

# VINTAGE BURGERS

By Dennis J. Polley

Research by White Castle reports the All-American, food-staple king, the almighty hamburger, was invented in Hamburg, Germany in 1891 by Otto Kuase. Could be. There are other claims to its invention including one going back to a 1747 cookbook, “The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy” by Hannah Glasse, also in Hamburg, Germany. (“...Plain and Easy...” The early stirrings of the fast-food industry?) There are assertions that burgers were first created in America. The real birth of this indispensable king of cuisines is somewhat questionable. Hamburg, Germany makes sense given the city’s name.

One fact is indisputable; the hamburger gained fame in the United States at the St. Louis 1904 World’s Fair when the New York Times reported the burger as “the innovation of a food vendor on the Pike,” which was the carnival strip at the Fair.

Moving on to Post-World War II Americans and St. Louisians, they were flush with money and cars, helping create the classic, drive-up hamburger businesses frequented by families and cruising teenagers. Route 66 was key with helping to drive the trend. So let’s go on a tour of vintage, St. Louis hamburger joints.



1950s carhop waitress and serving tray mounted on the car’s window. (Don’t accidentally roll that window down all the way!)

## Medart’s



Blossom & Bill Medart cooking burgers in 1930

In 1930, a small hamburger stand opened at Clayton and Skinker in was an A&W root-beer stand. By luck, the night Medart’s opened coincided with the Veiled Prophet Parade terminating close to the new business, making for a profitable opening night. Bill and wife Blossom Medart’s modest establishment was one of the first places in St. Louis to feature hamburgers as the main menu selection. The very impressive burgers were served on a bun with onion and a legendary secret relish, all kept together by a paper wrapper.

The place was a hit. They rebuilt their restaurant in 1933 with red brick. It was still small, with fresh, tasty hamburgers continuing to be the big draw.

In 1932, Bill Medart opened a Medart's restaurant at 3427 South Kingshighway, which his dad Phillip Medart ran successfully until it closed in January of 1956. It was near Uncle Bill's Pancake House.

The Medarts began expanding in 1939 by building a two-story restaurant and tavern called the Olde Cheshire. The addition was rustic with an English architectural style. Further extensive expansions were made. The property was sold to Stephen J. Apted, vice president of Hulling's Cafeterias, in 1960 and renamed Cheshire Inn.

Next time you are at Cheshire Inn, remember its humble begins with Blossom and Bill. They are mostly responsible for everything you'll see there. Class folks!

### The Parkmoor



The Parkmoor on South Kingshighway at Chippewa

Not far from Medart's, on Clayton and Big Bend, another famous place opened in 1930. It was The Parkmoor. It grew to have seven location, dishing out Kingburgers, onion rings, fries and omelets.

I recall the Kingshighway and Chippewa location, pictured to the left. We went there in the late 1950s after a St. Mary Magdalen School picnic. (Take me back!)

The car hop greeted us and we got our order to go. I remember the Kingburger had large, sweet onion chips and the thick fries came in a small, cardboard box. Dad got me a malt.

Eventually, only the original location survived as a full-service restaurant. It was unfortunately demolished in 1999.



Left: The original Parkmoor at Clayton & Big Bend

Right: The final Parkmoor at Clayton & Big Bend



## A&W Root Beer Stand



A magic place from the past was the A&W Root Beer stand on Kingshighway and Parker, across the street from McMahon Ford, north of the McMahon Lincoln Mercury dealership. The picture is not from that location, but it does capture its look. I think the stand dated from at least the early 1930s. (A&W was founded in 1919 in California, coming to St. Louis in 1925.) My dad went there in the late 1940s, traveling from North St. Louis. The building's front consisted of three sides jutting out from the back of the location. It had enormous glass windows folding out and up in the summer and were screened in, creating a porch-like

effect, letting the hot summer breeze blow through. The inside featured a u-shaped counter with stools surrounding the cooking area, and barrels dispensing the ice-cold root beer via big taps. The burgers were fried and had a true secret sauce that was white, creamy and delicious. I recall the burgers being pretty good sized, completely covering a generous bun. The fries were very substantial; crispy outside and soft inside. It was a great, unique place to go in the summer, which I did often in the late 1960s as a teenager. I don't recall curb service.

