

The Dish on Dining at WKU
by Lynn Niedermeier

“To whom it may concern,” read the petition delivered to Paul Garrett, president of Western Kentucky State College. Bearing the signatures of 116 students—more than ten percent of total enrollment in 1946—it complained graphically of “the deplorable situation” then existing in the Potter Hall cafeteria, the college’s main dining facility.

The charges were grave—and gross. Short serving hours and long lines left many students with only fifteen minutes to eat before their morning or afternoon classes. Once seated, they faced a culinary horror show of cold, greasy vegetables, dirty silverware and foreign objects in the salad, soup and pie—everything from insects and hair to nails and wads of chewing gum. A “filthy, dirty dog” commonly resided under one of the tables, while overhead flew pieces of bread hurled by their fellow diners, the young scholars of Western’s training school.¹

Whether or not the petition was guilty of hyperbole, its subject, food, has always ignited the passion of students who find themselves away from home at university, weaned from the comforts of the family kitchen. Arriving on campus to drink from the proverbial fountain of knowledge, they also come to eat, and for over a century have presented as much of a challenge to WKU’s gastronomic faculty as to its purveyors of intellectual nourishment.

Food lore on the Hill predates the establishment of Western’s campus. From 1889 to 1909, the exclusive Potter College for Young Ladies occupied the site where Cherry Hall now stands. In its large building, which combined living, classroom and eating facilities, meals were formal occasions. At the peal of a bell, boarders and resident teachers filed into the dining room, seated themselves six to a table, bowed their heads for the blessing, and were attended by servers from the African-American community of Jonesville. Some of their vegetables, milk and butter came from Potter College’s nearby fifty-acre farm, while the campus itself boasted a poultry house, dairy and cold storage house. Local grocers supplied other menu items such as peas, corn, cheese, pickles, oysters, dried beef, salmon, potatoes, grits, rice, oat flakes and eggs. Out of concern for the regularity of the students, the college also procured fruit—apples, bananas, apricots and prunes—in generous quantities.

As high costs, lack of pure food laws and unreliable cooking appliances conspired against them, however, students at Potter College soon grew fond of complaining about the variety, quality and quantity of their daily fare—tough meat, “vulcanized” cake, “petrified” biscuits and a bread-and-syrup concoction that substituted for dessert. To supplement their institutional diet, the young ladies pursued several strategies, none of which were approved by the college administration. They encouraged their families to send them care packages containing delicacies such as sardines, salmon, potted ham, cherries, condensed milk, peaches, fruit cake and olives. They pooled their stores of snacks and leftovers at “midnight feasts,” secret late-night gatherings held in the gymnasium. If such prowling about after curfew proved too risky, they would remain in their rooms to cook candy, fudge or Welsh rarebit over the gas jets, but not before hanging a blanket over the door to block any telltale signs of light. Unfortunately, the smell of burned

food, the empty cans and bottles, the resulting infestations of mice and ants, and the size of the college's gas bill often betrayed them.²

After Western moved to the Hill in 1911, President Henry Hardin Cherry reserved the former Potter College building for academic purposes and began planning for a separate dormitory and dining hall. In the meantime, he relied on various temporary or rented facilities to provide meals. Frisbie and Bailey Halls, two boarding homes on Center Street associated with Western's former campus, continued to feed students for about two dollars per week. The economics of table board concerned Cherry as much as his students, most of whom were of limited means. If they could not afford the charges at a school-sponsored dining room, they were left to search out better arrangements with private homeowners or landlords. Their modest options earned Western students a derisory nickname from the young men who attended Ogden College, a neighboring private school that claimed the same social prerogatives as Potter College. Envisioning their skimpy boarding-house menus, the Ogden boys referred to their counterparts on the Hill as "soups."³

The construction of J. Whit Potter Hall in 1921 promised to centralize and professionalize Western's food service. Located in the basement of the new building, the culinary department offered three meals a day under the supervision of a trained dietician. In February, a committee met to establish rules and procedures. Iva Scott, head of the Domestic Science department, was asked to draw a diagram showing the initial corps of twelve female waiters how to arrange place settings. The committee agreed that meals would begin with a formal blessing, after which students would seat themselves "at the tap of a bell." Designated hostesses for each table would take responsibility for serving the food, leading the conversation and showing "a special interest" in their dining companions. Students were to be discouraged from eating too fast, engaging in loud talking or "guffawing," or prematurely excusing themselves from the table. Voting unanimously "that the school never purchase any more toothpicks," the committee hoped to stamp out a particularly offensive post-dining habit.⁴

