

Turkeyville U.S.A. marks 50 years as an American roadside icon

By Claudia Capos
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MARSHALL, Mich. — Every day is Thanksgiving at Turkeyville U.S.A.

For the past half-century, the Cornwell family has served up home-cooked turkey dinners with all the trimmings and the “world’s best turkey sandwiches” to hundreds of thousands of guests who visit their 400-acre farm and sprawling restaurant complex, just north of Marshall.

Their homemade fruit- and cream-filled pies have attracted admirers around the country — even in the Oval Office.

President Carter dropped in years ago to sample some of the Cornwells’ famous country-style cooking and left an appreciative note scrawled on his paper napkin: “Thank you for the great pie.” First lady Barbara Bush stopped by Turkeyville frequently during campaign swings through Michigan to pick up the restaurant’s signature peanut-butter chiffon pie, a perennial favorite of her husband, President George H.W. Bush.

This past spring, the Cornwells celebrated Turkeyville U.S.A.’s 50 years as an American icon with a nostalgic friends-and-family gathering to honor its founders, Grandpa Wayne and Grandma Marjorie Cornwell.

Beginning in 1943, the couple ran a thriving turkey retail and wholesale business for two decades and sold turkey sandwiches at a booth at the Calhoun County Fair each August for 11 years. In 1968, after word of Grandma’s savory turkey delights spread, they opened a one-room eatery with two barstools in the turkey pot pie processing building behind their white centennial farmhouse.

Grandpa and Grandma Cornwell took their idea one step further and declared their original 180-acre farm and dining enterprise a “village.” They

called it Turkeyville U.S.A., and Grandpa Wayne promptly proclaimed himself mayor.

“This is still a family-run operation built on the business my grandfather started,” says Wayne’s grandson, Blain Cornwell, whose tanned face and strong handshake reflect a lifetime of farm labor. “It’s the only place I’ve ever worked.”

On a sunny fall day when the Michigan woodlands are cloaked with kaleidoscopic autumn colors, Doug and I head north from the city of Marshall until we spot a sign on the roadway reading: “Turkeyville Village Limit.” It’s just noon, but the parking lot is already filling up. Bright orange pumpkins from the farm’s patch line the walkways, and dried corn stalks adorn the covered outdoor patio of Turkeyville’s brown farmhouse-style dining complex. The peaked roof displays the name “Cornwell’s” in orange lettering with an image of a plump turkey.

Inside the restaurant, the tantalizing aroma of hot apple and pumpkin pie wafts through the air. Behind the deli-style food counter, ladies in black farm aprons hand heaping plates of turkey and mashed potatoes, turkey pot pies and turkey sandwiches to waiting guests. Suddenly, we realize we’re famished.

Blain’s wife, Patti, looking trim and fit in a red-and-white checkered shirt and blue jeans, fills us in on a bit of Turkeyville lore. Born and raised a “city girl,” she has never forgotten their first date as teenagers. Blain was responsible for raising 12,000 turkeys back then and insisted on taking her by tractor into the field to scatter feed for the birds before they left. “Turkeys are very curious, and I was scared to death they would bite me,” Patti remembers.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary, she has compiled Marjorie Cornwell’s original recipes into a 2018 cookbook,



PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Blain and Patti Cornwell (top) at the Turkeyville “Village Limit.” The farm business, which now includes a dining complex, gift shop, and RV resort, was started by his grandfather.

sold in the Country Junction gift shop. “All of our recipes are Grandma Marjorie’s, and everything is made from scratch, just like it was 50 years ago,” Patti tells us. “We have been offering gluten-free and dairy-free items on our menu for decades.”

She leads us down a hallway where she has created a visual timeline with 50 years of Cornwell family photos and memorabilia.

“Grandpa Cornwell was a

real character and a true entrepreneur,” Patti says. “He had great ideas. His son, Alan, and grandson, Blain, have continued that family tradition.” Patti and Blain’s daughter, Elyse, a fourth-generation Cornwell, now helps out in the restaurant.

A great deal has changed at Turkeyville U.S.A. over the past five decades. The original small eatery has been expanded into a 200-seat dining room decorated with dark wooden beams, antique furnishings, and farmhouse collectibles. In the adjoining 180-seat Dinner Theatre, visitors can enjoy turkey buffet meals and professional Broadway-style musicals and comedy shows.

Expansion during the 1970s and 1980s added an ice cream parlor featuring homemade flavors such as Turkey Trax, a bak-



ery famed for its cream-cheese-filled pumpkin rolls and a gift shop brimming with Thanksgiving decorations, kitchen gadgetry, old-fashioned hard candies, and Turkeyville souvenirs. The old granary now houses a trendy gift and apparel boutique. In 2011, the Cornwells opened Camp Turkeyville, a 127-site, full-service RV resort offering families a farm-themed vacation experience in the mid-Michigan countryside from April through October.

Turkeyville also has built its reputation as a family-entertainment destination. Year-round events attract 250,000 visitors who gobble up 30,000 turkey dinners annually.

On weekends, regional artisans, craftsmen, and antique dealers set up display tables on the front lawn for arts and craft

fairs, flea markets, and antique shows. In the spring, Civil War enthusiasts erect authentic encampments and stage re-enactments of the “Battle for Turkeyville.” Every July, farmers from the Midwest and beyond bring 600 vintage farm vehicles for the annual Antique Tractor and Machinery Show. On Saturdays and Sundays, kids clamber aboard a miniature railroad train, operated by the Mid-Michigan Railroad Club, for a ride on a 2½-mile track on the farm grounds.

What hasn’t changed at Turkeyville over the last 50 years is the warm family hospitality — and the delicious farm-to-table home-cooked meals.