The A&W Root Beer stand was torn down in the early 1970s, replaced by a parking lot for the cars of the Mercury Lincoln dealership. It was a sad loss of a true time capsule from the old days.

Years later I went to a newer, fast-food style A&W in the county. I noticed they had a secret sauce. Brimming with nostalgia, I ordered a burger with the "secret sauce," which had evolved into a mix of ordinary relish and catsup slapped on top of an over-fried burger. Ya' can't go back home!

## White Castle



White Castle began life in 1921 in Wichita, Kansas making it the oldest burger chain in the U.S. White Castle made its first appearance in St. Louis in 1925. The "carry out" concept was introduced by White Castle. The secret to their burgers' taste was the holes in the meat patty, which was placed on a pile of onions on a hot grill. The buns were then stacked on top the patty. The whole pile was cooked by the steam escaping through the magic holes. (I can smell it now.)

The main White Castle in my life was the one on Kingshighway at Devonshire. In the 1950s and 60s, you could pick them up for 10 cents apiece. They ran ads in the newspapers with coupons to buy a whole sack at a discount. Drive a sack of belly bombers home, and your car would

never have the new-car smell again! Although banned as a school lunchtime destination by St. Mary Magdalen, we went to the Kingshighway store anyway. (My only rebellion!) That location has been rebuilt twice since its original, pictured, 1930s porcelain-palace configuration, which featured stained glass windows spelling out “White Castle.” At least through the early 1960s, it offered carhop service, bringing the powerful little burgers to set on a metal tray mounted on the car’s window. It’s still in business.

A White Castle porcelain palace, #24, was built at Chippewa and Hampton in 1937 on what is now the corner of Target’s parking lot. It was unfortunately torn down in 1983. The company made the lame claim it was too old to restore. (One of the usual excuses made to demolish vintage buildings.) There was a great public outcry, but to no avail. It was replaced with a prefab Fox Photo kiosk, which was also eventually torn down--with no great public outcry.

### Steak ‘n Shake



Wow! Talk about a coincidence. I was primarily going to discuss the Steak n’ Shake on 6622 Chippewa at Lansdowne, and it turns out it was the first Steak in St. Louis, opening in 1948.

Steak ‘n Shake was founded in Normal, IL, in 1934 by Gus Belt. He wisely build along Route 66, helping the business spread to 29 states. The hamburger chain used the black and white décor from the beginning. They were already making “smashed” burgers in the early 1930s. These were

“steak” burgers consisting of T-bone and sirloin cuts. Steak’s hamburgers were always more expensive than McDonald’s and company—they were also better.

I recall three area Steak n’ Shake locations: Chippewa at Lansdowne, Gravois at Hampton, and Chippewa at Morganford. Unfortunately, all three are gone, with the original St. Louis location burning down in 2002, replaced by a Starbucks. The others were demolished.

The above picture is a great shot from 1959 during the golden age of drive-up hamburger joints. I can see a 1950s Corvette, a station wagon, a 1959 Chevrolet, a Volkswagen, a 1958 Plymouth, and pulling up a 1956 Oldsmobile. Very nice wheels! (Can ya’ hear Elvis from the car radios?) You can see the carhops getting ready to deliver the goods. Ten kinds of OK!

It seems incompetent management brought down many St. Louis locations and elsewhere. I encountered a huge example of that the final time I frequented the Steak n’ Shake at Gravois and Hampton. There was only two occupied tables, and they blew our order!



## Wild's Palace of Poison



Morticia, I think we've found the perfect place for a bite!



**"EAT HERE IF IT KILLS YOU  
WE NEED THE MONEY"**

PLEASE SPECIFY IF YOU WISH A LARGE OR SMALL  
AMOUNT OF ARSENIC WITH YOUR ORDER.  
P.S. DEATH CERTIFICATE ON REQUEST.

