this history and evolution of the business, and its role in the Beckley community.

EH: Emily Hilliard

DM: Dave McKay

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00:00

EH: Okay so could you introduce yourself and tell me your name, where you're from and when you were born?

DM: Okay, my name is Dave McKay, I guess I'm mostly from West Virginia. I was born in 1946. We got here 'cause we stayed--Oh I think I was probably 3 or 4 years old when we first showed up in West Virginia.

EH: Where'd you come from?

DM: New York, where my dad came back from WWII. He lived there for a while. I was actually born in Cleveland, Ohio.

EH: Okay.

DM: I don't remember any of that part.

EH: Yeah. Could you tell me a little bit about your family background?

DM: Let's see. Dad was a WWII vet. He and mom got married just before he got shipped off for D-Day out of Ohio. My grandmother raised my dad and was influenced him to get into the restaurant business because she was--managed restaurants during the Depression in New York City and in Cleveland. She was a Kraft (?) executive. And I think that's what got him eventually when he came back from WWII and got interested in selling food. He was working for Sexton on a route and then King Tut was on his route and he eventually bought it from the previous owner who was Tutweiler. And so my history is kind of falling along with the family I started school down at Laronna, WV--2 room country school and came up to Beckley when I was in the 6th grade and went to Woodrow and then Dad sent me off to Staunton Military Academy and then I ended up at Colorado State and finally CU, university of Colorado.

EH: And what about your family these days?

DM: I'm married to Michelle, I've been married for 33 years. Don't quote me on plus or minus one! We met in Colorado when I was there and she also worked for AT&T and so I started working for AT&T after I got out of the air force after Vietnam and we managed to get transferred together around Colorado, California, and then finally to Atlanta. And that's where we reside now. We have 1 daughter Heather. I have a son from a previous marriage, David Jr. He's in Colorado. And a granddaughter.

EH: Nice.

DM: Yeah.

EH: Do they have any interest in continuing the business?

DM: Not a single one of 'em. (laughs) Unfortunately. I also have 2 brothers and 2 step brothers. I have a stepbrother who is a partial owner of this business but he works for Little General in the maintenance side and my other brothers are all IT guys, as is my son. And my daughter is a chemist so none of 'em really have anything to do with the restaurant industry and neither did I and... 'til dad retired and found out that I retired and he dumped the business on me. (laughs)

EH: So did you have any choice in the matter?

DM: Not a one. One of my loudmouth brothers told him that I'd retired and I think I had 4 days of retirement from AT&T and he called me up and said here it's yours. And it's got a problem--go fix it (laughs).

EH: I guess you could have sold it.

DM: Could have. Probably the reason--2 reasons we didn't. One the people in town here really like the place. And we kinda want to keep the staff going (chokes up) I don't know why it bothers me--we like to keep 'em employed. So...that's the best thing we could do for 'em. So you know, that's really the 2 big reasons.

04:10

EH: So there were a lot of existing employees here that sort of...

DM: Yeah, so about half of the day shift folks were here when I picked it up in 2004 and several of the night shift folks were here too. We had a curb girl who just passed away after having 40 years here. And my day shift manager will have 40 years in November. So...

EH: Wow. That's a lot of time.

DM: Yeah.

EH: So yeah, what do you think the importance is for Beckley and the surrounding area. I mean employment for sure.

DM: Well yeah, we keep at least 23 people employed. The food here, we keep it just as inexpensive as we can and that helps a lot of pocketbooks and we keep it the same. The menus were created by my dad and my grandmother and some of them are based off of the 1930s books that she kept on the menu. And so we've kept that going. People don't like a whole lot of change. We've added things to the menus over the years. We seldom subtract stuff, so we have a pretty wide menu that everybody can come here and come here often and not have to get the same old thing. So we have a big lunch crowd and we have a big dinner crowd. About half of it's takeout now. It used to be that everybody just showed up, but now it's mostly about half of 'em just take something home for the lunch hour or dinner.

EH: Yeah, you don't see too much meatloaf sandwiches on menus these days.

DM: (laughs) Yeah. It's one of those things, when they designed the menu originally and Gram had learned during the Depression to use every single tidbit. So meatloaf is an offshoot. We make hamburger every morning fresh but we have a little bit leftover that we don't use, so that turns into the meatloaf, see? So there you go. If you use a number of products, you use 'em about 3-4 different ways. Less waste and more interesting menu.

EH: Yeah, it's really good. And you do homemade buns, homemade pies, what else?

