

**“
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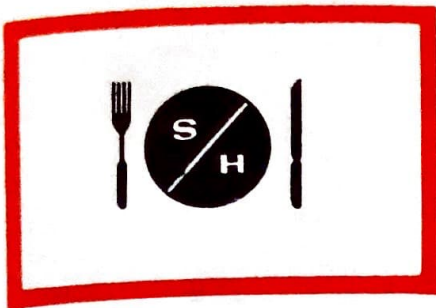
BELIEVE IT OR NOT, there seem to be more and more night people moving around Winnipeg these days.

You can walk into any number of all-night Salisbury House restaurants anytime after midnight and not find a seat. The night owls seem to feel safe in the well-lit surroundings where they know they are welcome and will get a familiar quality of food and service.

Winnipeg is unique in having twenty-seven restaurants in the Salisbury chain within its metropolitan boundaries — and most of them all-nighters. It means that good food — not gourmet food, but well-prepared food from a standard but surprisingly varied menu — is available twenty-four hours a day in almost every part of the area. Few cities can match this.

The Salisbury House phenomenon is really a double success story — the Winnipeg-based growth of a significant restaurant chain, and the miracle that the original little business ever survived at all.

Ralph Erwin started the whole process in 1931.



An actor from Omaha, Erwin always thought that Winnipeg in the twenties was a mighty fine place to visit. It was a friendly city and the climate was one of well defined seasons and, well, exhilarating.

To many visitors the city, nevertheless, had at least one glaring deficiency. As with Erwin himself, they could never find a good place to drop in for a light snack late in the evening after a show. In fact, it was hard to get a good cup of coffee at any time of day or night.

Erwin undertook to fill this deficiency. He opened a small all-night restaurant on Fort Street under the slogan "Dine for a Dime" and offered his patrons a hamburger and a good cup of coffee at a nickel each.

Today that modest cafe has grown into a chain of thirty-seven restaurants taking about four million dollars annually and with an employee payroll of about a million dollars a year. There is one Salisbury House in Kenora, one in Virde, three in Brandon, five in Alberta and the rest in metropolitan Winnipeg. The company has definite plans to continue expansion right to the Pacific.

From the start Erwin's reasoning was this: if he closed at, say, 1 a.m. he had to hire people to clean up and close down for a few hours. It seemed economically more sensible to leave the store open through the night and it certainly added disproportionately to the unique attraction of his business to provide all-night service.

Surely no enterprise ever began under less auspicious circumstances. Erwin had practically no capital. He was an actor, not a businessman. His only experience as a cook was gained

This article is a collaborative effort. The original story was written by Margaret Newfield. Additional material came from Edmund Sprunt and Susan Richardson and was incorporated in the article.

in the kitchen of his own home. And he opened his little cafe in the first dark days of the depression, when businesses were folding right and left.

It was the depression, in fact, which got Erwin into the food business. He came to Winnipeg in 1924 as an actor with Chautauqua, that idealistic organization which toured the country providing a mixed diet of culture and entertainment served up under huge billowing tents. Eventually Erwin became director of dramatics, with headquarters at Winnipeg.

Then came the crash of '29, and almost simultaneously the advent of radio. The once-crowded tents became empty and Chautauqua folded. Why should people pay to sit in a drafty tent to listen to plays and lectures when they could stay at home and hear the same thing coming from the sound box for nothing? As for the dance and craft demonstrations — they could be dispensed with until times got better.

The Erwins moved to New York and Ralph made the rounds of the casting offices. But the depression had hit Broadway too, and there were even more unemployed actors than usual for roles to be filled. Helen Erwin got a job as secretary to keep the home fires burning, and Ralph stayed home to keep house.

And cook. He experimented with economy meals. He experimented with tasty flavorings, and finally came up with the chili sauces that were later to become one of the specialties of Salisbury House.

About this time he began thinking seriously of opening a restaurant. Several other actors of his acquaintance had the same idea — perhaps a restaurant appealed to them because it was a chance to meet people, even though it was over the counter instead of over the footlights.

"If I could find a good manager I would do it," he used to tell his wife in those days.

Winnipeg! Why not a lunch room there? Surely there was opportunity there if any place.

He wrote his wife's uncle in Omaha, who agreed, tentatively, to a 50-50 partnership, Uncle to supply the money and Erwin to run the restaurant.

But his lunch room would have to be different. It would specialize on short orders and snacks, like hamburgers and coffee. And the coffee would have to be good.

He didn't like the word hamburger. It didn't sound right; it sounded almost indelicate. Besides, he felt, it was too American for a Canadian clientele. But what else to call it? One evening Erwin and his wife went

for a walk along the sidewalks of New York, and chanced to pass a shooting gallery. "Zip, Zip, Zip," the shots sounded through the wall. Erwin had his idea for the new name — he would call his hamburgers, not zips, but nips — a clean, pleasant-sounding word that was distinctive and easy to remember.