Unable to stave off our hunger pains any longer, we leave Patti and head back to the restaurant to order a late lunch of hot turkey biscuit and a “Sloppy Tom” barbecued-turkey sandwich. The meal more than fulfills Turkeyville’s promise of stick-to-the-ribs turkey goodness. To top it off, we split a piece of presidential-pleasing peanut-butter chiffon pie. It’s a little slice of food heaven in a pastry crust. We’re stuffed.

To work off the calories, we cut through the ice cream parlor, stopping to sample some tasty pumpkin fudge, and step out into the bright sunlight. A short walk across the grassy farmyard takes us to the turkey barn, where two dozen iridescent-plumed birds are strutting their stuff. These prima donnas are just “eye candy,” however. The 20,000 white domestic turkeys — tipping the scales at 35 pounds each — that end up in the restaurant’s bank of ovens each year are raised exclusively for Turkeyville elsewhere on another Michigan farm.

Before departing, we fortify ourselves with tasty mementos of our visit: two frozen turkey pot pies and two hefty dessert pies, a coconut-cream and a rhubarb.

In the future, the Cornwells plan to add attractions at Turkeyville U.S.A. while maintaining its old-fashioned countryside charm. “We’re a close-knit family and we’ll be here for generations to come,” Patti says.

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These cities may be small, but they are mighty appealing

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gle to pay rents in a place like Boston. So part of the story is the ability of these cities to support commercial venues that appeal to new residents and tourists,” said Japonica Brown-Saracino, a sociology professor at Boston University who studies cities.

Employers in places such as Des Moines also have invested in their communities to attract the workers that they need. That city’s new 1.5-mile Riverwalk, for instance, was a partnership with the Principal Financial Group, whose headquarters is here.

Yet, for travelers, the revival of the American small city has generally been a well-kept secret, said Chris Stone, head of the visitor bureau in Greenville, S.C., a onetime manufacturing center that has transformed its downtown with boutique hotels, a new performing arts center, more than 110 locally owned restaurants, and a baseball stadium modeled on Fenway Park where the Red Sox farm team the Greenville Drive plays. Cyclists drawn to the area for its flat terrain can rest up at the new Hotel Domestique, opened by 17-time Tour de France rider George Hincapie.

“That’s actually part of the delight,” Stone said. “You don’t know what to expect. Coming to cities like ours is a surprise, which makes for the adventure. Many of us as smaller places still have that for people who seek us out.”

Des Moines, for instance, boasts an unexpected sculpture park downtown that features a revolving collection of massive works by some of the world’s top artists. There’s abundant live music, pop-up galleries, and an innovative arts and en-



ART MERIPOL



From top: The Des Moines Farmers’ Market; Sunny Point Cafe in West Asheville, N.C.; Raygun, a design store in the East Village of Des Moines.

tainment venue in a renovated former art deco-style fire station.

Asheville, N.C., has no fewer than five new restaurants by James Beard award chefs, 33 microbreweries, a winery, rooftop bars, and a new art museum dedicated to the nearby, iconic Black Mountain College.

Wilmington, Del., has converted a former shipyard and abandoned warehouse district into a \$1.5 billion riverfront development with restaurants, shops, and two new hotels under construction.

A former railroad station in Chattanooga’s Southside District has been remade into a collection of hotels, bars, restaurants, entertainment, and attractions, newly renovated and expanded (and called, inevitably, Chattanooga Choo Choo).

“Smaller places in the past might not have had much depth in terms of a visitor experience,” Stone said. Now, often after decades of redevelopment, many do — but at a pace that is a contrast to what tourists find in bigger cities.

“When you go to a big city for a weekend getaway you’re caught back up in this frenetic pace — lots of people, almost too many choices,” Stone said. “People want to escape the frenetic and go to places that are easier and lighter.”

After all, said Barry White, the president and CEO of the Chattanooga Convention and Visitors Bureau, that’s what draws people to live in these cities, too.

“It’s beautiful scenery. There’s great restaurants. You might hear a local complain about downtown parking, but there’s not a parking problem. You can find something in that local shop that you’re not going to find on Amazon,” White said.

“That’s what you’re going to find in smaller towns.”

When people go out to eat in such places, said Leah Wong Ashburn, president and CEO of Highland Brewery Company in East Asheville, “You’ll see the chef-slash-owner. When you come to the local brewery you will see our staff behind the bar. When you want that experience of authenticity and finding a niche and a little weirdness, that comes from the local restaurateur or a brewery or art gallery or a boutique.”

There’s something else unique to smaller cities that’s different from what visitors sometimes confront in bigger ones: a lack of pretentiousness.

“Most of us here still look back at the last 15 years and reflect that it’s pretty remarkable that it’s worked out as it has,” said Paul Rottenberg, a New Jersey native who now lives in Des Moines and co-owns Orchestrate Hospitality, which runs Zombie Burger and four other local restaurants.

“There’s some Midwestern

humility. Some people like it to be a well-kept secret. I never run into people who say, ‘I wish everybody knew about Des Moines,’” said Chuck Current, executive director of the Des Moines Social Club, which provides a home for local artists and produces theater, live music, and other cultural events.

In fact, “This is the most laid-back city in America,” said Mike Draper, who moved back to his native Des Moines after selling T-shirts in Philadelphia and Boston and opened Raygun, a design store in the East Village that specializes in screen-printed clothing. “Des Moines: Let Us Exceed Your Already Low Expectations,” reads one of its T-shirts. Quips another: “Iowa: Wave the Next Time You Fly Over.”

“You’re able to slide right in here,” Draper said. “So it makes for a different experience as a tourist, that you’re not seeing things like a tourist.”

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