

Published: 01.11.2007

Opinion by Bonnie Henry : Chilling concept

North Campbell Avenue and East Grant Road corner was home to Basil Smith's second business venture in Tucson, a 27-seat diner, Smithy's Penguin Puddle

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You can't go home again. And aren't we the better for it?

Otherwise, Tucsonans might never have tucked into a tin roof, let alone a log cabin or a penguin pup.

All were various sundaes — none costing more than a quarter — served up by Basil Smith and his son, David, at a little fountain dubbed the Penguin Puddle, on the northeast corner of North Campbell Avenue and East Grant Road.

If the name Penguin Puddle sounds familiar, it's because I've written about its later years.

If the name Basil Smith sounds familiar, it's because in Monday's column we waved a figurative goodbye to Basil and family, who were heading home to Indiana after a year spent laboring in the citrus fields northwest of Tucson.

But just three months later, the family was back, this time making plans to open what would be a 27-seat diner dubbed Smithy's Penguin Puddle.

Opening day was in early 1949, which explains a menu with 25-cent hamburgers and pork barbecue. But what we all seemed to scream for was the ice cream, particularly if you could make it look like, say, a penguin pup.

Lay down two dimes, and it's yours: one scoop of vanilla, chocolate syrup, whipped cream and a marshmallow head adorned with licorice eyes and a candy corn nose.

"My mother came up with that little penguin head," says David Smith, who worked weekends and after high school at the Puddle, which was open 8 a.m. to midnight every day of the week.

Also helping out was kid sister Johanna, now Johanna Burgess. "I waited tables and made sodas," says Burgess, who also helped assemble those all-important penguin heads.

Lunch-hour workers, teenagers from Salpointe High School and moviegoers from the nearby Catalina Theater kept the place hopping, as did a jukebox and a pinball machine.

Regulars varied from cowboys to University of Arizona students. Local artist Ted DeGrazia, whose studio was then located farther north on Campbell, also ambled in from time to time.

Added onto an existing strip mall, the Puddle was constructed of gunite blown onto a steel frame, with windows facing Campbell and Grant.

"We had a terrible time hanging anything on those walls, pounding into that gunite," says Smith.

Never mind. Wall décor was never the draw.

"When we first opened, we sold Carnation ice cream," says Smith. "But then the business got so big, Dad decided to make his own, the way he had done in Indiana."

For, unlike running a citrus grove, this was a business Basil Smith knew something about, having grown up working in his father's ice cream parlor back in Peru, Ind.

To make his own ice cream, Basil Smith bought a cafe that had gone belly-up about a mile north on Campbell.

There, he installed an ice cream machine just like the one used in the family business back in Peru, says his son.

While there was no fountain, the place did sell hand-packed ice cream, as well as malts and ice cream cones, says Smith, who also delivered tubs of ice cream to UA fraternity and sorority houses.

But in 1951, David Smith joined the Navy. His dad sold the Puddle later that same year and the ice cream plant a year after that.

Basil Smith stayed in the restaurant game in and around Tucson for a couple more years, then moved to Texas, where he got into mess-hall management, says Burgess. He died in 1990; wife, Doris, died in 1980.

Meanwhile, other proprietors would come and go, running the Puddle during the 1950s and into the '60s.

But by 1964, the Penguin Puddle was no more, having morphed into a dress shop.

Today, the building still hugs the corner of Campbell Avenue and Grant Road, this time housing Apartment Locators.

Wanna penguin pup? You're on your own.

• Reach columnist Bonnie Henry at 434-4074 or at bhenry@azstarnet.com, or write to 3295 W. Ina Road, Suite 125, Tucson, AZ 85741. **Bonnie's new book** • To order Bonnie Henry's new collection of writings about Tucson's rich history, call 573-4417. "Tucson Memories" is \$39.95 plus tax, shipping and handling.

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