

## Beer Battered PBJ

When I was in college in Utica in 1962, my Uncle Jack decided Ray Kroc was a genius. The day the hamburger chieftain invented a cheap and fast burger a new industry was born, not to mention the resuscitation of the State of Maine's ailing potato business. Jack saw that McDonald's successful formula could be generalized to other foods and so he invented O'Dooley's Beer Battered PBJ, which wasn't much more than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich rolled in a batter and dropped in a deep fryer. As long as he was careful about timing the drop, the PBJ's ingredients wouldn't leak out. Or explode out, the latter being the reason Jack wore welding goggles while he cooked the treats.

The batter came as a dry powder from a supplier Jack met at a gun show in Ilion. To each plastic bag he added a quart of water and a can of beer. Although the mix was originally intended for fish fries, the yellow powder was general purpose and could have been used to make Beer Battered Bowling Balls. The stuff looked like high grade plutonium ore. In fact, after a few drinks Jack would pass a bag around to company in his basement rec room and claim exactly that. He explained he got it from an international arms dealer he met on a trip to Algiers. Jack had been no farther east in his life than St. Johnsville.

My uncle opened the very first (and last) BBPBJ Stand in the garage behind his house on Mortimer Street. I can't tell you how much he spent on a splendid sign, constructed with replaceable numbers. It read, "O'Dooley's Beer Battered PBJ - 0000003 SOLD." He placed it out in front of his house near the road.

The neighbors were excited to have an entrepreneur amongst them... excited, not happy.

After a month of very few sales, Jack became convinced he needed more publicity. He called me up one night to discuss the problem. At the time I was the only member of our family crazy enough to listen to him. He had worked his way down through the family's age groups before he found my sympathetic ear. I thought it was my entrepreneurial skills that attracted him. I'd had some business success with my paper route in high school. I recommended he move his sign down the street to the corner of a busier thoroughfare. The next afternoon I helped him drag it

to a new location next to the dry cleaner on South Street. Two days later it was gone.

"Taken by someone who is going to steal my idea," he moaned over the phone when he called.

Not really. The dry cleaner had called Jack's house while he was out to complain and my Aunt Alice telephoned me with an offer of \$5 to take the sign in my father's car to the dump. In truth, I stored it behind our house. It seemed too nice to just throw away.

"Don't say a word about this," my aunt whispered over the phone when I called to say the deed was done. "Maybe he'll forget about the damned thing." I didn't tell her I had the sign in my back yard.

Uncle Jack was inconsolable. I felt so bad I was the cause of his sorrow, especially when on the third call to me that evening he was close to tears.

"Without that sign," he sniffled, "no one will ever know of my creation."

"You could have another sign made," I said.

"That sign cost me all the spare cash I'll have for months," he said.

"Well," I said, "why not put an ad in the paper? Offer a reward and maybe the culprit will put the sign back on the corner." And hopefully farther away from the dry cleaner.

The ad appeared the next day in the newspaper. "Reward: For the return of my sign 'O'Dooley's Beer Battered PBJ Emporium - 0000009 SOLD." I put the sign back on the corner late that night. No one collected the reward, of course.

Because of the ad, a local reporter showed up two days later with a photographer in tow and the result was a big spread in the Sunday newspaper's Neighbors section. 000009 almost immediately zoomed up to 0000187.

Uncle Jack was back in business. Practically everyone knew of him and his sandwich now, including the City Health Department, the State Business Practices Board, the Alcohol Board of Control, the Internal Revenue Service, the nearby Third Avenue Baptist Church and even the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. More than one of them offered him a deal he couldn't refuse and no one ever heard of his sandwich again.

Years passed before Aunt Alice would have anything nice to say about me. At my wedding she told my new wife, "Don't believe a word he says. He never gave me my five dollars back."

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