

After 25 years, it's still the "Best Little Beef House in Missouri!"

The building has been renovated and the menu updated, but the mission of the Missouri Cattlemen's Association Beef House remains the same – to promote Missouri's great beef cattle industry by serving outstanding beef to the crowds at the Missouri State Fair.

2007 marks the 25th anniversary of the Beef House. The Beef House, now one of the premiere restaurants on the Missouri State Fairgrounds, had humble beginnings.

In the spring of 1982, MCA Executive Vice President Russ Harriman, along with many MCA officers and board members, decided to take action to increase the presence of beef at the Missouri State Fair. The Pork Producers had a pork chop tent, and fried chicken was plentiful on the fairgrounds, but high quality beef was missing from the State Fair's menu. Harriman's first action item was to find a location for the new beef restaurant. Two options were presented to Harriman: a location for a tent or an old building in need of repair. In the end, the old building won; because of its long, narrow shape, it cost less to rent.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1982, Harriman and his family and MCA members and their families worked around the clock every weekend to clean up the building in time for the State Fair. Lois Harriman recalls the first time she saw the inside of the building, "I told Russ that instead of people paying to eat here, he was going to have to pay people just to get them to come in to the building."

The building came with several refrigerators and ovens, many of which had not been cleaned out when the previous tenants vacated the building. The dining room was also in great need of cleaning. It took 23 hours of power washing the floor just to get it clean enough to paint. In addition to painting the floor, the bathroom and kitchen were cleaned, renovated, and painted. MCA members used 18 gallons of paint in the kitchen alone, in an effort to cover the stains left behind by dirt and grime.

After months of hard work cleaning, painting and renovating, members working on the building went on a campaign of "begging and borrowing" window air conditioning units to cool the dining room and kitchen. The addition of air conditioning would not only keep the workers cool, it would also draw customers to the restaurant.

By August, the restaurant was ready to open. A play on words from one of the most popular movies in the summer of 1982, the restaurant was called "The Best Little Beef House in Missouri." Although it has since been abbreviated to the "Beef House," the name stuck.

The night before the fair opened, the Beef House staff and volunteers held a run through to make sure they were prepared to open for business the next morning. Invited guests included volunteers who helped work on the Beef House, in addition to State Fair Director Marion Lucas, and others. They planned to feed 50 to 60 people, but ended up with close to 400 in attendance. In addition to revising their serving strategy and restocking ingredients and supplies, Russ Harriman and his Beef House crew faced another dilemma: the quality of the meat did not meet their standards.

At the time, the meat for the Beef House had to be purchased through the State Fair's supplier. The supplier had not provided the quality of meat as specified in the contract, and after what many recall as "an exchange of strong words," MCA was allowed to find a new beef supplier. The next morning, Eddie Sydenstricker flew to an IBP plant and picked up the high quality meat needed to supply the Beef House. He returned with choice ribeyes, which were hand-cut on site. This set the standard for the quality beef still served at the Beef House 25 years later.

From the beginning, the Beef House has not only served as a beef promotion, but also served to bring MCA members closer and create a sense of camaraderie. Russ Harriman had a vision of bringing in MCA members from different counties to work together at the Beef House. The first year, volunteers at the Beef House became acquainted with fellow members from across the state; many still look forward to reconnecting at the Beef House and annual convention to this day.

In the early years, volunteering at the Beef House was a family affair. Many families worked together for an entire day at the Beef House, with children pitching in to bus tables and complete other small tasks. Because of the volunteer help, very few paid workers were necessary to make the Beef House run. Through the course of the 1982 Missouri State Fair, MCA members – with the help of Chef Tom Horn - served nearly 18,000 meals from a menu consisting of rib-eye dinners, rib-eye sandwiches, and beef burgers.

As popular as the beef was, the fresh salads also were a big hit with customers. On busy days, it was not uncommon to use a case of lettuce per hour. The salads were also popular because of the fresh vegetables added to the lettuce. In addition to generously donating time, MCA members would also donate fresh produce from their gardens – tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, onions, and more – to supplement the Beef House salads. The carnival workers became regular customers at the Beef House after discovering the fresh salads, often bringing tickets for rides and games to the children working at the Beef House.

Despite the hard work, the MCA members who helped get the Beef House up and running have many good stories and memories. Many recall the excitement of the first time the line at the Beef House was longer than the line at the Pork Chop Tent.

Harold Day, an MCA member from Cooper County, recalls "The first year, we didn't know what to expect and found ourselves running out of \$1 bills every evening. At that time, there was no bank on the fairgrounds, so we went to several local restaurants each night to exchange larger bills for \$1 bills when the restaurants closed."

MCA member Dr. Wayne "Doc" Smith, of Winnigan, remembers "It wasn't easy the first year. A lot of people put in a lot of work to get the Beef House ready. We had to work for the business at first, but after word got out about our food, it wasn't long before there were long lines out the door."

What has changed since the inaugural year of "The Best Little Beef House in Missouri?" The most major difference: the building has improved tremendously. A brand new kitchen, updated dining room, and outdoor patio were added during renovations which were completed in 2005. The new kitchen and additional seating have increased the efficiency of the Beef House. In 2005, more than 22,000 beef meals were served during the fair.

Other additions include the Beef Showcase, which complements the Beef House's efforts to promote beef, and the Beef Depot, which gives fairgoers quick access to beef sandwiches. The MCA Brand Wall, also added during 2005 renovations, gives MCA members the opportunity to display their brand to the cattle producers and customers at the Beef House each year. The menu has also been updated. Additions over the years include BBQ beef sandwiches, steak salad, and all-beef hotdogs.

Despite an updated building and menu, much remains the same today as in 1982. MCA members from across the state still volunteer their time and efforts to make sure thousands of customers have a great experience eating choice beef at the "Best Little Beef House in Missouri!"