

## **How Curious – Chicken in the Rough**

### **How did a Route 66 lunch fiasco turn into an Oklahoma franchised food sensation?**

**MUSIC:** How Curious theme

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Hello. Welcome to KGOU's How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin.

#### **Logan Layden**

I will have the Chicken in the Rough, half ...

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

I'm with How Curious managing editor Logan Layden and we're at Beverly's Pancake House in Oklahoma City. This is the last bastion, in Oklahoma, of a one-time Sooner State menu item sensation that was once franchised across the nation. It was born – so to speak – on Route 66 and according to the Pancake House manager, Candy Barr, people order it ...

#### **Candy**

A lot. Like I'd say at least 45% of our customers that come in every day. It's because it's hand breaded and made on the spot. It's not premade at all. It's like your grandma's fried chicken.

#### **Rachel-in-situ**

Logan, did your grandma fry chicken?

#### **Logan Layden**

She did, in fact, and was obviously great at it. So I'm interested to see how this stacks up.

SEGUE

#### **Kathy Anderson**

Chicken in the Rough is a meal.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Kathy Anderson is a Route 66 historian who has recently written about Chicken in the Rough.

#### **Kathy Anderson**

It is not a restaurant chain. It is a specific menu item. It is five pieces of chicken from half a chicken. It has shoestring French-fried potatoes on top. It's served with two rolls or biscuits, honey, there's a little finger bowl that you can wash your fingers with afterwards. And it's served on a platter that uses the trademark logo.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

We'll come to the logo in a minute.

#### **Kathy Anderson**

Today, most people don't know about Chicken in the Rough. But there was a time when there were many Beverly restaurants that served that menu item of Chicken in the Rough. Plus,

Chicken in the Rough itself was franchised. To like 38 states, over 300 locations in its peak, and several foreign countries.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It all began with a man by the name of Beverly Osborne who was born in 1896.

### **Kathy Anderson**

He was dirt poor. I mean, he lived in a half dug out in sand dunes in Indian territory in Southeastern Oklahoma, and he was always hungry. As an adult, he wasn't much taller than five, five. And I would have to think part of that was malnutrition when he was growing up. But he had a drive for business, for success. There's an anecdote where he's shining shoes for a banker. So the banker's asking the kids, what do you wanna be when you grow up and blah, blah, oh, I wanna do this, I want to do that.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

You can imagine their answers: perhaps "I want to be a pilot" "I want to be a race car driver"

### **Kathy Anderson**

He looked at Beverly and Beverly said, I want to be a millionaire. I can do all those other things if I have the money. I mean, you know, his goal was set at a very early age.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In 1917, Beverly married a young woman named Rubye. The couple set their sights on getting into business in Oklahoma City. Their initial venture, a drug store, only lasted a few months. But then they opened a waffle shop and gradually added more locations. Still, Beverly had an eye for the main chance and wanted to branch out into a different kind of eatery – something more upscale and exotic. Years later, Rubye recalled what happened next in her diary.

### **Rubye Osborne (words read by Stephanie Royse)**

Beverly began to scout around for new locations, where the spot at 2429 North Lincoln loomed up to foretell possibilities. So after investigating what amount was available, the price, etc., one day early in 1936, he approached me with a 10 year lease to sign for \$60,000. It would be impossible for me to explain the feeling I had as he told me to sign it. It actually upset me so much, and I was so afraid that I got so deathly sick I actually vomited. He often tells this on me, but "Nerve" is all we had to offer as security.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Despite Rubye's anxiety, they did sign the lease on the North Lincoln location. Here's Kathy Anderson again.

### **Kathy Anderson**

It was north of the state capital, and there was nothing out there except oil wells and occasional gas station. I mean, it was like a desert. But Lincoln Boulevard was Route 66. Why he thought Lincoln would be a great idea, I have no idea. They were having to build from scratch. And then he and his wife and the managers at the other hotel where they had a restaurant, decided to take a trip out to California to find just something extra special to bring back to Oklahoma, to serve at

this new restaurant and kind of make their statement, bring something really special to Oklahoma City.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

But although they were off to explore culinary California for inspiration, inspiration actually hit before they got there - on the Texas part of Route 66 in fact. Many years later, Beverly Osborne recalled what happened. His words are here read by an actor.

### **Beverly Osborne (words read by James Briggs)**

In 1936, with rather small capital, we started a modern Drive-In one block north of the State Capitol Building. After laying the foundation ... my assistant manager and his wife, Mrs. Osborne and I started on a vacation trip. We were looking for ideas that might be utilised in our new Drive-In. Well, we literally bumped onto the biggest idea we've ever had. Driving along in Amarillo, Texas, and eating chicken out of a basket, the car hit a rough spot, throwing the chicken out of our laps onto the floor board of the car. Mrs. Osborne then wisecracked "This is chicken in the rough."

SEGUE

### **Kathy Anderson**

And there was something about that phrase that just struck everyone in the car, and they mulled over that phrase. What could they do with it? All the way out to California, and all the way back. And they had decided that that phrase would mean served without silverware.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Bear in mind, this was a time when eating chicken with your fingers was absolutely not the done thing. One etiquette guide of the era, for example, described doing so as a "barbarous practice." But the Osbornes were undaunted.

The shiny new Drive In restaurant opened in September 1936. Rubye later recalled the reaction to Chicken in the Rough.

