

HENRY'S SOHIO

Folks in Madison County know—Henry's is the place if you've a troubled radiator or a taste for rhubarb pie



Welcome to Henry's: *Twenty-five years ago Miriam told her husband she would try running the restaurant, but only for two weeks*

NINE A.M. Nellie, flour streaked across the front of her bib apron, is rolling out homemade noodles back in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Madge puts a few more pies in the oven. An old man comes into the dining room, sitting down at the counter. After Jodie takes his order, she asks him about the fishing. Miriam runs the cash register and, over in the next room, Henry leafs through a big book, trying to find a part number. Two rooms down, Tom backs a blue pickup off one of the lifts in the service bay.

Welcome to Henry's Sohio. West of Columbus. East of London. On U.S. Route 40, two miles outside West Jefferson, just past the point where State Route 29 comes to a dead end. Henry's Sohio is part restaurant, part service station, part auto-parts store. But mostly, it's work Pure, proud, hard work.

At 6:30 every morning, Henry and Miriam Summerford arrive at their business. Henry heads east into the garage, while Miriam goes west to start things in the restaurant. Their auto-parts store lies in between, a buffer zone. In the kitchen, Madge Knox is already busy making pies twenty at a time. Madge comes in before six, bakes until noon, then waits tables a couple of hours.

Twenty-five years ago, Henry had a service station in Columbus at Third and Grandview Avenues. He liked the place, but there was no room to expand, so Henry decided to try his mechanic's hands on the cars and trucks indigenous to the Madison County countryside.

At first, Miriam didn't realize the new business included a restaurant. A school-teacher for twenty-one years, Miriam said to

Henry, "Well, I *will not* run a restaurant. That's the one thing I don't know anything about. I *will not* run a restaurant." Henry suggested she try it out for two weeks. She washed dishes. She waited tables. She cooked "You live to eat your words," observes Miriam.

Henry is a small, fragile man now. He can hardly change a tire anymore. "One heart tube is badly plugged, and the other is plugged some," Henry explains so matter-of-factly that he could be talking about a congested fuel line on some customer's car.

A couple of years ago, when Henry had a double hernia operation, he had this advice for his surgeon: "Doc, I know my business just as well as you know yours. I don't get paid like you do, but I know my business just as well as you know yours. I make mis-

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In the Kitchen: *Nellie Pemberton's cooking is one reason for the restaurant's popularity*

takes. I know you do, too. Just don't make any on me."

Henry will tell you that he is a real mechanic, not one of the flunkies who just thinks he is a mechanic. "There aren't many *real* mechanics," Henry says.

"One thing Miriam could never understand was why I just couldn't pick up somebody to work in the garage like she does in the restaurant. The difference is, restaurant work is routine work. You can learn it in four or five days. But this is not routine work. You got to be able to find out what the problem is. You got to be like a diagnostician, see? It takes years of study, see?"

For more than five years now, Henry has been training two boys, Herman Stanley and Tom Summerford, his grandson, to be mechanics. "They're exceptionally good boys, but they're not seasoned mechanics," says Henry, looking down through his bifocals. "They're good, better than most, but they don't have the experience, yet."

Henry pushes back his red "Modine Performance Cooled" cap and scratches at his ear with a toothpick. "I wouldn't let a lot of guys work for me," he says. "I wouldn't let the lousy work go out. I believe in doing things right and in having them done right. I'm not a big enough liar for anything else____"

ELEVEN A.M. A red-haired lady pulls up for gasoline. Pepper, the black and white stray that Henry took in, hunkers under a parked car. The lunchtime crowd begins to filter into the restaurant. Students from the truck-driver's school down the road hurry through the door single file. One of them is a girl. "That little girl gonna be a truck driver?" Henry once asked the school's superintendent. When he replied in the affirmative, Henry gave him a warning, "She's gonna take your job some

day." The students fill two big tables and, by 11:25, every table is full.

GEOMETRY I: The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Sometimes. At Henry's Sohio, the quickest way to get from an empty stomach to satisfaction is through the kitchen where Patsy and Alice rush to prepare the noon-hour orders. Patsy throws burgers on the griddle and keeps an eye on the pots of chili and soup on the stove. Alice mixes Thousand Island salad dressing. She gives away her recipe: "I mix a little of this and a little of that and come up with something good."

