

## Martin's Place

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In December 1924, Martin Kapchinskie purchased land at what is today 3403 S. College. At the time S. College was a one-lane country road connecting Bryan and Texas A&M. The area where the business is located was formerly the communities of Union Hill and Midway. The property had been passed through many hands since Stephen F. Austin acquired it in the 1820's.<sup>1</sup> Previous owners could find no valuable use for the property so Martin decided to start a place where people could stop on their way between downtown Bryan and Texas A&M to get a bite to eat; his food of choice, barbeque. So Martin's, the longest continually operating barbeque restaurant in Bryan, was founded as a rest stop for weary travelers between Bryan and Texas A&M.<sup>2</sup> Martin even invested in a telephone, a rarity in small businesses at the time.<sup>3</sup> From the beginning the business seemed to be doomed for failure. A couple of weeks after he purchased the land and building, a fire destroyed his home which sat only 20 or 30 feet away from the business.<sup>4</sup> Martin, although discouraged, carried on and rebuilt his house. Some of the old timers can remember the early days, when horses and wagons and Fords surrounded Martin's.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brazos County Deed Records, Vol.106, p.277.

<sup>2</sup> Irby, Travis. "Historic Eats," Brazos Valley Insite. July 1998, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> See attached copy. Telephone Directory, November, 1926.

<sup>4</sup> "Three Thousand Dollar Fire Loss at Union Hill Today!! Martin Kapchinsky is Loser," The Eagle. December 3, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> McKay, Paul. "Eatery with Character," The Eagle. January 13, 1985, p. 4A.

The original building was no more than a wooden screen house. Inside was a single pit but no indoor dining. Out back was an enormous pit which Martin would use for weddings. Originally, Martin's resembled a modern day convenience store. It had groceries and sold white East Texas gas. However, barbeque remained the most popular item. Until 1939 little changed; the Great Depression hurt business but not as badly as other businesses. Martin was forced to sell some of the land around the business to stay afloat, but managed to remain open.

By the late 1930's business was improving, and the old facilities could no longer keep up with demand, so the decision was made to build a bigger and better building. The new building, built in 1939, was a rectangular red brick construction with the latest in kitchen technologies. It even boasted indoor restrooms, although they had to be accessed from the outside.<sup>6</sup> The pit was attached behind the brick building in a screened area with a tin roof. Now the pit and kitchen were under the same roof. The new building was built behind the old building where the pit Martin had used for weddings stood. The original building was leveled and became a parking lot. In fact the foundation from the original building still shows in the parking lot today. Although gas was no longer sold it still attracted weary travelers where they could now come inside and sit at tables to eat instead of eating outside. The new building was built as a café with a tall bar and high stools. So by the end of 1939, the new improved Martin's was open for business, but more changes were to come.

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<sup>6</sup> Daugherty, Amy, "Mm....Martin's!," The Eagle. February 6, 2000, p. 1D.

During the 1940's business continued as usual even though Martin's son Albin, who helped his father, was drafted by the Navy. When Albin returned at the end of the war, things went back to normal. By October of 1946, Martin and Albin had a formal partnership agreement.<sup>7</sup> Other changes occurred; in 1951 a neon sign was installed on the front facade, and a new and bigger pit was added onto the existing pit area more than doubling the amount of meat that could be cooked. The café style was abandoned in favor of a casual restaurant with an adjacent butcher shop. Also the tall bar was removed and replaced with a lower horseshoe-shaped bar that remains today. The meat market was Albin's idea. In the Navy he was a butcher, so he decided to incorporate it into the family business. The meat market existed until the 1970's when poor health forced Albin to discontinue the service. Another major change occurred after the war. Bryan city limits were steadily approaching Martin's Place, and before long Martin's was in the city. Due to faster cars and better roads Martin's was no longer a rest stop for travelers traveling between the twin cities, but business did not falter. Students from Texas A&M, affectionately called Aggies, started to discover the place. Through the 1930's and 40's a few Aggies would come in, but in the 1950's more began to eat there. Martin's provided students with a place to meet and get a cheap meal. And since then, Aggies have been a substantial part of Martin's patrons.

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<sup>7</sup> See attached document, M. F. Kapchinskie and A J. Kapchinskie, Dissolution of Partnership.

By 1955, Martin Kapchinskie had been in the business for 30 years and was ready to retire. So in May of 1955, Martin's son Albin purchased the business from his father. Martin moved to Michigan to enjoy retirement.<sup>8</sup> During the 1960's, Albin and his wife ran the business. But in 1971, Anna Mae, Albin's wife, died. Albin, trying to cope with the loss made significant changes to try and get over her death. He installed a new ceiling, covering the old tin one, and put in a new floor. But no changes were made to the business or the way the food was prepared. By late 1976, failing health made him shift some of the responsibilities to his son Steve, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation and current owner of Martin's. Steve, a 1975 graduate from Bryan High, took over the responsibilities of cooking the barbeque. But Albin retained financial and managerial responsibilities until his death in May of 1980.<sup>9</sup> In his last Will and Testament, Albin left the business to Steve.<sup>10</sup> Steve has continued the business to this date, with little change.

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<sup>8</sup>Brazos County Court House, Bill of Sale file, Vol. D, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>The Eagle, Vol. 104, No. 128. June, 1, 1980, p. 6A.

<sup>10</sup>In the possession of Steven Kapchinskie, 3205 Bonham, Bryan, TX 77803.