### **Rubye Osborne (words read by Stephanie Royse)**

Well, it literally took Oklahoma by storm; people were calling in, coming in from all over the state just to see and learn what it was all about. We had them ask what in the world it was? Was the chicken served with feathers on? Do we have to pick our own chicken? Do we have to fry it and serve ourselves? By now we decided we had done something to make them curious, and in doing so would naturally make them beat a path to our door. We had taken such a chance on going out into a territory where there were no restaurants at all, and we wondered if we could get people out that far from town. But from that first opening day ... it began to prove a success.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

And that success got Beverly Osborne's entrepreneurial mind whirring. He had a striking logo created; It shows a rooster decked out as a golfer and apparently rather frustrated in his attempts to hit a ball that's fallen in the rough. He was also interested in making the cooking process unique.

### **Kathy Anderson**

He worked with a local manufacturer and they figured out a special griddle grill steamer, whatever, and he had it patented. And it was that patent project. It was that patented item that gave Chicken in the Rough its distinctive flavor.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It wasn't just the griddle item that he sought to retain control over, he also had the special Chicken in the Rough crockery, glassware, and other related items – as well as the meal itself – trademarked. Then he started to advertise the menu item plus its accessories as being available to franchise.

### **Kathy Anderson**

As far as anyone knows, Chicken in the Rough is the first franchised food item, menu item. The idea of this menu item meant any restaurant that met the criteria the Osborne's laid out could franchise this menu item. It would be supplemented by a direct mail campaign with postcards so people would know what was going on. I have seen newspaper ads from when a restaurant would, let's say a new restaurant would open up and they decide to have Chicken in the Rough; it's a full page ad, it's a big deal, and "We have Chicken in the Rough." I mean, people knew. Chicken in the Rough, and it became a household pretty close to a household name.

SEGUE

### **John Dunning**

This was on Lincoln, see, the flagship store.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

John Dunning of OKC's Trolley Stop Records has been collecting Chicken in the Rough memorabilia for decades. He's showing me some of the postcards in his collection.

### **John Dunning**

This is probably about 1960 58 say the restaurant. Yes, there's the Capitol. This is Route 66. So when I was little we used to eat there. It was a really cool place.

### **Rachel-in-situ**

Why? What was so cool about it?

### **John Dunning**

Well, just the atmosphere, the architecture. It was just very neat. And, you know, there were pictures of Beverly and, you, know, chicken in the rough. You know, the guy with the golf club.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

John's talking about the rooster logo.

And it was just neat for a kid. You know it was a lot of fun.

### **Rachel-in-situ**

Can you remember what it was about the decor that really appealed to you?

### **John Dunning**

Well, you know, it was rock and wood, old wood, you know, beaded type panel, old timey. And so that was all pretty cool. And it was just, you're big open, a frame ceilings and it just, it was just always full of people and just a hubbub, you know, and you walk kind of down and they had these little uh, windows along this. Kind of walkway and they were lit up and they'd have dioramas of that chicken playing golf and things and it just appealed to a kid but I guess it appealed to adults too because it was very famous but a lot of movie stars ate there you know Bob Hope and just all kinds of people and they anytime there was big events here with you know out of town celebrities coming in they would go to Beverly's

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

John also showed me some images of Beverly Osborne himself, including at the home the Osbornes shared which was also on Route 66.

### **John Dunning**

And then here he is, he had beehives out at that house.

### **Rachel-in-situ**

Oh yeah, I have somebody told me that.

### **John Dunning**

And see, they had these little jars with honey, like little bee creamer jars. And so he supplied his own honey. So, you know, he was always thinking, always doing. Here he is by the chicken in the rough airplane.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Apparently he had several Chicken in the Rough airplanes! After all, he was probably a millionaire by this stage. You can see photos of some of this memorabilia on this episode's webpage. Just search for KGOU and How Curious. One of the items is a Chicken in the Rough placemat which shows scores of franchise locations. At its height the dish was being served in around 370 eateries across the US, plus – as Kathy Anderson mentioned earlier - several foreign countries. But eventually the bubble burst.

### **Kathy Anderson**

In the 70s, 1970s, the kitchen cleanliness codes changed and the special griddle no longer met code. And restaurants did not buy that griddle. They leased it. So they couldn't own it. And when it no longer met code. That just threw everything into a frenzy because how are we going to make the signature dish if we can't cook it the way it's designed to be cooked and it took them several years to figure it out, but it clearly took a hit.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

The Osbornes in time let go of the rights. There is still a Chicken in the Rough website which lists just four places you can eat it, not counting the remaining Beverly's establishment in Oklahoma – OKC's Beverly's Pancake House – which long since passed out of Osborne ownership. The walls of the place are plastered with Chicken in the Rough iconography and info, which How Curious Managing Editor Logan Layden and I enjoyed perusing while we waited for his Chicken in the Rough. There was a bit of a wait, as it is prepared on the spot, but eventually

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**Rachel-in-situ**

Something's headed our way.

**Logan Layden**

Omigoodness, look at this now.

**Rachel-in-situ**

Look at that. Thank you.

**Logan Layden**

It looks great. Thank you.

**Rachel-in-situ**

It looks huge.

**Logan Layden**

Yeah, I'll be asking for a to go box.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

The feast of a meal wasn't prepared quite like the Chicken in the Rough of yore. For example, there was no honey and no finger bucket. But the moment of truth had arrived.

**Logan Layden**

The breading looks amazing. It smells awesome. Let's see how it tastes. [Crunching sound]. It's wonderful. No, it's juicy, great flavour on the crust.

**Rachel-in-situ**

Is it really good?

**Logan Layden**

It is. I would not lie about fried chicken. I'm very serious about fried chicken [laughing].

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Thanks to Logan and to all of the contributors to today's episode, including readers James Briggs and Stephanie Royse.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

Don't forget, if you have an idea for a future episode, we'd love to hear about it so please drop us a line at [curious@kgou.org](mailto:curious@kgou.org).