Alice tries to ease a twenty-five-pound piece of top round into a roasting pan. The meat won't fit into the pan, so she slices off about three pounds to make it fit. Later on, says Alice, she'll use that extra piece for vegetable soup.

Henry walks slowly through the parts store, opening the door into the restaurant. He finds an empty chair and watches the customers eat. The month before, he comments, a woman from West Jefferson referred to his place as a truck stop. "I resent that remark," he told her. "I don't like the name truck stop bein' tied to this place."

"It seems like everybody thinks if you're in business along the road, you're a truck stop," Henry laments. "And contrary to what some people think, a truck stop is *not* an attractive place, except for truck people. A rough, tough place, see? If I had to deal with truckers daily, I never would do it."

"We're a little place, where a big place like the 76 over here can manage the trucks and cars. A little place can't do it. The truck drivers want to take over, see? They want to park in the way and block you up."

Miriam tries to mitigate Henry's wrath.



Exchanging Pleasantries: *As Henry often points out, Henry's Sohio is not a "truck stop." Jodie Berry, who usually chats with her customers while taking their orders, can support that invocation*

"They're lots better than they used to be. *Much* better. Don't you see it, Henry?"

"They just want to hog the show, you know," he replies.

Miriam tries again. "We have a truck-driving school down the road here. Now, they like to bring their students here. And they're very nice boys, very considerate. Aren't they, Henry?"

"They're not truck drivers yet," Henry points out. "They're just starting."

Miriam tries one last time. "We've had some that were *real* nice."

"We got some that were *real* stinkers, I'll tell you," says Henry.

When Henry and Miriam first opened, U.S. 40 was the main road out of Columbus, but, in 1969, they got four days' notice that Interstate 70 would be opening, a good nine months ahead of schedule. Of course, Henry and Miriam knew the road was coming, but they had counted on at least another winter and summer of business to tide them through the change. Right away, the big truck stop nearby went out of business, and the Stuckey's left, too.

"Almost everything closed on all of 40 here, and we were really scared because we didn't even have this place paid for," Miriam admits. "Everybody said, 'You'll just have to give up because you cannot survive.' But we did."

When the interstate opened, Henry's gasoline sales took a tumble, but, in the restaurant, business actually got better. As the transient traffic went to I-70, the local people began to discover their home cooking. No longer did the restaurant business roll all summer, drop in half on Labor Day and die out over the winter. Henry and Miriam now have a steady, year-round family restaurant. The regulars keep returning for Madge's pies, the homemade corn bread, the ham-and-beans Wednesday special. A retired banker and his wife from London stop by every day for supper.

Miriam used to keep the restaurant open on Sundays, when folks lined up all the way out into the parts department for the Sunday dinners, but then Mamie, the cook, took sick and had to give it up. So Miriam stopped serving on Sunday. Mamie is eighty now. She

still comes in a couple of times a week to help out.

"Mamie," notes Henry, "is really a beautiful woman for her age. She's independent and carries herself well. And do you know why she's that way? Because she has always worked hard."

"It's a funny world. Some people can't find anything to do, and other people can't see how in the world they can accomplish all that it looks like just gotta be done."

On the way back into the garage, Henry stops for a few minutes to give Pepper an extra pat on the head. "Pepper doesn't do much," he says. "Just runs around and wets on people's tires. Some people resent that, see?"

ONE P.M. Tom goes out on a tow call. Norm, the radiator and air-conditioning man, is at work under the hood of a Bonneville. Miriam hands a lollipop to a little boy while his father pays the check. Jodie dishes out Waldorf salad and pickled beets into small bowls. Lawrence Murray sits down on one of the red stools along the counter for a late lunch,

and Madge takes his order: Chicken and noodles in a light gravy, mashed potatoes, broccoli.

Lawrence drives ten miles a couple of times every week just to eat at Henry's Sohio. The boiled ham dinner is his favorite. "You get about a quarter of a head of cabbage, onions, potatoes, carrots and a nice piece of ham," he says. "It's about three dollars. I've been coming here for years and years."

Lawrence looks around the restaurant. The knotty-pine paneling has been on the walls since Henry bought the place. The tables are covered with flannel-backed plastic; none of it matches. As far as atmosphere goes, there isn't any, but then you can't eat atmosphere, he observes.

