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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. The book has been closed on a classic American tale of big hamburgers, narrow highways and honky-tonk music. It is a Red, white and blue story.

Sheldon "Red" Chaney opened a hamburger stand 50 years ago this summer on old Route 66 in Springfield, the Gateway to the Ozarks. Red's Giant Hamburg was the birthplace of the drive-up order window. It was easily recognized by the 16-foot-tall sign with the word Giant running horizontally, and the Hamburg running vertically along the post. Red miscalculated the space for the "er" in Hamburger.

In 1982, Lou Whitney and D. Clinton Thompson, then of the Morells and now of the Skeletons, wrote a popular rockabilly song about the hamburger joint. Of course, the song was called "Red's." And the hamburger stand was featured in a 1984 Rolling Stone magazine article on Route 66.

Red was born in Ithaca, N.Y., and reared in west suburban St. Charles. He ran Red's

with wife Julia, a native of Downstate Palmyra, from 1947 until they closed it in 1984. The Chaney's lived behind the rickety frame restaurant on the west side of town.

Red died on June 2. He was 81. The restaurant was torn down exactly two weeks before he died.

"Red had as much fun after he retired as he did when he was working," Whitney said last week. "I don't think that had much to do with his death. Red was out there when they tore it down." Red died of numerous ailments at St. John's Regional Health Center in Springfield. During the demolition, Chaney told the Springfield News-Leader, "The old place had become an eyesore."

But Red had an ear for music.

"You'd go into his place and there'd be hillbilly music blaring out of a crappy eight-track," said Whitney, who last saw Red a few months ago. "Red had this one beat he'd play on the register."

Whitney tapped out a happy dance with the tip of a pencil.

"That was Red's beat," Whitney said. "He'd play that to everything. He'd start beating a couple of spoons like that. Then he had tricks where he'd slide the root beer down to you."

"I took the Del Lords (the defunct New York rock band led by former Dictator Scott Kempner) in there when they were recording here. They wanted to go there two times a day, every day." Red's was a regular stop for anyone who recorded at Whitney's Studio, where more recently he worked with Jonathan Richman and Robbie Fulks, and engineered the song "Why Would You Wanna Live" for Wilco.

Red and Julia always returned the favor, checking out Morells or Skeletons concerts when they could. They met at an Army dance in 1943 while Red was stationed in Denver. After three dates they were married.

Last summer I stopped in to see Red and Julia. They were living in the same home they bought in 1947. Red recalled their first dance together. "It was the same kind of music Lou (Whitney) plays," Red said. "Same type of dance, same kind of good beat. A lot of big bands played it that way."

Julia smiled at her husband. She walked over to a dresser and tugged at a rickety

drawer. It contained invitations to their 1993 golden anniversary party, which read, "After 50 years they're still cookin'!"

Spiced by Thompson's sizzling guitar licks, Red's went this way:

*"Hamburger, cheeseburger, lettuce and tomato*

*Brown beans root beer, French fried potato*

*It's a crazy little place on the west side of town*

*Got a five-five Buick knee deep in the ground. . . ."*

Red had planted a 1955 Buick in the parking lot to prevent customers from backing into his homemade "Giant Hamburg" sign.

Red was honored that someone wrote a song about his crazy little place. "That really got me," he said. In confessional tones, Julia added, "Every once in a while we still play the song in our car."

On the record, Red's was known for big homemade burgers, blended with water and kidney suet. The hard fat that once enclosed the beef kidney enhanced the flavor. Off the record, Red would share a couple of snorts of mead with regulars like Whitney.

"His mead was whiskey made from fermenting honey," Whitney said. "Or something like that. If you were hanging around at closing time, he'd shut the door and give you a little of that mead. We'd perk ourselves up."

Red was always perky. He was known to dance behind the counter. In the days before his red hair turned white, he'd slide up to tables on his knees, arms loaded with platters of burgers. Red played pre-industrial rock on his refrigerator door. "I always played fast music," he told me. "And I played it loud, so people couldn't sit there and read the paper. I wanted to get people in and out."

Red said that after World War II, his father sold his restaurant-tavern near St. Charles. He took a year off to go on the road. "Dad came through this town, backed up and looked at it again," Red recalled. "He said he was going to buy right here. It was just a two-lane highway, but it was packed all the time."

Red's father recruited his son and new daughter-in-law to run the operation. Red was a

resourceful restaurateur, which is how the drive-in window was born. Old Route 66 was so busy with automobile traffic, the supply couldn't keep up with the demand.

"Down 66 here, I had a buddy who had one of those intercoms we'd use in the Army," Red explained. "With a speaker on one end of a line. Before I saw that, I was thinking of putting a roller-conveyer from the lot to the window. But the speakers would work better. Stuff would fall off a conveyer. So I started building it from his intercom. I built it overnight.

"And I had it working the next morning. At first, people were scared. They'd drive up to the speaker, talk to it and say, 'Hey, this is spooky! A box is talking to me; let's get outta here.' I'd say this was around the early 1950s."

Red shut down the restaurant on Oct. 31, 1984, in honor of Julia's 70th birthday. Julia and Red started to laugh. "We both walked out the day we closed it," Red said, grinning, as if he had pulled a fast one.

Julia added, "We never even cleaned it up!"

Last month, Julia buried her dancing partner next to her plot in a hilltop cemetery in Palmyra, southwest of Springfield, Ill. "I miss him," she said last week over the phone. "He wasn't feeling well at all. But it's tough after you've been married to someone for 53 years. I told him to keep going so we could celebrate our 55th. . . ."

For more on Red's, the Skeletons and Route 66 please check out our award-winning documentary "The Center of Nowhere (The Spirit of Sounds of Springfield Missouri) " on assorted streaming venues.: <https://thecenterofnowhere.com/>