

Farm House Served Up Memories For Decades

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"Customers that were coming in were there as children, and they were back with their children," EJ said. "In the restaurant businesses that's unheard of.

"It just evolved over time to a point where we were in the second generation of waiters and waitresses whose parents had worked there.

"We figure there were about 1,200 students that came through in the 43 years that we operated."

Many of those

Left: EJ and Shirl Blackwell helped create a culinary and musical tradition at the Farm House Inn and Restaurant.

former employees still keep in touch with the Blackwells.

"It's like a big family," EJ said. "We've watched them grow up, marry, have families, become band directors and choir directors at all of these schools and universities.

"It's just been fascinating for us to realize that all of these people remember the summer they were here with fond memories. It was the time of their lives.

"They loved singing and performing, and it gave them an opportunity to make money and do what they loved doing and get experience."

That opportunity ended in 1997, when the Farm House served its last meal.

"My dad always said it was a million-dollar view," EJ said. "I said it was priceless. Then somebody put a price on it, and my mom sold it.

"We were just heartbroken over the fact that we thought we were going to continue for maybe another generation. We were told it would never be sold."

The facility was razed the following year.

"It so abruptly ended," EJ said. "We just felt like we were cheated, that what was meant to be was cut short.

"Shirl and I had devoted all of our lives, since we met, to the Farm House. She was the music, and I was the kitchen and the food man. We worked as a team, and it worked really well."

Shirl echoed the sentiments of thousands of former Farm House employees and customers.

"When the Farm House closed and was gone, it was like part of the Blowing Rock slid off the mountain. It had become that popular," she said.

people. They were all college students," she said.

"They did have to audition, and we got to where we could be very selective. Out of like 300 applicants we'd take 30 so you really got good people."

Those selected to work at the Farm House sang around the dining tables until the Blackwells set up a parlor room for musical performances.

"You would have your dinner, and when you finished your dinner you went into the parlor room," Shirl said.

There staff members would perform musical selections on a stage.

Building A Reputation

Each year the Farm House's reputation continued to grow and draw people from as far away as Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Morganton, Hickory and even Abingdon.

"It was like a destination," EJ said. "People came to Blowing Rock to come to the Farm House. People would come up in groups. They would come up in the afternoon and have dinner, and then drive back. It was an outing.

"People would come for a special occasion, like a birthday. I bet we sang 'Happy Birthday' 2,000 times - maybe more.

"As business grew there were more and more people hearing about the Farm House and about the singing. It just became a huge attraction."

How huge?

Some nights would see almost 1,000 people coming through the restaurant's doors.

"We couldn't take care of the crowds," EJ said. "We would have people lined up all the way around the building.

"We were only open three months, but we did as much business in three months as most places did in 12 months. The volume was what made us successful."

The Farm House evolved into a tradition for customers and employees alike.



The Farm House Inn and Restaurant drew thousands of visitors to Blowing Rock before closing in 1997.

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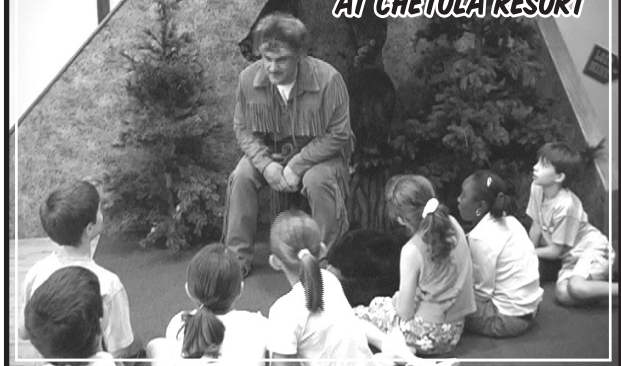
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