The row of ribbons that Madge won last year at the State Fair for her pie baking is taped to the front of the glass pie case at the corner of the counter. Every year, she enters all sixteen of the Fair's pie categories and has won every category except apple. Madge thinks that her apple pie might be just a little too spicy for the judges. Two years ago, when her cherry pie was sold at the Fair's

Blue Ribbon Auction, it went for \$125.

Every once in a while, Miriam entertains the thought that maybe they should retire. In all their years together, she and Henry had only one vacation, and that was when Henry took some radiator training. It was years ago. In Omaha, Nebraska. In February. While Henry took his training, Miriam stayed in the hotel room. "I had a ball," she remembers. "We didn't get to see much, but I had the whole week off."

Miriam thinks she might enjoy retirement, but she says Henry doesn't have any hobbies and doesn't want to let go of the business. "I just can't leave this," Henry insists. "I like my work. I wouldn't know what to do if I got up in the morning and didn't have my work." Henry claims he doesn't have enough money to quit, anyway. "I like to keep eating," he explains. "Root hog or die"—that's the way Henry sees it.

Henry says he has \$100,000 invested in the service station, every dime he ever made. The brake lathe alone cost him \$4,000. He has a complete radiator shop, too. But Henry has more than his money and his sweat invested in the business. He put some of his blood into it, too.

In May 1952, when Henry's Sohio was still in Columbus, a woman from the office next door brought her car in. She heard a funny noise in the engine. "She was an absent-minded sort of person," Henry recalls. He opened the hood and got to work. The woman decided to start the car so Henry could hear the noise. "She turned the engine on while I had my finger between the fan belt and the generator pulley," says Henry.

He lost most of an index finger. The woman's insurance company settled out of court for \$750, and Henry's lawyer took \$250 of that. The lawyer did recommend Henry's garage to a judge friend of his, though. The judge brought his car in, and Henry fixed a noise in one of the shocks.

Five years ago, when I-70 was totally covered with ice, Henry and Brian Parks were called out there to pull a car out of a ditch. A tractor-trailer loaded with steel came flying down the Interstate. When the truck driver saw them working along the road, he panicked, slammed on his brakes and lost control. The truck ran over Henry. Whenever he thinks about it, Henry can still see that truck heading toward him. "I had arthritis to begin with, and getting run over like that sure didn't help things any," he says dryly. It didn't improve his opinion of truck drivers much, either.

An angry woman comes into the garage. She's irate about her car's air conditioning. Her brother-in-law said Henry did her wrong, and she's pretty hot. They look at her car



Henry's Boys: *Learning to be diagnosticians*

and discover the problem is just a burned out fuse. Satisfied, the woman leaves.

"If you learn how to do something, and people believe that you know how to do it, then getting business is not a problem" Henry says.

"Going into service stations, you won't find that much today. There are very few times that you can feel here's a guy that knows his stuff and is not just trying to sell you something. In a good community, you can literally wrap people around your finger, see? Because they don't get that someplace else. There ain't no magic about it."

Since the Interstate opened, Henry and Miriam have been witnesses to a magic of some kind or other. Presto Chango!—Most of the small businesses around them on U.S. 40 disappear. Abracadabra!—Big business has grown bigger. The small farmers around him are vanishing, too, as family farms are gobbled up in the transition to big agribusiness.

But Henry and Miriam have warded off the corporate tricks and kept Henry's Sohio alive, a small, atavistic outpost on a road that progress has bypassed.

FOUR P.M. Miriam has gone home for her nap. She'll be back later to work until closing. Norm is on one side of a blue flame; a cracked radiator is on the other. "Radiator repair is dirty work," Henry says. "A lot of people won't do it." Henry turns to talk to a customer. There's a wide, wet sweat streak across his back. Tom, his heir apparent, cleans a radiator hose. On the workbench behind him, a rock radio station blares out hedonistic messages. Some young kid is singing, "Everybody's workin' for the weekend."

Henry has managed to work his way through one more day.

Pure Hard Work: *Pepper, Henry says "doesn't do much" around the garage, but that's all right. Despite Miriam's entreaties, Henry has no plans to retire, allowing that he enjoys his work, and likes to eat*