

The Varsity

Iconic Atlanta hot dog and burger joint is part of the American fabric. / BY JODY SHEE

When Frank Gordy opened Yellow Jacket Inn restaurant on a 70 x 120-foot lot at the corner of Lucky and Hemphill in Atlanta in 1928, all he had was \$2,000, a pot of chili, some hot dogs, a few bottles of Coca Cola and a pretty big dream. With the meager profits he made from that hot dog stand, he opened The Varsity later that year, selling American fast food from inside and outside the unit.

Before he died in 1983, Gordy probably had no idea how far his family would take his dream. According to the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, The Varsity ranks No. 3 among Atlanta's top 25 restaurants based on annual sales (\$12.61 million). With eight locations, the mothership sits across from Georgia Institute of Technology on five acres—an entire city block.

When he purchased the land, Gordy dreamed of opening restaurants in other college towns, as well, so he chose a collegiate name for the chain-to-be. The original locale stands as a slice of Americana by which seasoned patrons chart the milestones of their lives over the past 87 years.

Several customers have recounted to Gordy's grandson and company president Gordon Muir that, in the early days, the restaurant was sometimes so crowded that Gordy would usher them with their food into his office and seat them at his desk. Now, with inside seating for 800 guests and a carport outside for about 40 cars, seating space isn't quite the issue it once was at the expanded 18,000-square-foot restaurant.

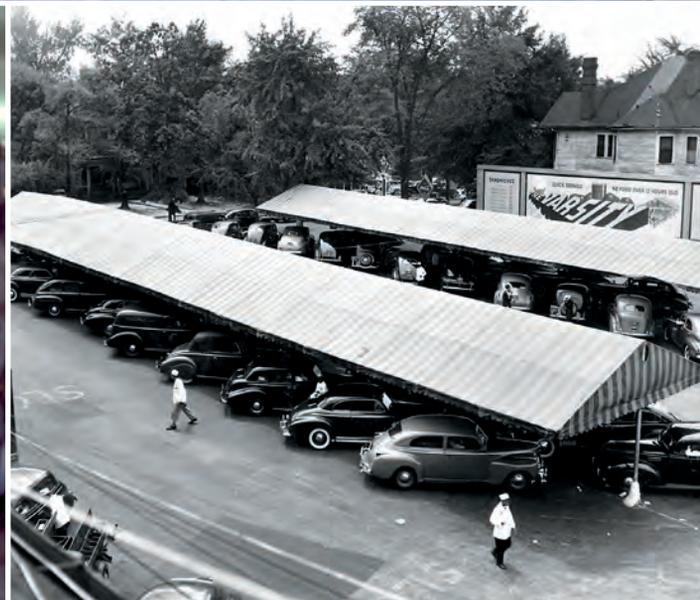
Ever a lover of technology, Gordy put a television inside The Varsity early on, and older customers tell Muir it was the first time they ever saw a TV. When most TVs were black-and-white, Gordy put in a color set, and in the 1960s, Muir says, customers arrived like clockwork each week to watch "Batman" in color.

Cruising the parking lot was a favorite pastime in the '30s and '40s. "The outdoor curb guys used to jump on the running board for a ride when they'd pull into The Varsity," Muir says.

Through the ages, the eatery has grown into a must-do campaign stop. Most presidents over the decades have visited, and Muir knows the tradition will continue. "They all, at some point, will show up here. It's an American experience," he says.

Part of the unmistakable customer experience is the shouted greeting, "What'll ya have? What'll ya have?" as customers enter. It's part of the way employees make the visit fun, but can be a bit loud and intimidating for new customers, Muir admits.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) At the original location, employees prepare and cook peaches and apples for the housemade pies. 2) The Varsity takes up an entire city block across from Georgia Tech in downtown Atlanta. 3) In 1950, The Varsity had 100 carhops and was dubbed "The World's Largest Drive-In." 4) The downtown location serves as many as 30,000 guests on a busy day. 5) The Varsity still offers an unpretentious menu. 6) Order takers shout, "What'll ya have?" as soon as a guest walks in.



JUST THE FACTS

THE VARSITY, ATLANTA

ESTABLISHED: 1928

FOUNDER: Frank Gordy

CEO: Nancy Simms (Gordy's daughter)

PRESIDENT: Gordon Muir (Gordy's grandson)

VARSITY JARGON

Veterans know the lingo.

- **Heavy Weight** = hot dog with extra chili
- **MK Dog** = naked dog with mustard and ketchup
- **Red Dog** = naked dog with ketchup
- **Walk-a-Dog** = hot dog to go
- **Steak** = hamburger with ketchup, mustard and pickle
- **Mary Brown Steak** = hamburger with no bun
- **F.O.** = frosted Varsity orange
- **P.C.** = plain chocolate milk, always served with ice
- **Bag of Rags** = potato chips
- **Sideways** = onions on the side
- **All the way** = with onions, can be a hot dog, chili, steak, etc.

the menu

The old-fashioned menu hasn't changed much over the years. Chili dogs, fries, onion rings and burgers are the top-selling items. The family's personal touches include steamed buns for the 3-inch burger patties, a smooth housemade pimento cheese spread offered as a topping and fresh-cut onion rings hand-dipped in a house batter blend.

