

21 Sweet Memories at the DQ

The summer of 1964 was a busy time in Blawenburg. The Wally Byam Caravan arrived with 5,000 visitors (see blog 20), and the village saw its first and only franchise restaurant, Dairy Queen, open on the northwest corner of Routes 518 and 601. In this blog, we will remember the Dairy Queen.



This photo was taken in 1988, after the Dairy Queen had changed hands. It no longer had the Dairy Queen franchise and was known as the Hilltop Family Restaurant. The building looked similar to the original building.

The opening of the Dairy Queen in Blawenburg was a big deal. Until that time, the only village businesses at the crossroad were country stores, luncheonettes, and gas stations. Dairy Queen was in a different league – a well-known, national franchise.

In the early 1960s, Bill Wellemeyer, a local resident, ran the food concession in Jimmy Ajamian's store on the northeastern side of the intersection of Routes 518 and 601. He had retired from the parts department of the Van Zandt's farm supply store less than a block west of the crossroads.

Wellemeyer had his sights set on bigger stakes and wanted to open his own restaurant in Blawenburg. The problem was that the best location for the restaurant was occupied by a two-family house in which Bill and Grace Terhune lived on the first floor and Fanny Van Zandt lived above them. He didn't let that deter him. He bought both the house where the Terhunes and Ms. Van Zandt lived and the lot behind it. He had the house moved to a new location where it still exists, adjacent to the railroad crossing on Hollow Road. He now had a cleared plot of land in the center of the village on which to build his dream restaurant.

Emma Tufano, who grew up in Montgomery, remembers, “Mr. Wellemeyer lived on Hollow Road. He sold his farm and built the Dairy Queen in front of the cemetery.” Wellemeyer found the Dairy Queen franchise to his liking and talked with the village residents about opening “a charming country establishment” before he undertook the project. His idea seemed to be accepted by the locals, and he proceeded to purchase the franchise and built the ice cream restaurant. It opened in 1964, in time for the Wally Byam Caravan to arrive. That good timing paid off!

As Wellemeyer learned after he opened the Dairy Queen, not everyone was thrilled with the barn-shaped building or the signage and lighting associated with the franchise. Some hadn’t fully understood that the “charming country establishment” was a Dairy Queen, and others objected to the bright yellow fluorescent lights. One person, who asked to remain anonymous, recalls that you could see those lights all the way down on Bedens Brook Road, a half mile away. For some, it didn’t seem to be in character for the historic village.



We Treat You Right

John Fremont McCullough, and his son, Alex McCullough developed the formula for soft-serve ice cream in Doud, Iowa in 1938. They offered the product in Sherb Noble’s ice cream store in Kankakee, Illinois, where it was a huge hit. In 1940, Noble and the McCulloughs partnered to open the first Dairy Queen in Joliet, Illinois.

When the Blawenburg franchise opened, it used the slogan, “We treat you right.” During Welleyeyer’s ownership, it adopted a new slogan, “It’s a real treat!”. This slogan was used by the company for many years. We commonly refer to the restaurant chain as DQ, but DQ did not become its official name until 2001. Today, the company emphasizes its burgers and fries as much as its ice cream products, naming some of its new stores DQ Grill & Chill. Its current slogan is “Happy Tastes Good”. Like many large businesses today, Dairy Queen is owned by a conglomerate, Berkshire Hathaway, Inc. It has over 4,400 sites in the US and over 6,800 globally.

Ice Cream and Memories

The Blawenburg Dairy Queen created many sweet memories, especially for its regular customers and local residents. Larry May recalls that summer of '64. "Working at the Dairy Queen was my first job, and I was 16 that summer. I'm not sure of what my hourly pay was but I think that it was \$.95 per hour plus all I could eat." Depending on your appetite, you could be well paid for working at the Dairy Queen.

Diana Pfannebecker remembers the establishment well. "I was among the frequent customers at the Dairy Queen in Blawenburg, mostly in the late 70s and early 80s. It was before Thomas Sweet and the new Shop Rite were in the area. I remember a guy named Adrian worked there and was choosy about who got a big scoop and who didn't."