DM: Swiss dinners are made here. The BBQ is made here. Let's see. We do soups in the winter, we make our own soups. Um...there's things I'm not thinking about. That if we can make it, we will, because that reduces the cost and it lets us control the menu better and the food quality. So we make as much as we can with the limited resources we have some space and personnel and things like that.

EH: What's a Swiss dinner?

DM: Swiss steak. Okay, so it's cubed steak and then we make our own sauces that goes in it and we, what we do, we'll run off a big batch of those about once a week and then prepackage 'em in portions. And so that when we sell one, all we have to do is warm up the prepackage portion and boom, you're done.

EH: And do you have a pie maker?

DM: Yes, we do! She's on vacation this week, but Shana's my pie maker. Diane's making 'em this week and we make pies fresh every morning. We make about 7 or 8 pies. We generally sell out like by evening you know, which it's about as many as we can make without wasting any.

EH: And you do some whole pie sales as well?

DM: Yeah, we'll sell a whole pie at least a day in advance 'cause we put it in a different kind of pan, so if they call in at least one day in advance we'll sell a whole pie.

EH: And how much does it go for?

DM: I knew you were gonna ask that.

EH: (laughs)

DM: (laughs)

EH: I'm a pie maker so I understand what goes into it.

DM: Ah, don't quote me. I think it's 11 or 12 dollars. We can check inside on the thing 'cause I just wrote, I just changed the price on it. (laughs)

EH: What was it like when you started working here?

DM: Well dad paid me a quarter an hour. I just want to get the record on that 'cause he was cheap. (laughs) On the other hand, it was more--there were 3 restaurants, drive-in restaurants in town at that time. It was ours, Pete & Bob's, and Phil's. And for kids the ones who were driving age, I wasn't at the time, it was kind of one of the places to hang out because we all would just circle around the town and drive around and then sit outside someplace and the kids would all gather. And Pete & Bob's was the place to sit around and drink beer. Dad sold beer--they all did at the time which is no longer politically a good thing to do. But Dad decided he was gonna break that and start selling more family style stuff and kinda ran a lot of the kids out, and that's what started the family side of the drive-in business. So as a kid working here he made me either clean up the lot or make pizzas 'cause they were fairly easy to do. So I'd ride over on my bike you know, work for a few hours and then ride back home. I learned to avoid the restaurant by doing that (laughs). So I didn't do that for long.

EH: And pizza wasn't very common at that point.

DM: There was no pizza in Beckley. Dad went to a trade show, one of these annual trade shows in Chicago and started business with the Verger Brothers who were making homemade pizza crust and selling the sauce. And so he brought that back. There was one other business in town. I think it was where the Capri is now. That was also starting to get into it, but people around Beckley weren't used to pizza so what he did is, he ended up giving little slices of it away to get people to try it.

10:11

And that's what introduced it around town here.

EH: Nice.

DM: Yep.

EH: It's hard to imagine a time before pizza, for me.

DM: There was a time before pizza, there was a time before chain restaurants, there was a time before arches (laughs) and it was just us, you know, and a few inside restaurants too around town.

EH: And your neon sign is still operational?

DM: Oh yeah, it's still operational and it costs me a dang fortune to find people to fix neon.

EH: I bet. You know I interviewed a guy in St. Albans who was a neon sign maker and he would repair signs but he passed away a few months ago.

DM: Yeah, I've had to search around a couple times to find, get the neon fixed.

EH: But it is iconic.

DM: Yeah, and that's why I don't want to change it. It's neon, it's different and it's our logo.

EH: Right. So who are your employees?

DM: Oh you want me to name names?

EH: Well you know, just talk about some employees over the years and you don't need to name names.

DM: Yeah, Diane [Hamilton] who you'll interview here is a dayshift manager. She started inside and has been inside ever since. And I'll let you tell her her history. Her tell her history. If you want to stay for evening shift, Judy is the evening manager and she has a background similar to Diane's--does a lot of inside work and everything. Has been here just about as long. The rest of the staff, the curb girls, both of 'em have at least 15 years, maybe more. An odd year. So it's Melanie and Debbie. And they've been doing that for that whole time. The rest of the staff inside are relatively new. I think Amanda on the grill has got only 5 years. (laughs) And on evening shift, Bryan's got around 10 years, you may get a chance to meet him. And a lot of them are newer. We've just gone through some rotation of folks. The curb girls there, Kathy's been oh, she's relatively new, maybe 20 years of service (laughs) and then the rest of 'em have less than that, so they could give you some stories.

EH: So mostly women?

DM: Mostly. I've got guys in here but they're all new. I have Shorty, Shorty, and he is, there's a reason he's Shorty--he's only about 5'2" and Kenneth is in the back today. And he's new. Shorty's been around for maybe 5 or 6 years. So and then on the evening shift I have a couple of guys--mostly guys on the evening.