The Varsity housemade chili, single-serve peach and apple pies, and orange shakes called Frosted Orange are menu standouts that keep many of the restaurant's 200 employees busy. The chili is a well-balanced finer grind with no beans that became so popular guests ordered it by the gallon to take home. "We'd save the mayo jars for those who wanted to order the chili," Muir says. "But in today's world of food safety and what a priority that is, it became an uncomfortable situation for us."

He searched for a company to prepare and can the proprietary chili for customers to purchase, and in 2010, partnered with Vanee Foods Company, Berkeley, Illinois, to can the product to sell at the restaurants and online. "Kroger wanted us, and we came close," Muir says. But the fine details of retail made the proposition less palatable than simply selling the product themselves.

Leading up to the Frosted Orange, Muir says his grandfather took a trip to New York to find and sample orange drinks. "He found one he liked and came up with his own take. A customer wanted an orange drink with orange ice cream. He made it, and it took off from there." In the early days, the shakes were hand-blended. Now the staff makes the orange drink every day in a refrigerated vat and blends it with the vanilla shake mix in a machine.

The menu didn't change at all for more than 50 years. "In today's world, you have to have more options," Muir says. The restaurant added a few salads and a grilled chicken sandwich. For a season it added chicken wings. "They did well, but they were an operational headache, so we got rid of them." It also eliminated the underperforming ham salad and egg salad that were on the menu from the beginning.



BOTTOM: The Varsity has always been a popular Atlanta hangout spot.

OPPOSITE, TOP: The Frosted Orange is unique to The Varsity.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Onion rings are one of the top-selling menu items.

PHOTO CREDITS The Varsity



logistics and evolution

The downtown location goes through 200-300 gallons of chili, tons of potatoes and onions, and 1,000 peach pies on a busy day. When there's a football game, concert or motor sport downtown, 30,000 guests may show up, and that location can sell as much food in a day as other locations sell in a week.

Feverish chopping, mixing and cooking is continuous, supported by three or four daily deliveries to the loading dock. US Foods is one supplier. Other purveyors, such as Sutherland's Foodservice, Forest Park, Georgia, have done business with The Varsity from the beginning, Muir says. His suppliers must agree that if a sudden need arises, they are just a phone call away with a delivery.

Besides additional locations in Athens, Gwinnett, Kennesaw, Alpharetta and Dawsonville, Georgia, an HMSHost licensing agreement has The Varsity in two spots at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. By this summer, construction is set to begin on a new location in Winder, Georgia. Beyond that, "We're going through the process now of external research and customer surveys, trying to figure out what direction to go in as far as expanding," Muir says. "It's a family business. A lot of times, people who do the same thing every day working in a business might think they know everything they need to, but it may not be true," he adds, in reference to determining how and where to expand.

He admits that expansion know-how has been the toughest nut to crack. Because the first restaurant was so huge, it seemed logical for the others to be, as well. The Alpharetta location, especially, has been a challenge with its expensive location, even though it is smaller than the original store. "It has struggled. It's not by a mall. We thought if we built it, they will come. But it's too big for the demographics that are there," Muir says.

He also had a reality check when he gazed at the opening of one of the airport locations—next to a Chick-fil-A. "I realized we are nowhere in their league. They are a national brand," Muir says, noting that airport visitors are not necessarily Atlanta visitors. "The airport is a melting pot. The Varsity is not as well-known outside Atlanta. Your opinion of yourself gets straightened out a little."

The made-from-scratch nature of the menu was also a challenge to expanding. While everything is made on-site at the original location, that turned out to be impractical for the other locations, so the company worked out an arrangement for Tyson Foods to make the chili recipe for the outlying locations. Meanwhile, an area bakery makes and delivers peach and apple pies. "It's fresh and easy to manage," Muir says.

success defined

Muir credits his grandfather's dedication and vision for The Varsity's success. He always believed the business was about the people, not the money. "Are your customers happy? Are your employees happy? He said that if you did the right thing, the money would come."

Happy employees are the second thing Muir credits for the company's success. Many have been with The Varsity for 30 years or more. One employee, Miss Janet, had been there for 38 years when she announced in October 2015 that she planned to retire at the end of the year. With goodbyes planned, "Right before Christmas, she came to me and said, 'This is my family. I can't retire. This is such a big part of my life,'" Muir says. "To have that type of person working in your business is invaluable." ■

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