Reed Chapman also has many DQ memories. He lived catty-corner from the Dairy Queen, above his mother's antique store. He remembers playing Kick the Can in the Blawenburg Cemetery right behind the Dairy Queen. "One of my staples at the Dairy Queen was the \$.27 medium grape Mr. Misty (slushie). I would sometimes get the lemon-lime variety, but the cherry was awful. One had to be careful to avoid the dreaded brain freeze by pacing one's intake rate. The DQ was a draw for the entire region, including bicyclists. The stand-out memory was of a regular customer who, I think, had cerebral palsy. He lived in the NJNPI (NJ Neuro Psychiatric Institute, the former Epileptics Village that now is Skillman Park). This guy was disabled and moved with great difficulty, but somehow was able to pilot an orange Cushman 3-wheeled vehicle that he drove up to the DQ often for lunch."

I (Dave) also remember that man on the Cushman, and I always admired his effort to travel up Blawenburg hill to get lunch at the Dairy Queen. Before I became a resident of this community, I remember passing the Dairy Queen as I traveled from Pennington to Rutgers along Route 518. I couldn't help but note the popularity of the ice cream restaurant with lots of cars and kids in Little League uniforms lined up for ice cream treats. I may have stopped there a time or two without knowing that the little village was called Blawenburg or that I would end up living here for 46+ years.

Anne (Brownie) Hartshorne Allen, who grew up in Blawenburg Tavern just east of the Dairy Queen, said that her family had mixed feelings about the restaurant. She remembers the aroma of burgers wafting through the air at her house. She reports that her family wasn't too fond of the Dairy Queen, but loved the ice cream!

For at least one patron, the Dairy Queen was a breathtaking experience. Paige Heebink Torgerson remembers the bicycle ride as well as the payoff. "My most vivid memory is of the final huge hill leading to Dairy Queen. As a seven-year-old girl, this hill was daunting. The only thing that made it worse was my brother insisting I had to hold my breath while riding past the entire span of the old graveyard or else something very, very bad would happen to me. But nothing was stopping me from getting my ice cream!"

The End of the DQ

By the 1980s, Bill Wellemeyer sold the restaurant and it became Hilltop Family Restaurant. Undoubtedly, the name came from its location at the top of Blawenburg hill on Rt. 601. It might have been borrowed from the previous Hilltop Store that had been across the street from it more than 50 years earlier.



By the early 2000s, a plan was approved to convert the corner where the Dairy Queen once stood to stores with apartments above. To build this project, the Hilltop Family Restaurant and two adjacent houses were razed. Today, Blawenburg Village Square hosts a variety of businesses and apartments. True to the plan, all access is from the rear of the building, retaining the colonial look on the street side.

The northwest corner of Routes 518 and 601 has seen a lot of changes over the years – from farmland to residences to restaurants to stores. The community has certainly changed and the traffic has increased, but the sweet memories of the Dairy Queen and Hilltop Restaurant last in the minds of many to this day.

Blawenburg Fact

Route 601, the north/south road that ran past the Dairy Queen, has had several names. In addition to its present route number, it has been called Route 13, Belle Mead - Blawenburg Road, and Plainville Road. Plainville was an earlier name for the part of Montgomery Township that we now call Belle Meade.

Looking Ahead

In Blog 22, we will tell the story of the beginning of the Blawenburg Reformed Church, a structure that has served as a beacon in the community since 1830.

Sources

Wikipedia – Dairy Queen

Anne (Brownie) Hartshorne Allen

Reed Chapman

Ken Chrusz

Larry May

Diana Pfannebecker

Paige Heebink Torgerson

Emma Tufano

Dick Van Zandt

Photos

Dairy Queen logo – Dairy Queen

Hilltop Family Restaurant – Blawenburg National Historic Register Application, Clem Fiori

Blawenburg Village Square – David Cochran