<b>MURDER BURGER</b> - ON TOASTED BUN ONIONS AND SALAD DRESSING ..... <b>15¢</b>	<b>WITCHES BREW</b> - COFFEE, TEA ..... <b>5¢</b>
<b>SUICIDE BURGER</b> - ON TOASTED BUN NO ONIONS - SALAD DRESSING ..... <b>15¢</b>	<b>ARSENIC FIZZ</b> - ROOT BEER - COKE .... <b>5¢ + 10¢</b> ROOT BEER OR COKE FLOAT, 16 oz. .... <b>20¢</b>
<b>SCORPIONS STING</b> - FRANKFURTER ON TOASTED BUN - BAR-B-QUE SAUCE ..... <b>15¢</b>	<b>IDIOTS DELIGHT</b> - MALTED MILK CHOCOLATE, STRAWBERRY, PINEAPPLE OR VANILLA ..... <b>20¢</b>
<b>PTOMARINE SPECIAL</b> - HAM & CHEESE WHITE, RYE OR BUN - SALAD DRESSING .... <b>25¢</b>	<b>ANGELS KISS</b> - 16 oz. SOFT CREAM WITH WHIPPED CREAM TOPPING ..... <b>20¢</b>
<b>TOMBSTONE</b> - TORSTED CHEESE WHITE, RYE OR BUN - PICKLE SLICES ..... <b>15¢</b>	<b>BLACK WIDOW</b> - CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM SUNDRAE WITH CHOCOLATE SYRUP AND WHIPPED CREAM ..... <b>15¢</b>
<b>PHANTOMS KISS</b> - CHILI - HO-MADE ..... <b>20¢</b>	<b>ARSENIC SPECIAL</b> - 3 FLAVORS ICE CREAM PINEAPPLE, CHERRY, CHOCOLATE SYRUP WITH WHIPPED CREAM ..... <b>25¢</b>
<b>DOOMS DAY DELIGHT</b> - HAM AND EGG WHITE, RYE OR BUN - PICKLE SLICES ..... <b>25¢</b>	<b>ANY FLAVOR SUNDRAE</b> ..... <b>15¢</b>
<b>VAMPIRES KISS</b> - BACON, LETTUCE, TOMATO WHITE, RYE OR BUN ..... <b>20¢</b>	<b>FRENCH FRIES</b> ..... <b>10¢</b>

"Next stop, the Twilight Zone!" Thank you Rod Serling—accurately stated. Wild's Palace of Poison, opening in 1947 on 1500 Lemay Ferry Rd., was a crazy place where you could order a Murder Burger or Black Widow ice cream Sunday. (Did the Addams Family eat here?) It was conveniently located next to Mount Hope Cemetery--talk about location, location, location. The Palace

was a huge hit with teenagers of the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Carhops zipped between '48 Mercurys and '57 Chevys, delivering the burgers, fries and malts. Eat them off the tray mounted on the car's window since there was no inside seating. After the meal was consumed, a souvenir death certificate could be purchased—crazy! Check out the menu; it says it all.

Around 1964, a Steak n' Shake opened about a block away, ending the run for Wild's Palace of Poison.

Hey gang, "Eat Here if it Kills You!" They "need the money!"

## CUCK-A-BURGER



This is the one I've been looking forward to writing about. Bud Taylor, Ralph Stille and Curt Bennett were operating an IBC Root Beer stand on

the corner of Page and Pennsylvania that was part of the Dairy Dell chain. Their food selection was limited to the franchise's menu, and they wanted to expand past that. They tossed around some names for their new place such as Broil-A Burger and What-A-Burger. Ralph Stille came up with Chuck-A-Burger. It grew to eight locations.

The Chuck-A-Burger my friends and I went to in the late 1960s was in Affton on Gravois, pictured above. The main building had the kitchen and some seating—we were never in there. A row of covered parking slots was to the right of the main building with illuminated menus above each car. The far edges of the parking lot had similar slots on two sides. Mostly good-looking female carhops brought the flame-broiled burgers, fries and drinks. (Real American Graffiti!) The hamburgers were fresh and large on a nice, toasted bun, with toppings to order. They were thin and crispy without being burnt. I always thought Chuck-A-Burger's food was superior to Steak n' Shake and way better than McDonald's, Burger Chef and Burger King.

