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Up Front

THE WICHITA EAGLE-BEACON A 3Z

For Sale: A Bit of Fast-Food History

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At first, they thought it was a White Castle. Then they discovered it might be a White Knight or a Little Palace, which is the first cousin of a White Crown.

But whatever it is, it's related via its builder to Little Kastle, Silver Castle, Tiny Castle and White Palace Inn.

No, the subject is not European royal houses. As any hamburger aficionado worth his pickle would have told you by now, these fanciful names once adorned common hamburger stands and diners — those forerunners to fast-food golden arches and "have it your way."

Confused? So was everyone else who was trying to figure out the real identity of a forlorn little metal building sitting on stilts at Kessler and West Douglas. Its once snow-white walls now are covered with rust-colored paint primer and its once stately turret houses pigeon nests.

It turns out the building is a White Knight Nickel Sandwich stand that first stood at 117 S. Market. Owned by A.J. Strahm of Tulsa and operated by Rhea Rodgers of Wichita, White Knight opened in 1940 in a prefabricated movable metal building manufactured by Wichita's Ablah Hotel Supply Co.

Long-time Ablah employee Lealand Lincome remembers it well. He had a devil of a time painting the battlements on top. "I painted it four or five times," says Lincome, who remembers the restaurant as "clean" with "real nice burgers."

The building is being auctioned at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at Kessler and West Douglas by McCurdy Auction Service. Its owners, Lindy Andeel and Gene Razook, hope someone will restore it and use it for an office or restaurant. "We just bought it for nostalgia purposes," said Andeel.

It's not surprising that many people think the building once housed a White Castle hamburger stand. For one thing, it's almost an identical twin to the always white and always turreted White Castles. For another, those restaurants were founded in 1921 in Wichita by a short-order cook named Walt Anderson and a real estate investor named E.W. "Billy" Ingram.

Anderson and Ingram are credited with the invention of the modern hamburger, a burger patty between buns, and with starting the fast-food burger business. The White Castle system left Wichita in 1938, but still has 169 stands in 11 cities from St. Louis on east. The company's headquarters are in Columbus, Ohio. White Castle Advertising and Public Relations Coordinator Shirley Stapleton says the chain sold 359 million burgers in 1981 with total sales of \$179 million.

White Knight served burgers, too, says Bill Ellington, Wichita historian, as did many early diners who followed in White Castle's footsteps.



Staff Photo by Santa Fabio

The White Knight building is now at Douglas and Kessler

The identity of the building didn't baffle Wichitan A.J. King. The founder of the Wichita Kings-X restaurants got his start in the business in 1927, by flipping burgers in a White Castle. By 1930, he was managing all Wichita White Castles and in 1938, bought the three still operating when White Castle left the city, turning them into Kings-X.

"White Castles had square turrets and

doors on the side. That's why White Knight had a round turret and their door in the middle," King says. Apparently White Knight owner Strahm wasn't taking any chances after White Castle took another hamburger chain, White Tower, to court for copying White Castle's building.

In 1946, Ellington says, Rodgers opened another White Knight at 132 N. Main. Both

stands closed about 1951. There were only two other White Knights in the country, both in Tulsa.

Frank Ablah was president of Ablah Hotel Supply Co. when it started manufacturing metal restaurant buildings. It was brother Harvey's idea to construct the prefabricated unit complete with plumbing, wiring and restaurant fixtures. "They could be put up in a day and a half," says Harvey, now 85. He eventually owned 27 of the Ablah-built restaurants, called either Little Palaces or White Crowns, throughout Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas.

Harvey convinced Frank that such low-cost units, run with simple menus, would make a lot of money. And during the 1930s and early '40s, the Ablah company turned out about 200 of them for themselves and other customers, buildings that are now scattered from Wyoming to New Mexico.

All were simple metal buildings, either painted white or covered with white porcelain, containing a few stools for customers and not much else.

Even though the emphasis was on prefabrication, Harvey says the restaurants often were customized according to the customer's wishes. For example, White Knight and Little Palace buildings sported turrets, while Lucky "7" diners had a simple raised entryway.

Like Ingram of White Castle, Harvey believed in keeping the menu simple, although his restaurants always served more than just hamburgers. Chicken fried steaks and beef stew with french fries and salad were usually on the menu. "At that time, you couldn't get anything (in a restaurant) but full meals. I wanted something with no fancy foods, where you could hire any man and teach him to run the grill," Harvey said. "Chefs were high."

The secret to financial success, he says, was a system — 10 burgers from a pound of hamburger, steaks weighed only 6 ounces and every cook was to follow the company recipe book exactly.

Harvey says he was a stickler for uniformity between restaurants. Once, he was eating beef stew in one of his restaurants and called the cook over to compliment him on the stew. The chef preened with pride, Harvey says, until he was told never again to deviate from the company cookbook.

"I wanted people to know it would be the same food no matter where they ate," Harvey said, a principal which most fast-food chains religiously follow today.

The South Market White Knight building eventually was moved to 13th Street near the Ken-Mar Shopping Center, says owner Razook, and then became a liquor store at 1837 Orient Blvd., now Southwest Blvd. He and Andeel bought the building about a year ago and moved it to the west Wichita location.