

The Observer & Eccentric

BUSINESS

Maple house crew works its way up

By SHARON PENLAND-MACE

They look like a group of young college students being lectured by a professor.

Eager and energetic looking, these young men actually comprise the management of The Maple House restaurants. Their "professor" is Bruce Cameron, the owner and founder of the restaurants, who is "lecturing" at a regular monthly meeting of his management personnel.

How did such an unlikely-looking group of young men gain so strong a foothold in Bruce Cameron's restaurant business?

"When I first started in this business I had the philosophy of hiring older men with experience," explains Cameron, "but it was difficult for me to communicate with them. They felt they knew more than I did about the food business, so I couldn't get my ideas across."



BRUCE CAMERON

"CONSEQUENTLY, I began to train men who were already working in my restaurants—the younger college types. I felt that if I took young people and trained them in my approach, I would have things the way I wanted them."

Cameron built his first Maple House restaurant in Birmingham in 1964 as an investment while working as a commercial realtor for Byron Trerice Realty Co. He took the name from both Maple Road where the first new restaurant was to be located and from its association with a maple syrup. Since that time, he has opened seven other Maple Houses in this area.

Because Cameron believes that all of his restaurants should have a manager on duty at all times, each has both a manager and an assistant manager alternating working hours in order to maintain this goal of constant supervision. This obviously creates quite a few management positions to be filled.

He usually fills these positions with what is known in Maple House jargon as a "lifer," someone who has been with the organization for several years and has progressed "from the ground floor up."

Nearly all of Cameron's managers started in a position such as dishwasher, bus boy, waiter or cook. From there they worked up to the more responsible position of assistant manager and, finally, to manager.

SAWNIE GIBSON started working with Bruce Cameron as the assistant manager of the Birmingham Maple House in 1964 when it first opened. At one time or another, Gibson has either managed, opened, or helped to build several Maple Houses. In 1973, he was made general manager of all the Maple House restaurants.

Twenty-four-year-old Cal Hardy started working at the Birmingham Maple House as a fifteen-year-old bus boy in 1965. From that point, he did everything: cooking, dishwashing and waiting tables. After serving a period of time

so later a basement tavern was added, called the Downunder.

One young trainee, Steve Sudnik, started working for Cameron in 1970 as a waiter in The Meeting Place. He later became a bartender in the Down Under. From there he went to the Birmingham Maple House as an assistant manager.

Now after 10 years in business Cameron gives the impression that he may have built his seven Maple Houses and The Meeting Place in order to provide places to put his good managers. He maintains that good people are the key to success.

"RIGHT NOW I have so many good people working for me. I wish I had the time to open more restaurants so that I had a place to put all my assistant managers who are ready for their own restaurants," he said.

Not all of Cameron's managers started as bus boys or waiters in his restaurants. But even those who are university-trained in the restaurant business claim to have started in this capacity at one time or another. Michigan State University graduate Jim Jones likes to refer to himself as a "bus-boy/manager" when referring to his position.

The university-trained managers have a somewhat different history in the Maple House personal progress plan. Most of them started out as either managers or assistant managers, by-passing the usual ground-floor route. Marty Schenn, the manager of the Troy Maple House; Jim Jones,

manager at the Northland Maple House; Tom May, who manages The Meeting Place; and Richard Harrison, manager of the Southfield Maple House are all university graduates in hotel, restaurant and institutional management courses.

Cameron refers to them as a "fraternity," and they are examples of his desire to pepper his food business with educated professionals.

But even these managers are enrolled in a type of "ground-up" training program in the Cameron network of restaurants.

ONE OF these "fraternity" members, Richard Harrison, a graduate of University of Michigan, joined the Maple House organization in 1968 as manager of the Northland Maple House.

Harrison, who likes to point out that he began in the restaurant business as a dishwasher at the age of 15, successfully managed the Northland Maple House for two years.

After his stint there, Harrison became interested in the expansion of the Maple House restaurants. He then left the Northland restaurant to help build the Orchard Lake Maple House, where he served as a lay carpenter.

It was at this point that Harrison was entering the next phase of Cameron's management training program—the "Jack of all Trades" period. Harrison not only helped build the Orchard Lake Maple House, but also assisted Cameron in the complete remodeling of the old Wilkins Restaurant in Orchard Lake.

Under Cameron's supervision

and with the decorating and artistic services of Alexis Lahti, a local artist, Harrison helped transform the Wilkins place into a modern, slick restaurant with imaginative decor, original art and a specialty menu served by young male waiters, an innovation at that time.