Beyond its concern for conduct and atmosphere, the culinary department endeavored to provide economical, well-balanced menus. During a one-week period in April, 1924, some 320 students paying the four-dollar fee (about \$50 today) sat down to breakfast selections of rolled oats, cream of wheat, poached eggs, grits, biscuits and hominy. Their midday meal included baked ham and candied sweet potatoes, roast veal with gravy, creamed Spanish steak with asparagus and corn bread, Irish stew with string beans, and roast beef with creamed onions. For supper that week, students enjoyed macaroni and cheese, ham omelets with fried potatoes, baked hash with vegetable salad, cold sliced ham, and pork and beans.⁵

A year later, President Cherry advised Western's Board of Regents that the number of students taking meals in Potter Hall's dining room had dropped to about 225, roughly one-quarter of total enrollment, but he attributed the decrease to competition from providers in town rather than to any dissatisfaction with the food. To prove his point, he itemized the menu for the Board's benefit. Meals for one week in February, 1925 had included pork chops, sausage, veal birds, baked halibut and Swiss steak, with side dishes of stewed tomatoes, creamed carrots and peas, mashed potatoes, cole slaw and salad, and desserts of chocolate pudding, coconut custard pie and fruit jello. Busy students, however, had long been calling for greater flexibility in their food

service, and by that summer Potter Hall had responded to this “crying need” with the addition of a sandwich shop. Open all day and operated by students, it supplied between-meal snacks and quick lunches, including specially prepared picnic lunches.⁶

The trend toward speed and convenience accelerated in 1943, when military necessity transformed the Potter Hall dining room into a cafeteria-style facility. In April, the building became home to 400 U.S. Army Air Corps trainees taking classes at Western, and cafeteria equipment was installed to move them quickly through their new mess hall. The air cadets, noted the *College Heights Herald*, were quiet, orderly and appreciative of the “swell” food—in stark contrast to the disgruntled students who petitioned President Garrett only a few years later.⁷

By late 1954, the Potter Hall cafeteria was gone and dining headquarters on the Hill had relocated to the new student union building (now Garrett Conference Center). With its two cafeterias, faculty dining room, snack bar, large-capacity kitchen equipment, and modern conveyor belts to whisk dirty dishes away to the basement, the facility could accommodate more than one thousand diners.⁸

Western’s explosive growth in the 1960s—from barely 3,600 in fall 1960 to more than 11,000 in fall 1969—brought new residence hall construction, and with it the need for expanded food service. Opened in 1961, West Hall (now part of Southwest Hall) featured a grill and snack bar on the ground floor. Completed in 1963, Terrace (now Gilbert) Hall housed yet another sandwich shop on its ground floor. In 1964, a building expansion project enlarged the Garrett Center’s dining capacity by several hundred. The next year, more than one hundred vending machines appeared in all eleven of Western’s residence halls and other major buildings to dispense sandwiches, pastries, fruit, ice cream, soft drinks, milk, coffee and candy.⁹

With the opening of the Dero Downing University Center (DUC) in October, 1970, student dining again found a new locus. The Garrett Center cafeteria and snack bar remained in operation, but the West Hall facility was closed and its equipment moved to DUC’s new 1,200-seat cafeteria and grill. By the mid-1970s, Western’s Food Services department was filling daily orders for meals that called for 60 dozen eggs, 45 pounds of bacon, 250 sandwiches, 60 gallons of chili, 800 hamburgers, 1,100 salads and 85 pies. Where a 500-pound supply of potatoes had lasted three days at the old Potter Hall cafeteria, it was now exhausted after only one day.¹⁰

