

The Hammond Daily Star

Hammond, LA

Daily (ex. Mon)
Circ. 11,645

November 6, 2009

Column

Homogenization of America

In the Atlanta area there are several Jersey Mike's sandwich shops; that caught Turnip's perceptive eye. Jersey Mike's, smack dab in the heart of Dixie?

There's no rational reason why "Jersey" should appeal to anyone's taste buds. But, savory food is not the issue. Jersey Mike's is important because it is a manifestation of our popular culture; the development of which began even before the American Revolution.

Savvy Europeans noted that while the American colonists were English subjects there was something different about Americans. In the 18th century, British writer Jonathan Swift satirically wrote that Americans ate babies.

The New Land changed the colonists and immigrants who came here after 1800 from Europe and elsewhere. Out of those changes came a unique national culture. The morphing of Europeans, Africans and Asians into Americans accelerated when in the 20th century, inventions such as radio, movies, television, and the Internet greatly contributed to nationalizing the popular culture. Americans from Maine to California now view the same movies and television shows. And, they can connect with one another on the Web via email and social networks like Facebook and MySpace. These innovations have made it possible for Americans to become more alike without having to even leave their homes.

Turnip opines that President Dwight Eisenhower's interstate system is equally important as the innovations mentioned above, because the highway system made it much easier for Americans to physically move between regions.

American entrepreneurs, seeing great opportunities made available by the interstate, moved in and began providing places for Americans to rest overnight and eat near the system. Even before the 1956 Federal Highway Act, an Arkansan opened the first Holiday Inn in Memphis. Today, the company has 1,338 hotels worldwide, competing with several other chains. Sadly, the traditional downtown hotels, almost every small city and town had one, suffered the consequences of their locations.

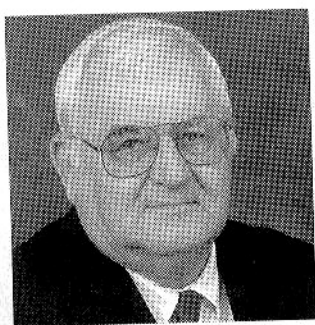
Downtown cafes met the same fate when travelers, reluctant to leave the interstate corridor, opted for national fast food chains located near exits. Inevitably, commercial developers joined the flight from downtown and established shopping centers and strip malls near the interstate; more often than not, department stores relocated to the new malls.

Eventually, for good or bad, many cities across the land acquired the same cloned appearance; similar shopping malls, fast food restaurants and traffic congestion.

Turnip believes something is missing from travel when people don't venture off the interstate. They eat in reliable but bland restaurant chains and sleep in motels offering similar facilities, but they often miss out on the beauty of historical town squares that were once the center of commerce. A family traveling on the interstate in California has almost the same experiences as one traveling in Virginia.

Fortunately, some towns and business interests have said "enough." Hammond, for example, has created a new type of downtown area with a retro look. Small shops, locally owned eateries, taverns, loft apartments, and professional offices line freshly landscaped streets and brick sidewalks. The "new" Hammond Square echoes this nostalgia for the old look. Stirling Properties did away with locating all the stores under one roof containing a food court, central atrium area and escalators to upper levels. The new model is one of separate buildings connected with bench-lined pedestrian walkways and landscaped courtyards.

These Hammond developments are part of the ongoing process of change in our culture. Where our popular culture is heading is anyone's guess, but rest assured, Americans from coast to coast will be eating the same foods and enjoying similar things.



JUST OFF THE TURNIP TRUCK

Roman Heleniak

— Roman Heleniak,
retired professor, Ellijay, Ga.