One of the most important men in the history of Martin's Place, Steve Holik, made a lasting impression on all who met him. While the business passed from father to son over the years, "Uncle" Steve, as everyone called him, remained a steadfast and loyal employee. While Martin, Albin and Steve took care of the cooking, financial and managerial aspects of the business, Uncle Steve served the people who are at the heart of Martin's success. When people came to eat they were treated like family. He was quite the character too. He wore a white apron with chewing tobacco stains all over it and always with some in his mouth too. He had a high pitched distinctive voice that would always yell out over the crowd "A Plate of Beef!" Some people would say it would only take one visit before he could remember what you liked to drink.<sup>11</sup> Before coming to Martin's in 1946, Uncle Steve worked in the mess halls at A&M for 10 years.<sup>12</sup> During that time he developed a deep loyalty to A&M. He even rode the train with the football team to away games. That love for Aggies carried over to his job at Martin's. Ada Holler, fellow employee, has fond memories of Uncle Steve, "We still have Aggies come through here and they have to leave when they find out Uncle Steve died, they get so choked up. Uncle Steve never let an Aggie leave here hungry; he'd give him a bowl of beans or something."<sup>13</sup> It was his devotion to Texas A&M that brought old and new Aggies back to Martin's year after year, till this day. Martin's has become a tradition among many at A&M.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas, Dave. "An Aggie Tradition in Barbecue," The Battalion. October 28, 1993, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Knopp, Judith. "Steve Holik, barbeque cook extraordinaire at Martin's," The Eagle. December, 12, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, Dave. "An Aggie Tradition in Barbecue," The Battalion. October 28, 1993, p. 9.

Uncle Steve continued to work until a month before his death in December of 1987.<sup>14</sup> The legend of Uncle Steve remains today. Students who never knew him know about him from their parents who knew him. Some people like to believe he is still here, blaming the fact that the wind blows open a door and a water fountain makes too much noise when it runs, on his spirit coming to make sure his customers are tended to. His death brought an end to an era, allowing another to begin.

Once again a new decade was approaching for Martin's Place, and once again little changed. By the early 1990's, like most of the Bryan/College Station area, business began to boom, thanks to rapidly increasing number of students attending Texas A&M. In order to keep up, new items were added to the menu, although barbeque remained the most popular item. This "boom" led to Martin's developing a night-life, although short lived. A group of students who belonged to the Cavalry at A&M started a band and they needed a place to play. Being loyal customers they asked to come in at night and play. Before long, Martin's turned into a restaurant by day and honky-tonk by night. After the kitchen would close, everyone showed up to drink beer, listen to music and play pool. Unfortunately, after four years, the band graduated and Martin's once again returned to the old business hours. Another result in the economic boom of the 90's was the removal of the old pool table and one of the domino tables that had been there for 30 years. More tables were needed to seat customers during the busy lunch rush. One domino table remained, but was moved to a small corner out of the way. By this time, most of

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<sup>14</sup> Knopp, Judith. "Steve Holik, barbeque cook extraordinaire at Martin's," The Eagle. December 12, 1987, p. 2.

the regular domino players had passed on but a few remained. So about two o'clock every afternoon four or five men would come in and get a game going. Unfortunately, by the end of the 90's all of the Aold@ domino players had died and the games ended. Today, the table remains, but not many games are played anymore. It is left mainly as a tribute to the loyal customers and a bygone era.

As Martin's approached its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the economic boom of the early 90's soon ended for Martin's. Big chain restaurants began opening in College Station, capitalizing on the large student population. As a result, students and ordinary citizens were drawn like flies to the new and Abetter@ restaurants, forgetting Martin's. But Martin's had seen harder times. As the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary approached business was down, but a shot in the arm got Martin's back in the game. In February 2000, The Eagle ran a special story in the February 6 edition to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>15</sup> The week after the article ran, business doubled for that week and continued to do so for the next few months. For some years people had been telling Steve to fix up the outside, because it looked like an abandoned building or a run-down beer joint. So with the extra revenue earned from the increase in business, Steve spent money on landscaping and having the neon sign, which hadn't worked in five or six years due to a hail storm, restored. To the dismay of some of the customers he was able to build a covering over the outside restrooms so customers no longer had to get wet while going to the restroom. As one customer put it, "It just doesn't seem like Martin's when you don't get wet going to the bathroom." On the inside, all the trim was repainted maroon to show Aggie pride and new window treatments were installed. But the change was for the better and business started to pick up as people started to

rediscover the place. In this day in age when all restaurants are owned by big corporations, many find comfort in the few mom and pop establishments left open. At Martin's, all employees are family members. Currently Steve's wife Betty, his two children Brian and Mandy, his sister Betty Jo and sister in-law Ada are the only employees. When customers walk through the doors they immediately feel like family, a rarity in today's fast-paced society.

Thus, Martin's Place and the community would benefit greatly from a historical marker. The community would be able to learn about local history and the people who have come before them. It would provide a glimpse into a more simple time. Martin's began as a rest stop for weary travelers, and today provides a break for weary college students. Martin's allows students to identify with their father's and grandfather's generation, enabling them to learn who they really were and where they came from. Perhaps the majority of Martin's historical significance comes from its ability to act like a time warp. When a patron walks through the door they are transported to a simpler time where they can forget their problems and history comes alive.

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<sup>15</sup> Daugherty, Amy. "Mmm...Martin's!," The Eagle. February 6, 2000, p. 1D



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