How to be sure that his coffee would really taste good? He thought of the new Silex coffee makers and arranged to equip his cafe with them.

But what to call his restaurant? As an American, he thought it ought to be a name with a definite "British" ring. Erwin recalled a story he had heard of Lord Salisbury who had solved the problem of a tough steak by ordering it ground. Erwin was going to specialize in ground steak in what most Americans thought of as a "British" country — what better name than Salisbury House?

One night soon after, the Erwins held a party and when festivities were at their height, Ralph and his wife Helen, with a friend, went up to the roof of their apartment building and made a neat bonfire of some \$500 worth of wigs, costumes and grease paint left over from his Chautauqua days. He burned his bridges behind him along with the grease paint. There was nothing now but Winnipeg and the restaurant idea.

The Erwins packed their trunks and were ready to leave. Then the blow fell — a wire from Uncle saying he had reconsidered and was not willing to finance a restaurant after all.

The Erwins rushed to Omaha and pleaded with him to change his mind. But Uncle was adamant. Ralph was too generous, he objected, and would give everything away.

Eventually Uncle yielded to the extent of a small loan. And it was small. Helen Erwin thinks it was \$400; Ralph is equally sure it was \$135. Helen borrowed another \$100 on her diamond ring and got a job in Omaha. Erwin set out for Winnipeg with the intention of opening a restaurant. It was spring of 1931.

In Omaha the weeks passed with no word from the north. "Mother and I didn't know whether he was so busy



The "movable" Salisbury House at Portage and Spence during the war years.



consistent customers. Policemen, especially, are encouraged to frequent the stores — they're sometimes treated to a cup of coffee on the house.

The uncle was right in at least one respect, Ralph Erwin was generous. He never turned a hungry customer away in those lean years, money or no. But, says his wife, this quality seemed

more of a help to his business than a hindrance. It made long-term friends and customers.

Soon the Erwins were planning a second restaurant. Ralph wanted this one to have a distinctive appearance, so he had Ralph Ham, an architect with Moody, Moore and Partners,

design the now-familiar building with the high-peaked red roof. It went up on Kennedy Street, just south of Portage.

This House was a wanderer. It was first moved to River and Osborne, then to Portage and Spence. When the CBC wanted this property, Erwin decided the picturesque building would not stand another move and it was demolished. But it survives as the Salisbury House trademark, featured on their advertising and the distinctive red roof facade on present Salisbury House restaurants.

By 1934 Erwin had four Salisbury Houses in operation, and was planning a fifth. This one, at Osborne and Broadway — where a branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce now stands — was to have inside walls of rubbed aluminum. But the builders were held up for material and Erwin figured he could not stand a long delay. The paved land and the vacant lot at the rear of the building gave him an idea. He had his cooking equipment installed in a temporary kitchen at the completed rear of the building and opened Winnipeg's first drive-in restaurant, serving snacks through the back door to patrons seated in their cars.

The idea caught on almost too well. Police eventually complained that he was causing traffic congestion at a busy intersection. But by that time the front of the restaurant was completed and could be opened for

he didn't have time to write, or was doing so poorly he didn't want to," his wife recalls. "Finally Mother said, 'I think Ralph needs you', so I headed for Winnipeg."

She found her husband in business on Fort Street between Portage and Graham. He was living in a one-room apartment and had his invoices and receipts stacked on the floor against the wall. Helen immediately took over as bookkeeper.

The cafe was a tiny one, 20 feet long and 11 feet wide, able to accommodate only about ten customers at a time. Patrons sat on low benches instead of stools. The slogan, "Dine for a Dime" was prominently displayed in the window, and there were only two items on the menu — Nips and coffee.

It was a hand to mouth operation — a far cry from today when there are executives in charge of each division of the prospering firm.

Erwin paid cash for everything. The landlord, who lived upstairs where he could keep an eye on things, insisted on being paid his rent every day. It was two dollars and ten cents.

But the business prospered. Erwin turned his flair for showmanship to good account. The customers liked the way he prepared the food right in front of them; so they could see how it was handled. They liked the scrupulous cleanliness. Besides, dining for a dime at Salisbury House was

fun. Erwin was a friendly sort and it was pleasant to eat in his cafe. Customers were fascinated by the new Silex coffee makers and loved to watch the water climb into the upper container as though by magic, then return as coffee.

In his cafe, Erwin couldn't have been more obliging. One day an early customer asked for bacon and eggs. "Sorry," Erwin told him. "I haven't any bacon and I haven't any eggs. I serve only Nips and coffee"

"Will you cook me bacon and eggs if I get them for you?" asked the customer.

"Sure thing," said Erwin.

So the customer went to a grocery store across the street, bought three slices of bacon and two eggs, and Erwin cooked them.

Another time a customer wanted a pork chop instead of a Nip. "Just a minute, if you give me the money I'll slip into Dent's next door and buy a pork chop," said Erwin. And he did.