Now, onto the all-important social scene, which at Chuck, was cruising. I went to Chuck-A-Burger a lot while proudly attending St. Mary's High School from 1965 to '69 on the Southside. Tons of kids were also at DuBourg and Southwest High Schools. There were also several South St. Louis City and County Catholic parishes in close vicinity. On Sunday night, those parishes would hold big CYC dances in their gyms, drawing tons of high-school aged kids from all over. They went to hear big-brass rock 'n' roll bands like Bob Kuban & the In Men, Johnny Kay & the Runaways, Walter Scott & the Guise, Mike Zimmer & Avantis and others. (My parish was St. Mary Magdalen on South Kingshighway. They had a huge, legendary gym which easily held more than 1000 on the "dance" floor.) The dances usually got out at 9:00 PM. Lots of those kids, especially in the summer, then headed out Gravois to the Affton Chuck. The parking lot was an unobstructed oval, which supported fabulous cruising round and round, waving at the girls, showing off tough cars, maybe hoping to meet a new date. It got to be such a hot spot for cruising the police had to control the traffic and the cruising. However, even though jammed with teenagers in cars, there never seemed to be any major problems. It was mostly a clean cut, Southside crowd, and it was great!

By 1973, national chains such as McDonald's, Burger Chef and Burger King were crowding the burger scene, and Chuck-A-Burger had to file for bankruptcy. The Gravois location has seen the original building home to numerous businesses. It's still there.

One Chuck-A-Burger still exists on Rock Road, run by Ralph Stille's son Ron. The food is original and good, seasoned by 1950s and '60s rock 'n roll and cruising classic cars. Pedal to metal, boys!

### **Dooleys Ltd**



A St. Louis Downtown legend was born in 1968 when Alex Dooley opened his restaurant at 308 North 8<sup>th</sup> Street on the first floor of the Chemical Building. It was originally called Beef Eaters, but some copyright issues with the Beefeater Gin company caused him to change the name to Dooleys Ltd. It had an “Old English” theme, inside and outside. The exterior sported half timbering and stucco. The interior featured a first floor with a full bar and balcony floor with lots of dark

woodwork, chandeliers and red-plaid wallpaper throughout. There was seating at tables, or diners could stand at high-top tables.

Time to get in the food line which at lunchtime usually reached from the cash register to the front door. With mounting anticipation, the diner would arrive at the order/cooking station at the back of the first-floor. There were various menu items, but the big seller was the thick, six-ounce burger topped with a scoop of soft cheddar cheese with fries on the side. This beauty would be ordered, with cooking instructions, at the cash register. Proceed right to the open-flame grill behind a glass partition and let the show begin. The raw burger would be formed into a patty and grilled to order on an impressive open flame, with the heat and aroma drifting over the glass partition into the waiting line. After flipping the burger a few times, a scoop of soft cheddar cheese was pressed on top the meat. The bun toasted on the grill while the cheese melted on the burger. Still moving to the right, the burger was assembled and presented to the diner on a tray, accompanied with the fries. The diner then went to the condiment bar, topped off the hamburger, maybe ordered a draft beer from the bar, finally landing at their table. Time to chow down and enjoy that ice-cold beer! If it was a Friday, a second beer might be in the near future.

Speaking of Fridays, I had the good fortune to work Downtown for over 40 years, and Dooleys was a Friday destination. The place always had a big lunchtime crowd, and the vibe was a happy one. Usually a group of about three to six of my coworkers and I would go there, enjoying really good burgers, fries and cold brew. I still miss it and the Downtown St. Louis of that era.

The Chemical Building was purchased in 2006 for rehabbing into luxury condominiums, essentially forcing out Dooleys in 2008. I was there on the last day, and the draft beer taps quit working. Seems like they knew the end was near.

## Henry's Hamburgers



A Henry's Hamburgers was located on the point of 5837 Devonshire and Hampton, just behind Kiddy Land featuring real pony rides and small carnival rides for kids. Henry's Hamburgers was founded in 1954 out of Chicago, IL, an outgrowth of Breslers Ice Cream. During the late 1950s, you could pick up 3 burgers, fries and a chocolate shake for 85 cents. Good burgers and malts. The local Henry's Hamburgers disappeared in the mid-1960s, chased out by McDonald's and such.

## Burger Chef



Burger Chef began in 1957 in Indianapolis, IN with a growth rate challenging McDonald's. It was truly a fast-food restaurant in the modern sense of the term, with the motto "Burger Chef goes all out to please your family". They featured flame-broiled hamburgers, a nice change from the usual frying technique. I remember eating at the one on 6450 Chippewa. I don't think they ever had carhops there, at least not in late 1960s. You had to order inside, where

there was some seating. The chain closed in 1982, bought out by Hardy's.

