

The Columbus Dispatch

Waitress provides 63 years of smiles

Neval Pennell, 78, polished the art of waitressing over decades at the Red Brick Tavern

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

LAFAYETTE, Ohio - Icfe Davis hasn't had to ask for a cup of decaf in 26 years.

Well, at least not at the Thursday lunch meetings of the London Rotary Club.

Since the second club meeting that he ever attended - in February 1984 - waitress Neval Pennell has had a cup waiting at his table by the time he makes it to his seat. (She had to ask his preference the first time, of course.)

It's not that Davis is some VIP. No one has to ask for what they want here in the dining room of the Red Brick Tavern, where the Rotary Club has been served weekly for the past 30-odd years by the woman everyone calls "Ms. Neval."

For 63 years, she has waited tables at the 173-year-old Ohio landmark along Rt. 40 just north of London. She and other longtime employees were recognized last month when the Ohio National Road Association installed a highway marker at the Red Brick Tavern, noting that it is Ohio's second-oldest stagecoach stop and a place where six U.S. presidents have stayed.

Ms. Neval didn't serve any of them, though. She jokes that she might be old but is not so long in the tooth as to have served Warren G. Harding, the last president to stop in.

She doesn't mind. She's content serving ordinary Rotarians.



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Pennell has been serving customers at the Red Brick Tavern since 1947. The tavern, which began as a stagecoach stop in 1837, is an Ohio landmark along Rt. 40.



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Neval Pennell, left, a waitress at the Red Brick Tavern in Lafayette for 63 years, laughs with her colleague Madge Peterman.

"Yes, we're kind of particular about Ms. Neval," said retired high-school Principal Bob LeBeau, who figures she has been bringing him his iced tea with artificial sweetener since at least 1978.

"She's stuck with us through everything and always comes to us with a smile on her face. You can't buy a smile from most people these days. It just brightens everyone's day to see her and makes us appreciate her all the more."

Ms. Neval was 15 in 1947 when her future sister-in-law took her to the venerable brick building in Madison County to ask for a job.

With five siblings at home, she didn't have the luxury of school anymore. She needed work. So she interviewed with the lady proprietor, who was sunning herself on the second-story porch at the time, and got the job. She left home and shared a cramped third-floor room with three other waitresses at the inn until she married three years later.

She met her future husband, John, when he started waiting tables. Throughout their marriage and the raising of two sons, Ms. Neval served weary travelers in the downstairs dining room, sometimes seven days a week.

Once, she worked nearly 48 hours straight - after the Snow Bowl of 1950, when Ohio State played Michigan in a blizzard. Travelers trying to get home on Rt. 40 made it as far as the Red Brick. And then they got stuck. Hundreds of them slept on tables, the floor, anywhere there was room.

Ms. Neval stayed for two days and served them hot food until they could all make it safely home.

But those days are over now. Last year, her 78-year-old back finally got the best of her. She was certain she would have to quit, but the owners had another idea. Perhaps, they suggested, someone else could carry her trays to lighten her load.

"Someone else carry my trays?" she says, incredulous. "What kind of waitress would do that?"

Not yet quite ready to hang up her old black apron for good, she asked the owners: "Can I just keep the Rotary?"

That would give her one shift a week, allowing her to keep her hands busy and her mind occupied. And she could still chat up the group of 20 or so people she has come to love.



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Neval Pennell chats with London Rotary Club members, from left, Jim Williamson, Gary Feliks and Steve Saltsman. She knows the drink orders of her longtime customers by heart.



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Neval Pennell has been happily serving customers at the Red Brick Tavern in Madison County for 63 years.



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As Ms. Neval buses the room, she balances the still-steaming trays of leftover baked chicken and green beans on her hip and kicks the swinging kitchen door open with the toe of her scuffed black Reeboks. "Waitressing is a challenge. If you haven't done it, you don't know how hard it is. You have to make people as happy as possible. And you have to smile when you do it, even if you don't want to."

While the Rotarians conduct their business meeting, Ms. Neval nibbles a french fry, sips her room-temperature water and sneaks in to the bar to say hello to bartender Kelley Meredith.

The two have worked together for nearly 30 years.

Meredith says that regulars, especially those who haven't visited in a while, always inquire about Ms. Neval: She's *still* here?

Yes, he always tells them. She's *still* here. He cannot imagine it any other way.

"She's been like a mother to me," says Meredith, 50. "This is what she loves, this place. I think she'll work here as long as she's alive."

He says she has to make enough pocket money to pay for her smokes and her gambling. Asked if that's true, Ms. Neval only smiles.

She understands she is something of an institution here. But she is not really interested in giving history lessons about the place. She's a waitress, after all, not a tour guide.

Ask her for the stories behind the myriad antiques in the Red Brick, and she'll say she isn't much interested in historic stuff. Ask her about the female ghost purported to roam the hallways, and she'll call it hogwash: "I lived here, and I never heard her or saw a thing."

But ask her about the Rotarians, and she is full of praise: "They've been good to me. You have to have patience to be a good waitress. They make it easy."

The club members occasionally discuss leaving the Red Brick. A meeting place in London proper would be more convenient.

But the debate always ends the same.

All those other restaurants have green beans and baked chicken.

What they don't have is Ms. Neval.

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SLIDE SHOW

- [View a typical day for Neval Pennell at the Red Brick Tavern](#)