

Memphis Business Journal

THE BUSINESS AUTHORITY OF THE MID-SOUTH

30th
Anniversary 1979-2009

Nirvana can be in the mouth of the beholder

The town where I grew up was once described by Mark Twain as “one of the prettiest situations on the Mississippi.”

And that was only the river view. A visitor in the late 1800s to Helena, Ark., would have found a downtown full of brick structures and plenty of commerce going on below the verdant hills created by Crowley’s Ridge.

It’s the same setting I grew up in. Almost every storefront on our downtown’s main drag contained a business: hardware stores, clothing stores, dime stores, shoe stores, restaurants, even two movie theaters.

It’s sure not like that now. Mr. Twain might today call it “one of the direst situations” on the river. But it’s not alone among Delta towns that can remember better days.

But one of the most charming aspects of this town when I was a kid was the prevalence of the neighborhood grocery. Most neighbors had them. Mine had two — across the street from each other. Somehow, they both stayed in business.

One of them, Reeves Grocery, was known as “the biggest little store in town.” It did seem to have a lot of stuff. And one item made Reeves stand out from every other tiny little store, and that was a product called “Smokey Joe.”

This was a foot-long smoked sausage in a bun, covered in chili and slaw, that was invented by the store owner, Ellis Reeves. I grew up eating them. Then after I grew up, I kept eating them. And when Mr. Reeves sold his store and moved away, I rushed to the store to make sure the Smokey Joe had not left with him.

The new owners assured me that they would continue to sell Smokeys. Whew. But then I was afraid that maybe someone else should know that recipe, just to keep this fabulous creation alive for the ages. So I asked the folks to tell me how to make one, and they did.

This whole history of Helena, Reeves and the Smokey Joe surfaced during our recent Small Business Awards program. One of

ANOTHER VIEW



BILL WELLBORN

the finalists — and an eventual winner, as it turns out — in the competition was Monogram Food Solutions LLC, which makes and distributes cold cuts, hot dogs and sausages, among other products. One of its products is the Circle B brand smoked sausage, which just happens to be the key ingredient in Mr. Reeves’ Smokey Joe.

So I was talking to one of the Monogram guys about all this, and I was telling him all the ingredients and

trying to sell him on the idea of experiencing the Smokey Joe. I was literally raving about it. And I must have done a good job, because before I knew it he had agreed to make up a batch of Smokey Joes in Monogram’s test kitchen. And he invited me to come to the company headquarters and wolf down a genuine Smokey Joe in what essentially is the Circle B corporate boardroom.

Well, that sounded like Smokey Joe nirvana to me. In the weeks that followed our initial meeting, we had several conversations about the key ingredients and the proper steps for a winning presentation.

Then it happened. Just this week, right in Circle B HQ, I walked in to find a simmering pot of Four Star Chili, Circle B sausages and all the trimmings. It was fantastic. It made me wish Mr. Reeves could be there.

Of course, I suggested a couple of minor changes in the preparation that could have made the meal even better. I also recommended that next time, I should be around to help out from the beginning.

I hope they understood the message, because I really want there to be a next time. Once you get a taste of Smokey Joe nirvana, you want to go back.

billborn@bizjournals.com | 259-1721