## Courtesy Diner



Courtesy Diner was opened in 1935, eventually becoming a national chain. The one I remember was on 3153 S. Kingshighway by Southwest High School. The menu was varied, featuring "steakburgers" malts, and fries among other diner fares including legendary Slingers. A chrome juke box adorned each table. Courtesy Diners looked very much like Steak n' Shakes. I believe one is open on 1121 Hampton and in Affton.

## Naugles



Naugles was Southern California fast-food Mexican restaurant chain existing from 1970 to 1995 and noted for hamburgers and tacos. In the 1980s, it merged with Del Taco. I remember the one on McCausland and the store on Grand by St. Louis U in the "Flying Saucer" building. Both those locations closed in 2011 and the company left the St. Louis area. The McCausland



location is now the site of the Highpoint Café, with top-notch, good burgers! The “Flying Saucer” building is now home to a Starbucks.

## McDonalds



Dick and Mac McDonald began McDonald's in 1948, using their Speedee Service System and a menu concentrating on burgers, fries and soft drinks. Ray Kroc took over 1955, going national in a big way, and the rest is history.

The first McDonald's in the St. Louis area opened in 1958 in Crestwood on Route 66, Watson Rd. It was a walk-up restaurant with the standard franchise menu of frozen, fried burgers and fries. I was most familiar with the 7241 Gravois location (on the way to Chuck-A-Burger), and the 4620 S. Kingsway location next to White Castle. I usually selected White Castle over the “Golden Arches.”

## Big Boy



The Big Boy chain was founded in 1936 (as Bob's Pantry), in Glendale, CA. I knew of at least one St. Louis location, but I can't place it. I think it was known as Shoney's Big Boy. Shoney's was affiliated with Big Boy from 1952 through the early 1980s. I was unable to find any St. Louis-specific data on this chain regarding location and when it first opened and eventually closed.

## Super Sandwich Shop

I cannot locate any pictures of the Super Sandwich Shop at Chippewa and Brannon. I believe it was built in the early 1960s with a design very similar to the Courtesy Diner, only smaller. I do recall my Dad was not happy about another burger joint opening in the neighborhood. The hamburgers were the big draw. I'm not sure when it closed and was demolished. A 7-Eleven was built on the site which was converted to a manicured nails establishment.

## Coda:

It's a hot Friday night in June, 1962. The legendary 409 V8 impatiently rumbles under the hood of the custom '58 Chevy. The guy driving pulls a comb, slicking back his hair, Elvis style. Tough-no apologies! The blonde sitting next to him is listening to Dion singing “The Wanderer” on KXOX AM 630 Radio. The car hop approaches. *“Give me two to go with fries and two malts. Wait a minute. Make that with extra onions and pickles.”* The goods are delivered. The 409 V8 responds instantly to the accelerator; the 58 Chevy disappears into Southside's nocturnal darkness. “Where were you in '62?”

Thanks to these sources of facts and figures:

Medart's ,Parkmoor, Dooleys Ltd,-(Lost Treasurers of St. Louis by Cameron Collins, Publisher Reedy Press & Lost Tables website)

Chuck-A-Burger-(Riverfront Times, Cheryl Baehr)

Steak n' Shake-(John Sarkis Facebook page and Steak 'n Shake website)

Big Boy-(Wikipedia and Big Boy website)

Wild's Palace of Poison-(St. Louis Magazine & Lost Treasurers of St. Louis by Cameron Collins, Publisher Reedy Press)

White Castle-(Vintage St. Louis & Route 66 Facebook pages)

Henry's Hamburgers-(WIKIPEDIA)

Burger Chef-(WIKIPEDIA)

Courtesy Diner-(Courtesy Diner website)

A&W Root Beer Stand-(A&W website)

Naugles-(Lost Treasures of St. Louis and WIKIPEDIA)

McDonalds-(McDonalds' website)

***And, the many alumni on the St. Mary Magdalen Grade School Facebook page who provided the names and facts of many hamburger joints I had forgotten. Thanks!***

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