Over five months in 1924-25, food operations had realized a modest profit of \$382 on receipts of \$15,543, but President Cherry was concerned about the rising price of eggs, flour, lard, coffee and canned goods. Subsequent administrators perpetually hoped that food services could be self-supporting, but the problem of balancing costs against the needs of a fickle and financially sensitive university population reached crisis proportions in the early 1990s, when losses over five years approached \$1.7 million. As a consequence, WKU turned to privatization of its food operations, entering into a five-year contract with a division of the Marriott Corporation effective on July 1, 1992. With the change came Marriott’s undertaking to construct a new food court in DUC (opened that fall) and to offer a wide range of prepaid meal plans to accommodate students’ needs. Some missteps occurred, including a temporary closing of the Garrett Center’s food outlets in 1995 because of low inspection scores, but during the fall 1996 semester Marriott reported sales topping \$3 million.¹¹

Under the management of Marriott and its successor, Aramark (awarded the contract in 1997), the WKU campus has hosted many nationally known eateries such as Burger King, McDonald's, Taco Bell, Dixie Creme Donuts, Pizza Hut, Subway, Chick-fil-A, Java City and, most recently, Einstein Bros. Bagels and Popeyes Chicken & Biscuits. Other establishments such as the Pit Stop and Bate Shop convenience stores, and the Red Zone, WKU's sports-themed restaurant, are unique to the Hill. Meal providers have also responded to the demand for healthier foods, a consideration that diners increasingly rank alongside convenience and economy. In 2003, Aramark converted DUC's Topper Café into the Fresh Food Company, and the DUC Food Court is now home to AFC Sushi. A few steps away are outlets for fresh pasta, gourmet coffee and yogurt smoothies.

With so many variables to juggle—choice, convenience, price and health—food service on the Hill will continue to adapt and evolve. Can the same be said of those it seeks to satisfy? Some students will forever be determined, even delighted, to address the subject of campus dining with a sarcasm equal only to that reserved for the parking problem. In 1974, three of them bemoaned the “vicious creature called ‘The Meal Plan,’” for which they paid \$239 per semester for ten meals a week. “You must either leave school, marry or die of food poisoning before you can receive a refund,” they complained. In 2002, WKU announced a mandatory meal plan for first-year-students to help finance the cost of expanding dining services. Commenting on the ten meals a week that would now cost \$729 per semester, the *College Heights Herald* declared that the “Food Services Posse” had plotted to “force feed next year’s crop of on-campus freshmen.” Shortly after opening in September 2004, the Red Zone earned low marks from a reviewer for cold food, warm iced tea, and hamburger patties that “would have been right at home on a Quarter Pounder.”¹²

Other students, however, are more philosophical about food, understanding that good dining habits, like good study habits, are yet another skill they must develop in order to succeed at university. As WKU strives to provide “all you can eat” in both its academic and culinary curricula, they will always find something on the menu to enjoy.

¹ Paul Garrett Papers, Box 6, Correspondence R-V 1938-48 (Student), Western Kentucky University Archives.

² See Lynn E. Niedermeier, “‘That Mighty Band of Maidens’: A History of Potter College for Young Ladies, Bowling Green, Kentucky 1889-1909 (Bowling Green: Landmark Association, 2001), 84-94.

³ *State Normal Bulletin*, 1915-16; *Cardinal* (Ogden College), 1914; Silas Bent, “His Memorial is Western State,” *Courier-Journal Magazine*, 12 September 1937, 3.

⁴ *Teachers College Heights*, August 1924, 3; Culinary Department Committee Minutes, 3 February 1921, University Archives.

⁵ Board of Regents Minutes, Western Kentucky State Normal School, 17 April 1924.

⁶ Board of Regents Minutes, Western Kentucky State Normal School, 20 March 1925; *College Heights Herald*, 18 June, 2 July 1925.

⁷ *College Heights Herald*, 23 April 1943.

⁸ Sybil Clark, “Garrett Cafeteria,” undated monograph [ca. 1954], University Archives.

⁹ Press Release, 7 July 1964, University Archives; *Park City Daily News*, 5 January 1965.

¹⁰ *College Heights Herald*, 26 March 1948; “Feeding a City of 12,000,” *Western Alumnus*, Winter 1974-75, 26.

¹¹ Board of Regents Minutes, 20 March 1925; *Courier-Journal*, 3 April 1992; *Park City Daily News*, 2 April 1992, 29 June 1995; *College Heights Herald*, 26 November 1991, 9 December 1997.

¹² *College Heights Herald*, 19 November 1974, 20 August 2002; *Park City Daily News*, 16 December 2004.