

Indiana

The Port Drive-In is a Blast From The Past!

By Barbara Folek

Complete with roller-skating carhops, homemade root beer and a secret chili recipe, Chesterton's Port Drive-In is one of the few authentic 1950s drive-ins still operating in the United States today.

"We're a dying breed," say owners Terry and Beth Gassoway.

The orange-and-brown roadside eatery facing busy Calumet Road has been in operation for 53 years and owned by the Gassoway family since 1958.

Elsie and Virgil Gassoway, Terry's parents, called it The Snack Shack, until the name Port Drive-In evolved in the '60s because of the high volume of beach traffic from the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

Former teachers, Terry and Beth left their school jobs to take over the operation in 1975 and subsequently purchased it in 1978. They are committed to maintaining Terry's parents' recipes for chili, coleslaw and root beer, and preserving the character of a '50s drive-in.

The root beer is available by the gallon, half gallon, quart, or by the



glass mug, which weighs a pound, making carrying a tray laden with four mugs and food no easy feat for any server. On skates, it's a heroic effort the carhops make with good cheer.

Alongside the splits, sodas, shakes and floats are Green River (a Chicago beverage rarely seen anymore) and Spezi (a combination of cola and orange phosphate). "It's really popular in Germany. We dis-

covered it on a trip to visit my husband's relatives and introduced it here," Beth says.

The large menu features everything from BLTs and fried clams to deep-fried dill pickles and pochitos—a chili-cheese dog in a flour tortilla. But their best sellers remain the chili-dog and root beer, the plate-sized pork tenderloin sandwiches and fried smelt.

The busy stand features booths

for indoor dining in a room plastered with pictures of the sports teams the Gassoways have sponsored over the years and graduation pictures of the many teenagers who have enjoyed their shakes and fries.

Seventy-five percent of the drive-in's business is from car service, requiring a staff of 22, most of them long-time employees who started in high school and return every summer during college breaks.

"We not only believe in old-fashioned treats and an old-fashioned atmosphere, we believe in old-fashioned values," Beth says. "When we tell our employees to be here at 10:30 a.m., we don't mean 10:55, and they abide by it."

Let one think the Gassoways are harsh taskmasters, mention must be made of the many whipped-cream fights that have taken place at the close of the business day.

The Port still has a rotary-dial telephone, a homemade ticket holder made of wire and clothespins, and the carhops still wear coin changers on their belts.

"Their math improves when they come to work for us because we have no calculators and no cash registers to figure out the right change for them," Beth says.

One of the few concessions to modern times made by the Gassoways is switching the carhops from skates to roller blades because it's easier for them to stop.

"We still ask, 'Can you roller-skate?' on our application but it's not a condition of employment," Beth says.

Weather is a factor in their business and 9/11 had a profound effect, Beth says.

"Business was so slow, we could have closed for the season but we're fighters and we've just come off two record-breaking seasons."

The Port Drive-In is not only part of Chesterton's local history, it's a national dining treasure located at 439 N. Calumet Road. It is open from mid-March through mid-October until 9 p.m. daily and can be reached by telephone at (219) 926-3500. ✕