

The History of Reds Restaurant

By, Zachary J. Konopka

“Success is not final; failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.”

(Winston Churchill). Reds Restaurant is considered the oldest independently owned and operated restaurant in Greene County, but it could not have gained this esteemed status had it not been for the courageous entrepreneurial spirit that embodied each of the four eras of Reds ownership. Each owner’s ability to recognize and adapt to changes in the social, economic, and political environments allowed them to progress and innovate in ways that set Reds apart from other restaurants in the region, and helped to secure the longevity of the restaurant through each transition of ownership. Every owner faced obstacles and unforeseen circumstances that impacted the business in sometimes unexpected ways, but ultimately their commitment to explore, evolve and persevere not only helped them to survive, it has helped define what Reds is today.

Forest A. Mays, better known by his nickname ‘Red’ for his bright red hair, was a businessman originally from Georgia who saw an opportunity to make money in the 1940s when he decided to purchase a plot of land accompanied by a small building on US Route 9W in West Cossackie New York. The land was owned by a local man named Bill Phillips, who happened to be serving in the Second World War. Unbeknownst to Bill, his father sold a piece of his land to “Red” while Bill was deployed in 1944. “Red” saw that there were no restaurants in the area that featured seafood, and was confident there would be a demand for it. So, he applied his knowledge and connections with the seafood market and founded Red’s Seafood Restaurant in West Cossackie. “Red” knew that he could buy shrimp and other seafood in bulk for a low price

at the Fulton Fish Market and took full advantage of this, developing most of his menu around seafood dinners. He quickly became known for serving high quality seafood from the Chesapeake Bay, New Bedford, and Boston, and developed a loyal customer base who would drive long distances just to partake of his unique assortment of simply prepared quality seafood, particularly the shrimp cocktails.



Before long, the restaurant became known as “The house that shrimp built” because the volume of shrimp sold was said to have been the basis for all the early financial success the restaurant experienced. In fact, it was so busy at that time that patrons would sit in their cars waiting to be called for a table via the outdoor speaker.

During “Red’s” tenure between 1944 and 1953, he and his restaurant manager at the time, Carl Martin, expanded the restaurant over 20 times, in both the kitchen and the dining areas. The dining area began as a small bar area with a few auxiliary tables and expanded to include the north end, and later the large room on the south end that “Red” called the Candlelight Room. His vision for the Candlelight Room was to feature a nightclub atmosphere, which stemmed from his personal enjoyment of the night life and the drinking associated with it. Unfortunately, “Red” was unable to control his own drinking and stopped managing the day to day operations as closely as the business demanded to remain functioning. His employees took advantage of his state and ultimately he lost control of his business and it was returned to the bank to cover his debt. Although “Red” Mays ended up losing the restaurant, his vision and courage to do what

had not been done before in this little upstate NY town set the stage for a long history of



customers making Red's Seafood Restaurant a part of their lives. "Red" Mays built a full service restaurant with an ambiance of a sit down eatery and served a quality product that people in and out of the Greene County area loved and would continue to patronize for generations.

Reds was for sale and the bank called upon Hans and Freda Bartels to consider taking advantage of the opportunity to assume ownership and turn the business around. Hans and Freda did just that when they bought the restaurant in 1954 by managing every detail of the business operation with professional discipline. They made sure everything was perfect for their guests and this benefited them because they gained loyal, happy customers. During their time as owners, they focused on customer satisfaction and on consistency which incorporated less innovation but made the business more sustainable at the time. Hans and Freda were always there working and their time and effort contributed to their 16 years of a profitable and stable business. They did not want to sell Reds, but Freda's health was declining and it prohibited her from being present in the dining room as much as she was needed. The Bartels led a business initiative of hard work, focused on customer satisfaction, and running a tight business with the original formula established by "Red" Mays. Then, in 1970, they found a suitable buyer who they believed could continue the

tradition of high quality food and service, so they reluctantly, yet confidently, sold the restaurant to Edward Barber.

Edward Barber, affectionately referred to as “Mr. B” by his employees, was a New Jersey native who had many years of experience in the restaurant business. Ed had worked in a wide variety of restaurants and his deep understanding of this industry and line of work fed his desire to own his own



business. When he saw that there was going to be a new NYS Thruway exit leading directly to Coxsackie, he believed it could potentially make Reds a gold mine and decided this would be the perfect time to buy it. Ed had to borrow as much money as he could gather to afford Reds. A long time customer from his previous employment at Whytes (NYC), who favored Ed, loaned him a large sum of money to help pay for the business. This was a testament to Ed’s ability to build meaningful and trusting relationships with customers, vendors, and the community at large. He already had a team of people who trusted him enough to stick their necks out for him to help him succeed. After the closing, Hans surprised Ed by showing him that he had repaired, painted and performed maintenance on all equipment in the restaurant before turning it over to Ed. He told Ed he did this so that Ed would not have to worry about dealing with financial obstacles related to these things in the first few years as they were getting established. This generous gesture by Hans demonstrated his commitment to the restaurant’s success under new ownership.

With Ed working the kitchen and his wife Cathy managing the dining room, the Barbers ran the business much like the Bartels. Ed was very particular about how things were done and wanted his staff to follow his way of work. He would work day in and day out both in the kitchen preparing food, and in the office bargaining for the best prices for food from vendors. He developed a bid system, which was a method used to get the very best prices on food products by comparing different supplier's prices on the same products. This was time consuming, but it was ultimately worthwhile because it saved them money and allowed them to keep their menu prices low. His work ethic, along with Cathy's, was a driving force in the success of Reds during their reign as owners.