IN ADDITION to his general carpentry tasks on this project, Harrison co-supervised the project and operated as the general contractor and manager of the operation. He even designed the menu (taking the opportunity to name one item after himself) and invented a way to make wine "come out of the wall in three colors: white, red, and rose."

After managing The Meeting Place for a time during which he helped construct and manage the Downunder room, Harrison was lured away from The Meeting Place by Cameron with an offer to make him part owner of a Maple House which was to be constructed in Southfield. This time Harrison was given the complete responsibility for the entire construction of the building and staffing of the restaurant.

Harrison, presently manager and part-owner of the Southfield Maple House which he helped to both design and construct, has also recently been appointed to the position of vice president of all Cameron's Maple House restaurants.

What is the philosophy behind having a manager go into the construction business? Obviously, turning him into a contractor is not really his goal.

Harrison calls Cameron's system a "subliminal" approach.

"IF A MANAGER helps to build the plant, he has a personal pride in the restaurant," Harrison explains. "Rather than hiring a man off the street, you have a man involved—both with the company and with the physical building he will be managing."

Another way Cameron likes to insure that his employees will continue to grow is in his nondestructive approach to management. He seems to feel that most people perform better when given both responsibility and a free hand to use their own ideas.



A group portrait of Cameron's young restaurant gang



Richard Harrison hangs bannering on the Southfield Maple House (Photographs by David Franklin)



Good of Sonny

A natural, funny guy

He makes people happy

By HY SHENKMAN

"To make people happy is one of the most important things to me," Sonny Elliot said.

His sense of humor doesn't just come out of his mouth, it pours out of his heart. That is why Sonny is a natural, a funny guy, who doesn't have to try too hard to make people laugh.

While forecasting a tornado he can turn TV viewers frowns into smiles.

"Why worry people?" he says, "there is not much they can do about preventing storms anyway."

His WWJ weather forecasts are interwoven with one-line gags and bits of philosophy.

He relates his traffic safety messages in a quip: "There is a driver upstate who has four speeds—fast, faster, very fast and Good Morning, Judge."

If courtesy is the topic Sonny says, "Don't drive as though you owned the road—drive as though you owned the car." or "Watch out

for children—especially if they are driving."

Sonny admits that his favorite is "Busy like a one-handed pick-pocket with a large family."

I have no writers, I do my own gags," he said. "I make up places like Eggs-ring-dinga-dine or names like Nelson Nudnik and Eutshuldigensiemir."

What about John Butsicaras? "He is real," Sonny said. "He is my co-partner to the Cessna 210 plane we own."

"The two of us go out on trips to the Northern peninsula as well as other states."

Flying is part of Sonny's life. A pilot in World War II, he was shot down over Germany. In the concentration camp he organized shows for his fellow prisoners, where as he kibitzes "I had a captured audience."

"I knew then that one day the United States will win the war and we'll all go back to our homes, but in the meantime I felt a strong

need for laughter to help us overcome the hardship."

"A man who has never been hungry will not understand what hunger is like: For us prisoners it was an experience. We learned how to appreciate this great country of ours even more," he said.

Sonny Elliot now holds the rank of Colonel in the Air Force Reserve. But Sonny is a regular guy with people from all walks of life.

"I have a contract with the Red Wings," he goes on. "It states I'm to receive \$1.67 per year. Next year I'm going to negotiate for \$1.74. Of course, this is an all-fun contract, but being a fan it gives me an opportunity to travel with them free and play goalie during a charity show. That adds a little humor to the serious game of hockey and it's good for them and me."

But Sonny's versatility doesn't stop there. Working in a zoo made me get to like animals," he claims, "and of course there I meet kids. For children in particular,

Sonny has a soft spot in his heart. As he puts it "maybe it's because I don't have any of my own. They bring me knickknacks which they make themselves or they offer me part of their sandwiches. From the little girls I get kisses. How can anyone resist that?" he asked.

He grew up in Detroit, on Easting Street, the son of immigrant parents from Russia. His father worked as a blacksmith in England then came to this country and opened a small hardware store.

"My mother always made sure that I ate and slept well; did well in school and she was concerned with the girls I took out," Sonny said. "A teacher was one of Mom's favorites and so I married one named Annette."

"My mother passed away 8 years ago and I miss her kind of talk," he said.

His smile widened and in his eyes I could see mirrored a thought "How nice it would be to have mom and dad here, so they too could enjoy their Sonny."