

By Jeff Louderback

Wearing a wide-brimmed Stetson hat on his head and an infectious grin on his bespectacled face, Bob Evans sits in the restaurant named for him in Rio Grande. He's sharing a fish sandwich with Jewel, his wife of 59 years. The 81-year-old Evans tells stories in his long southern Ohio drawl, about everything from learning the basics of hog butchering on his father's farm in Gallipolis to his frequent identity crises, despite that his is a household name.

"One time, I was driving to Cincinnati and a state highway patrolman pulled me over for speeding," Evans explains between bites of his sandwich and salad. "When I showed him my license, he asked me if I was 'the' Bob Evans, and I told him I was. He took another look at the license and another look at me and said 'You're not that Bob Evans. He's dead,'" Evans recalls. "I reached in the back seat and pulled out a restaurant flyer with my photo on it. He was so embarrassed he didn't give me a ticket."

The belief of Evans's passing is a well-traveled misconception, but the affable good ol' boy is more alive than ever. "Heck no, I'm not dead," Evans says with a smile. "Though it seems too many people think I am."

He retired in 1986 from the company that operates the restaurants and food items that bear his name, and he still spends his days down on the farm tending to his 2,500-acre, 1,000-head cattle ranch named Hidden Valley. He's also involved in several pet projects, from helping to promote college opportunities for Appalachian schoolchildren to spreading the word about a year-round grazing program he believes will save family farms. But it was his early achievements in the sausage-making and restaurant businesses that have forever linked the humble Ohio boys name with rustic farmlands, country kitchens and old-fashioned cooking across the country.

Evans was born in 1918 in Sugar Ridge, a hamlet near Bowling Green, and lived there until his father moved the family to Gallia County to run a small chain of grocery stores. After attending Gallipolis High School for two years, he graduated from Greenbriar Military School in West Virginia in 1937. Evans then studied to be a veterinarian at Ohio State University for nearly two years. He left college to pursue his true love - farming. But, it wasn't until he returned from World War II in 1946 that he found his life's calling.

Back then, he and Jewel had had the first two of their six children and lived on a farm near Gallipolis. To help keep up his mortgage payments, Evans hit on the idea to open a 12-stool, 24-hour diner to cater to the steady volume of truck drivers who stopped off in Gallipolis at all hours of the night and day. Always hungry for breakfast after long drives, the truckers had few options for such food, Evans recalls. His restaurant - he called it a "steakhouse"- was a hit with truckers who could not get enough of the steak and eggs.

"Actually I opened the restaurant so I could pay off the mortgage on my farm," Evans says. "I never thought it would develop into anything big. I was content with having my farm. It's all I ever really wanted."

But once he added sausage to the menu, the place really took off.

"At the time, most sausage was made from scraps, and it didn't taste good," he says. I butchered a hog at the farm and made some sausage with hams and tenderloins in my sausage, which was unheard of then," Evans says. "Truck drivers would come miles out of their way just to eat with us. They knew good food, and we always treated 'em right."

Soon the truckers were asking for sausage they could buy to take home with them, and eventually Evans began packaging it in 10-pound tubs to sell.

By 1950, the demand for his sausage was so high, he decided to open a sausage production business. Evans still has the yellowed note from the Ohio Valley Bank in Gallipolis that records a \$1,000 loan he used to buy equipment and construct a sausage plant on his farm. Evans's father also backed him, on the condition he install sliding doors on the side of the building so it could be used to store farm machinery if the venture failed. Evans then bought a used Studebaker pickup truck, packed his sausage on blocks of ice and hit the road, selling to stores across Ohio and West Virginia. To help pay the bills in the early days of the company, Jewel worked every Saturday at a family restaurant in Gallipolis. She prepared the food at home on Friday and brought it in the next morning. It was Jewel who perfected recipes to serve at the first Bob Evans restaurant, and for years her kitchen was a testing site for every product her husband sold.

In the early 1960s, the company started advertising on television. In the commercials, Evans appeared wearing a cowboy hat and bow tie with his genial smile and gave straightforward pitches as a voice singing "Bob Evans, down on the farm" played in the background. The advertisements were taped at Evans's home - the 1820s brick farmhouse is now known as the Homestead and is part of the company-owned Bob Evans Farm. Soon after the first commercials aired, visitors flocked to Gallia County to meet Evans and see where his family lived.

To ease the loss of privacy at their home, Evans built a "sausage shop" by the road on his farm so guests would have a place where they could chat with him and sample the sausage. "We still had a lot of people in and out of the house," Jewel Evans says. "Bob would talk with them at the sausage shop and then invite them up to the house for to the house for a meal. I remember several times going out on the back porch to shake the rugs and people would be standing there taking photos."

That sausage shop is now Bob Evans restaurant in Rio Grande. The original steakhouse was torn down last year.

Evans still savors the occasional breakfast of sausage and eggs, and he still prefers a hearty country-style meal to an elegant dinner - which is exactly what you'd expect of Bob Evans.

Besides breakfast items, the Evans name is used on food products such as the 10-grain

cereal produced by the Jewel Evans Grist Mill in Bidwell. Fourteen products are made there, including flour for their son's Stan Evans bakeries in Columbus. Today, Bob Evans Farms Inc. operates 424 restaurants (144 are in Ohio) and offers an assortment of retail food products, including flavored sausages, bacon, home fries, microwaveable sandwiches and frozen entrees.

"On our commercials, we used to say, 'Made fresh by a farmer on the farm: " Evans says. "Boy, there's nothing better than that. When people hear that something is made on a farm, they get the impression that the food is fresh and better. I think that's true. A farm is the best place in the world to make a living and raise a family. It's given me a good life, and I want to make sure future generations can experience the same thing."

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