

Carhop Had It Good

By Dorene Mangan, Kenosha, Wisconsin

I WAS EXCITED on my first day of work when Dad dropped me off in our blue 1950 Hudson Hornet. I had a work permit and could earn real money, big money.

Homer would be paying me minimum wage of 65¢ an hour, a lot more than baby-sitting for 25¢ an hour. I dreamed of all the ways I'd be spending my real money.

I learned how to hook the metal prongs of the food tray over the partially raised car windows so the food wouldn't slide off and to be alert for the flashing headlights or the tap of a horn that meant a customer wanting service.

I also learned how to write code on the order slips—MOP for mustard, onions and pickles—and, best of all, regardless of what my mother told me, I could talk to all the boys I wanted.

It was my job.

That summer, a new kind of drive-in was built across the street from Homer's. The bright red-and-white-tile building had a slanted roof and was rooted by two shiny yellow rainbow-shaped structures.

They sold flat hamburgers on soft, teeny buns there for 15¢ each—half the price and half the size of a real burger at Homer's.

The tradition in my hometown of Sheboygan, Wisconsin was to prepare hamburgers on a charcoal grill and serve them on crispy, hard rolls from the local bakery.

The crunchy roll provided the yin to the yang of the soft, buttery

burger covered with juicy Dusseldorf mustard. The pickles were long slices, thin and crispy. And the onions had a bite that let you know you were breathing when you inhaled.

I laughed when I saw my first McDonald's hamburger. It was so small, so mushy. All yang, no yin. No specifying MOP.

All customers had to get their robot burgers the same way: with small, soft sour pickles, a blob of ketchup and, worst of all, yellow mustard the color of baby poo.

I predicted that the new restaurant wouldn't be there very long. Its root beer wasn't real—no foamy top, only brown-colored, syrupy fizzle water with chunks of ice that filled most of the space in the cup.

And people had to go to the service window, put in their order and pick up their own food, as though they were employees instead of customers.

The public is too smart to spend their money there, I thought. McDonald's won't last. They don't even have carhops!

McDonald's, the color of spilled finger paints in the midst of my sepia-colored hometown, flashed like a neon sign attracting the attention of drivers near Homer's Drive-In.

The boys were no longer turning into Homer's for real frozen custard and root beer. They were going to the gaudy McDonald's across the street.

By the end of the summer, we sometimes sat on metal lawn chairs, counting the cars turning into McDonald's.

Eventually, I lost my real-money job to that franchise across the street.

Big business had come to my hometown, flashed its shiny colors and

transformed everything.