



In Memoriam 1951-1985

by Dolores Preslar Wilkes

A landmark in Waynesville for over half a century, the old Tasty Grill Building is no more. It has been out of business for nearly twenty years, so anyone under 30 probably doesn't even remember it.

But there was a time...in the '50s and early '60s when the big neon "Tasty Grill" sign burned 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with Walt Preslar there every one of those days. The Tasty Grill opened for business in 1951. It had red tile floors, painted red wooden booths and then, later, red leather booths. Waitresses wore white nylon uniform dresses and hairnets. Paydays at the Fort were once a month and on payday weekend, Waynesville city buses made regular runs to pick up soldiers and bring them to Waynesville for their weekend pass. They could come to the Tasty Grill and get a hamburger for 25 cents (fresh bulk 100% ground beef made into patties by the cook), French fries for 25 cents (made from potatoes, hand peeled and sliced on a French fry cutter, and a Coke for 5 cents. They could listen to Elvis on the jukebox, 45 rpm records, six plays for a quarter.



Walt Preslar. Courtesy of Dolores Wilkes.

The streets of Waynesville were lit well into the night by the many neon signs up and down Route 66. There was no Interstate 44. Route 66 was the main road with all of the cross-country traffic on it. When I-44 was being built in the late '50s, Walt would cook up hamburgers, cheeseburgers, French fries, and take lunches out to sell to the highway workers, even as he worried that the new highway would take away all of his tourist trade.

There were very few times that Walt closed—once was for two hours on November 25, 1963 for President Kennedy's funeral. Another time was when a mayor of Waynesville died and all businesses were requested to close. Shortly after that, a local tavern owner died and Walt said that he deserved the same respect as the mayor, so he closed for his funeral, too.



Fort Wood Theater. Courtesy of Benny Doolin.

Wandering in memory down the streets of Waynesville those many years ago, I see the Ft. Wood Theater across from the Tasty Grill where you could see a movie for 25 cents, get a box of popcorn, a Coke, and a candy bar for 30 cents.

On up the street were Weber's Appliance Store, the Waynesville Lumber Yard, Bobby's Fruit Stand, Ruth's Cafe, Dave Woodward's drug-

store, Rigsby's Gas Station and their house next door with the iron fence and the beautiful red roses, the Western Auto, Leonard's Jewelry Store, Bradford's Drugstore, Wilson's Dry Goods, and Tut's Cafe. Other businesses were Carl's Five and Dime, Witt's Fashion Shoppe, Bates Shoe Store, Cohen's Jewelry, Bertha's Beauty Shop, the Baker Hotel, the Bell Hotel, the Greyhound bus station, Mallow's Market, and others that I can't remember the names of. On further out in St. Robert were the drive-in theater, Jodie's Cafe, the Wagon Wheel, the Park 'N Eat, Leo's Supper Club, P & P Lumber, the Top Hat... each and every one of these now gone.

I remember all of these places but I was a child when my parents bought the Tasty Grill so my early memories are somewhat vague, disjointed and out of sequence.



Walt and Mildred Preslar. Courtesy of Dolores Wilkes.

Walter and Mildred Preslar knew their customers well. Mildred, 20 years retired, can still tell you what many of the people of Waynesville and St. Robert would want to eat forty years ago. All-you-can-eat fried chicken dinners for \$1.25 were a "Daily Special" (and some of those trainees could eat two or three chickens), hand dipped in eggs and milk, rolled in flour and deep-fried. When Mildred retired in 1985, she said she would never fry another chicken and she hasn't. But she still makes the best chili in the county. All of the food was fresh and home made; mashed potatoes made from real potatoes, and gravy made from scratch. There was nothing frozen, dried, or instant.



Mildred Preslar and Lillie Reinke. Courtesy of Dolores Wilkes.

Waynesville High School was where the Middle School is and some of the high school students would come to the Tasty Grill on their lunch hour. To encourage this business, Walt would have a "free day" every week. Students eating there on that day got their lunch free.

Like most Mom and Pop businesses, it was a family affair. There were three kids, Dolores, Rose Mary, and Rick, and at age 12 we would start washing dishes on the weekends and waiting tables a couple of years later. Plans were made around "payday weekend" because, as we got older, all of the family was needed to work then. Payday weekends meant peeling and slicing 200 pounds of potatoes on Friday night and another 100-200 pounds on Saturday.

It was a different world then, literally a slower world—where news updates were the two old, grainy, black and white newsreels shown before the cartoon and the main feature at the theater. Now, we watch and cry in our own living rooms as we actually see the jets strike the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and we watch thousands die in the devastation. For better or worse, the entire world is only a mouse click away.

But the Tasty Grill belonged to another era—another century—and, with the razing of the building, there is now nothing to tie it to this century except the memories of the family, the customers, the regulars, the waitresses who work there, the townspeople who saw it standing for so many years that it wasn't really seen anymore until it was gone, and then there was a hole in the town.

Walt ran the Tasty Grill from 1951 until he died in 1977. Mildred then carried on until she retired in 1985. Now, 80 years old, she lives in Crocker and she doesn't fry any chicken.



Mildred Preslar, 2003. Courtesy of Dolores Wilkes.