

Bob Evans' First Steamboat Gothic Customer

On August 31, 1969, my colleague, Russ Getson, and I traveled from Kent, Ohio to Columbus, Ohio for an Ohio Counselor Educators Association (ACES) conference. We had an early meeting the next morning, September 1, and had booked a room at the Howard Johnson Motel on Route 161 about ten miles north of our downtown Columbus meeting location.

Our plan was to stay at the edge of Columbus, eat early and head downtown for our 8:00AM meeting. When we arrived at our motel, we noticed what appeared to be a new red and white restaurant across the street and decided to have dinner there. After unpacking, we walked the short distance to the restaurant. We could see that there were lots of waiters and waitresses inside, but when we tried to open the door it was locked. A nice young man opened the door to tell us that this Bob Evans restaurant was to open for the first time early the next morning.

The next morning, Russ and I were at the door several minutes before the doors opened, were ushered to our seats and had a wonderful breakfast of, if my memory serves me correctly, eggs, home fries and red links of sausage. We loved this place! When we checked out, the person at the counter said to me, "Thanks for coming to Bob Evans...you are our first customer."* No fan fare, no framed dollar, no cheers...just a warm welcome and a sincere "Thanks." We vowed to return to this place again!

Over the next few years, I ate at that Bob Evans restaurant every time I attended meetings, or passed through Columbus, often with my wife and four children. My children heard the story of me being the first customer so many times that they started calling it “Dad’s restaurant,” and once, I even overheard them tell some of their friends about me being the first customer at that particular Bob Evans.

One lives a shallow life when their biggest claim to fame is being the “first customer” at some restaurant, but hey, I say “take any positive fame you can get.” One time when our family was eating at “The” Bob Evans, and when the manager came to our table to inquire how everything was going, my oldest son, Jeff, said, “Dad, tell him about being the First Customer.” I told him the story, and when I finished, he said, “Oh,” nodded his head and walked away.

I guess he thought I was trying to get a free meal! After the manager departed, my kids started laughing and couldn’t stop! They teased me all the way home and have never let me forget it. At any opportunity, they say, “Dad was the first customer at Bob Evans.” I even made it worse by telling them that the restaurant was “Steamboat Gothic” in design...and this has even made the story funnier as I spent thirty-two years in the Naval Reserve. They tell stories about me being the Captain of a restaurant-oriented Steamboat...as, of course, “His first command.”

The years have passed, the kids have grown up, our grandchildren are grown...and they all know I was Bob Evans’ First Customer! We still frequently eat some of our

meals at the Kent or Streetsboro Bob Evans...and even go to Columbus occasionally to as the slogan says, "Come on Down and Visit Us" at MY Bob Evans restaurant. I enjoy it today as I did when I was "The first customer."

*I know the original Bob Evans' restaurant was on the home farm and opened in 1961. The restaurant I have written about is the first "new Steamboat Gothic" concept Bob Evans' restaurant...red and white, with a large yellow Bob Evans name just under the "keyhole" roof. I have even told my story at the Original Bob Evans Restaurant in Rio Grande...and they didn't seem to be impressed either!!
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About the Author: Before he retired, Dr. Saltzman was the Director of Basic Medical Sciences at the Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine in Rootstown, Ohio, Although he has eaten many meals at many Bob Evans' restaurants, he remains a fit and trim seventy-three year old man...and lives with his wife, Ruth, and their dog, Orville, in Twin Lakes, Ohio. The Saltzmans have three living children and four grandsons.