

The Old Coot's Place

By Mitch Brown

Two worn-down roads run parallel to one another on the edge of Broadwell, Illinois. Surrounded by fields of corn, a motel, and the Lincoln AG Center, there's a sign that stands tall, and it's not the 'Welcome to Broadwell.' This is the sign of the Pig Hip restaurant, and it, along with a plaque, is all that remains of the classic local diner that fed the people of both Broadwell and tourists driving through Route 66 for decades. But while gone, it has not been forgotten!

Back in 1937, a young Ernest L. Edwards Jr. — Ernie, to those who knew him — bought the Wolf's Inn and changed the name to Harbor Inn due to the nautical wallpaper that invoked images of anchors and boats. He obtained the funding thanks to a \$150 loan from his father, Ernest Sr., a factory worker who believed in the rewarding nature of being a self-made man and didn't want his son to

follow the same career path that he did. Ernie Jr. had plenty of experience working in food service, working in hot dog and popcorn stands at fairs and at Bea's Ice Cream in much larger Springfield.

And it would not take him long to leave his mark with the famous Pig Hip sandwich, which would eventually, by 1939, become the restaurant's namesake. As is commonly known by those who visited, Ernie only ever used one of the hips of pigs.

"You only take meat from the left leg because the meat wasn't as tough as the meat on the right leg. It was because of which leg they stood on a hill or something silly like that," said John Weiss, Chairman of the Route 66 Association of Illinois Preservation Committee. "Someone came in and said, 'Give me a slice of that pig hip,' that they saw hanging in the kitchen, and that's what gave Ernie the idea to change the name."

Soon, Ernie Jr. earned some minor celebrity as the owner of the restaurant, gaining the moniker of 'The Old Coot on Route 66' after the release of an article in the Chicago Tribune written by Mike Royko, that mentioned



a conversation he had with Ernie about Emil Verban, second baseman for the Chicago Cubs. Royko referred to Ernie Jr. as the 'Old Coot in the Rocking Chair,' and Ernie Jr. liked the sound of it so much that if he ever autographed a piece of paper, that's how he would sign it.

Being a self-starter became something of a family trade. While he ran the restaurant, his brother Joe ran their Phillips 66 filling station, and his sister Bonnie operated the Pioneer's Rest Motel. All three businesses were on the same property, but today, only the latter remains, but not as a functioning motel. And in a true testament to Route 66, Pig Hip stayed open for decades, longer than the average business on Route 66, after the Mother Road was decommissioned. However, by the late 1980s, it had become too overwhelming for Ernie Jr.

"It was just too much work," said Weiss. "He and his wife Frances, who was a

waitress at the restaurant, felt it was time to retire. Business wasn't nearly as good being on the outskirts of I-55, and you can't make it strictly on tourism." So, in 1991, Ernie Jr. closed Pig Hip's doors as a restaurant and opened them as a museum, where it remained open for seventeen years. That's until March 5, 2007, when a fire occurred.

"One day, he went to the store, and when he came back, the place was on fire," said Weiss. "It was in the attic. So, we assume that a squirrel chewed through some wires, and by the time he got back from the store, the fire was already engulfing it, because no one could spot it sooner, and by the time the fire department got there, it was too late to save anything."

Today, all that remains of the Pig Hip restaurant is the restored road sign, a commemorative plaque on a boulder where the building previously stood, and a few surviving artifacts that reside at The Mill Museum on Route 66 in Lincoln, Illinois. Ernie Edwards passed away in 2012 at age 94, but he left behind a remarkable life and a career at a restaurant that became something of a legend on the historic Mother Road.