EH: And then who are your customers and regulars?

DM: So we have probably several classes of customers. The business folks, the businesses around here lunch, they're all in for a quick bite or a quick pick up. We get people from the hospital who place a lot of orders, doctors' offices, anyone in the businesses up and down the road, they're always ordering lunch next door, are in here all the time and the place up here, Lilly's is in here all the time. Then we have folks who have been eating here for years and years and years. Some of whom are on oxygen, I might tongue and cheek add. But they're still coming and they get a lot of the same thing. We know a lot of the names, about half, at least half the customers who call in and they give me their name I just heard from 'em recently and they're here all the time. And then we have people who are driving through the Beckley area, probably in an interstate going north and south, who are hearing about us. We have pretty good reviews on the internet, and they stop by for just curiosity. So that's probably the 3 main classes.

EH: Do folks have standing orders? Any regulars?

DM: We have regulars but we don't make--they order the same thing all the time but they don't do a standing order per se. But we get somebody who always, even the guys over on the sandwich bar say, "Oh, that's so and so." That kind of thing. The curb girls can tell you--they spot a car and they'll just place the order before they even talk to who's in the car because they know what they're gonna order. So there's a few of those.

14:49

EH: Yeah, when I saw--do you have fried liver? Yeah. When I saw that I thought this place is for real.

DM: Yeah, that's one of those we make ourselves. Yeah.

EH: So what are the most popular items?

DM: Hot dogs, because they're English buns, toasted on the side, top cuts. We just sell those like gangbusters. The BBQ sandwiches. They like our BBQ. Are probably the 2 top most--the steak hoagie sandwiches are real popular. In the kitchens, that pan liver dinner we just talked about. Pizza. Those are our big top items. Of course we always sell fries and things like that with everything, so.

EH: And then how about competition and prices. How has that changed?

DM: Well competition of course has changed greatly over the years. The other drive-ins died off. And back in the early days the chains started coming in. And of course we evolved with the town. Back when I was a kid, everything happened downtown. And then they developed out here what we, area I call Skelton (sp?) which is the restaurant row now. All those are sit-down restaurants. They don't seem to impact us much. The most recent opening was a Texas steak joint, I think it's Roadhouse or one of those, pretty good steak joint by the way. I was expecting to see some changes, nope. Didn't happen. So we get the type of customer that comes here is not necessarily somebody who's got time or the money to go sit in the sit-down restaurant. So we also keep the prices absolutely as low as we can. I don't take a lot of money

out of this place. I don't need to. So if we can keep the prices down we will and it serves a segment of the society it needs that too. Besides the fact it's good food.

EH: Right.

DM: Yeah.

EH: And what about sourcing. Has that been an issue?

DM: Sourcing is always somewhat of a headache. The guy for people on the mic, I was just talking to one of the salesmen before you showed up and he has been my salesman here probably 15 years. And his dad worked with my dad. So that's US Foods. And I have 2 people from US Foods--they used to be 2 companies, now they're one but I still have 2 salespeople. And we try and do as much locally sourced stuff as we can so all of our meat products come from a local guy.

EH: Oh nice.

DM: The breads come from the local area to the extent I can do that I will. It's hard to find some products and somethings get changed over the years that we have to contend with. One year a pizza company bought Verger Brothers who made our pizza sauce and without us knowing it, they changed the label! (laughs) And the formula. And all of a sudden my customers said what's wrong with the pizza? And we had to figure out what was done, we had to go up that supply chain to figure out if somebody changed the formula without telling anybody. Then we had to find products that closely matched what the basic was and so that happens every now and then. So as the industry changes, we have to accommodate it and sometimes we get a little surprise.

18:22

EH: Let's see. Is there anything you would like to add?

DM: No, we just as long as people are happy with us and they need to come by and we'll try to serve them as best we can. I'm getting a little old. We're gonna have to hand this to somebody, I'm not sure whom in a few years, but we'll find somebody to try and run it.

EH: Yeah, I hope so.

DM: Yeah.

EH: And oh, your chili and slaw--is there someone who makes those for the hot dogs?

DM: Mmhm. Yeah, it gets made here. Yeah, she's on vacation. Sorry! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) She's the person who makes the pies.

DM: Yeah, she's the head cook back in the--but Diane can talk to you probably about that just as well because Diane made it too for a while. So if you want to talk to her you can do that.

EH: Alright! Well thanks so much!

DM: Okay! (laughs)



19:18  
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END OF INTERVIEW