Ed and Cathy made some meaningful changes and developed some revolutionary marketing ideas as the third owners of Reds. They transitioned from serving canned to fresh vegetables and began making homemade mashed potatoes daily, which had never been done before at Reds. His new focus on quality doubled business in just two years, and Reds became known for its excellence. In response to the nationwide gas crisis in 1973 and the diminished sales on Sundays, Ed created the first Sunday Special in the area, which was an inexpensive full course meal that beat anything his competition had to offer. Because people preferred to stay home on Sundays when they were prohibited from buying gas, they were able to dine out locally and at a great value. Years later, to stay ahead of the competition who were now offering similar Sunday offerings, he transitioned to the Reds Sunday Brunch proving once again that Reds was able to adapt to changes in the market. The brunch, like the Sunday Special, was a new trend in

the Greene County area, set by Reds, which also gave diners the incentive to go out to eat on Sundays.



To his surprise, the installation of the thruway did not result in the business volume that Ed had predicted. He decided that the solution to this problem could be billboards on the thruway that invited travelers

to stop for a good quality meal, which could not be found on the NYS Thruway at the time. The signs were extremely expensive but were ultimately a game changer for his business.

Perhaps one of Ed's most revered accomplishments was his development of the Reds Frequent Diner program, which was one of the first of its kind. He got the idea from the frequent flyer programs that airlines had begun using at the time. He believed if he rewarded those who dined at Reds more often they would have an incentive to come back even more frequently. This program would gift customers things such as a free dessert and reward them with \$10 discounts after spending over \$200 on food and beverages at Reds. The customer response was phenomenal and the discounts given were more productive than other marketing efforts. Ed's ability to adapt to the changing community around him gave the restaurant a leg up on any local competition.

Not all of Ed's ideas proved as successful as the aforementioned. His decision to enter politics later proved to be a detriment to the business. He was not afraid to express his political views as a republican, and it did not sit well for many in the community, resulting in a significant

loss of business at Reds. Ed says that this was a major mistake in his business strategy because he lost many customers who did not believe in his political views, and politics demanded time that pulled him away from managing the restaurant. With Ed not being present as much as he was needed, his wife Cathy had to take on much of the workload. She began to tire of the business, and together they agreed to sell Reds.

Joe and Kate Konopka were both employees of the Barbers, and both Ed and Cathy took a liking to them. Joe was the Head Chef, and Kate was a long time hard working waitress they trusted. Ed decided they were the right people to sell the business to, so he gave them a discount of what he thought the restaurant was worth.

He saw success in the future of Joe and Kate but understood the challenges of taking over a business during the slower mid winter months, so he also extended them a loan to ensure adequate cash flow. This gesture taken by Ed demonstrated that he really did care about the



succession of Reds and he did his best to make the transition to new ownership as flawless as possible, just as the Bartels had done for him.

In December of 1999, Joe and Kate Konopka became the fourth owners of Reds Restaurant. For the first few years as owners, they worked tirelessly 12 hours a day, 7 days a week streamlining operations and further improving the guest experience. Maintaining a physical presence is still an important aspect to this day. This constant effort helped propel them into profits so that they were able to better promote the restaurant which they did via TV and Radio ads. This type of advertising was something that no Reds owner had done before, setting them

apart as innovative in a more technologically centered time period. One of their more successful advertisement campaigns was with the “shock jock” radio host J.R. Gach who was very influential in the Capital District at the time. He would read live ads to people listening and it dramatically increased business by inspiring listeners to take the drive from the Albany area to Coxsackie for the mouth watering meals he described. Local people experienced a renewed interest in the restaurant as well, many hoping to catch a glimpse of J.R. when dining there.

The Konopkas also promoted the restaurant via TV commercials, focusing their advertising on the newest addition to their business model, The Reds Fish Fry Boat. In 2006, The



Fish Fry Boat was born from a 1963 Sea Skiff that was completely remodeled to fit a cooler, a fridge, and a fryer. Every summer since, the Reds Fish Fry Boat has served freshly fried seafood rolls right off the boat in the north lot. No one had ever done such a thing before, and

it continues to be a one of a kind experience for customers far and wide.

Unique ideas and experiences have become a signature component of the Konopka era at Reds. Two of their most popular events include the annual Sunday Brunch with Santa and Chef Joe Konopka’s annual Wine Dinner Event, which showcases the culinary talents of the head chef and owner Joe Konopka. Events like these, and the rise of social media marketing, inspired the decision to create the tagline, “Making Memories at Reds”, that the Konopkas believe reflects the culture for which Reds had become known over the last several decades.

Since 1944 Reds Restaurant has been a staple in the community, known for its high quality seafood for a fair price. All four ownerships contributed in some way to the continued success of the restaurant, whether it be through their hard work, their new innovative techniques, or their insurance of a seamless transition of proprietors. Because of challenges faced by "Red" Mays, the Bartels, the Barbers, and the Konopkas, the restaurant has gone through many changes to improve and grow the business overall. The ability to adapt to changes and challenges is the reason Reds has been successful and continues to prosper to this day.

Bibliography

Barber, E. (2019, December 21). Personal Interview.

Konopka, K. (2019, December 30). Personal Interview.

“Red’s Seafood Restaurant.” *Coxsackie Union News* 1952.