It's still standard procedure in the Houses to be serving breakfast to one group and dinner to another at the same time. Different people on different schedules are attracted to this specialty. Some of their best customers are the night shift workers like policemen, firemen, taxi and truck drivers.

Restaurant lore says that night workers are good eaters and Salisbury House feels that they are also

business. The drive-in was discontinued. Today, the Erwins generally stay out of the drive-in business, realizing that Winnipeg already has an over-abundance of such eating places.

Another innovation came when a branch was opened in 1937 in the then new bus depot on Graham Avenue. This one was hot take-away lunches for bus travellers. Today, take-out business adds up to a substantial part of the firm's income.

Catering is another service, but the Erwins consider it a minor part of their business.

In the early days, Salisbury House used many promotional gimmicks. One was Kiddies' Day — the children had a Nip or a hot dog and a drink for a nickel, then a bonus of a free movie and balloons. During the Second World War, there were Rag Days for the Patriotic Salvage Corps. The youngsters received a Nip and a drink, plus a free movie, for a bundle of rags. This program had to be dropped because it was just too successful. "The kids mobbed us; they nearly pushed out the walls, and we had to give it up," Erwin says.

Today teenagers make up at least thirty percent of Salisbury trade. "We can't survive without them," Erwin's son, Stewart, asserts. "Basically they are good customers, although sometimes a few will spoil it for the majority. The teens today have the money — and the appetites."

Stewart Erwin says that it's a little ironic how children are encouraged to become restaurant patrons but when they reach adolescence some restaurant managers tend to say: "go away for a few years and come back when you're grown up and have a family."



Salisbury on the water. The luxury yacht "Grace Anne" offered superb meals on its Adventures Unlimited cruises in the Lake of the Woods, but it was ahead of its time and was sold after three seasons.

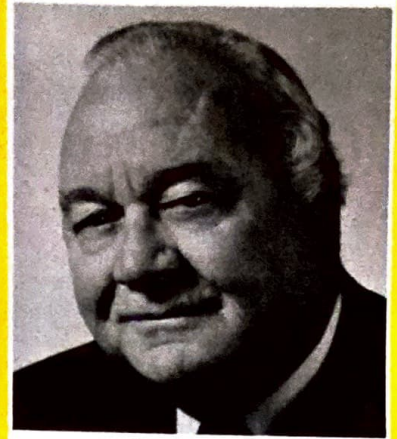
"This just isn't fair," Stewart says. But Salisbury House has the same problems as other establishments. Some adults somehow don't think teens should be served and some teens feel that adults shouldn't be part of the scene in their "spot".

The secret of the Salisbury House success has been Erwin's insistence from the start on uniform high quality, absolute cleanliness and prompt service at all his branches. Wherever one stepped into a Salisbury House he could be sure of the same good food and the same good coffee, served to him without an annoying wait. This, plus a limited menu which kept down costs, has made Salisbury Houses famous in Winnipeg.

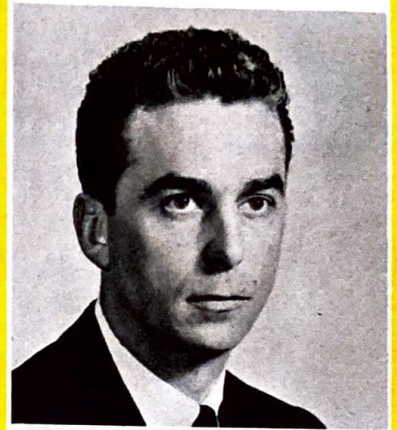
Salisbury House trains all its staff to Salisbury House standards, employing a full-time instructor who gives a three-day intensive course in a classroom at Main Street and Matheson Avenue. Further training is done on the job, and may take as long as six months — for a short-order cook, for example. Periodically, the firm holds a seminar for restaurant managers, male and female, with a Department of Education instructor in charge.

Recently, they acquired video tape equipment used to teach employees the techniques of griddle food preparation. This assures that students in Calgary will produce the same Nip as Winnipeg cooks. More than half the employees at each store must be trained on the griddle, including the working manager and shift supervisor.

Erwin is proud that many of his former employees are doing well in their own businesses after Salisbury House training. "We have contributed to good restaurant management all over Western Canada," he says.



Ralph Erwin



Stewart Erwin

Four years ago the firm built a huge commissary at Bannister Avenue and Rosser Road, St. James, complete with refrigerated and unrefrigerated storage rooms, large baking ovens, and other equipment, plus a central buying office. Here, under the watchful eyes of Alf Eide, Production Manager, something like 70,000 pounds of meat, 120,000 donuts, and 4,000 pounds of bacon — to say nothing of huge quantities of pies, soups, bread, buns, chili sauces and other foodstuffs — are prepared and sent to Salisbury Houses each 28-day period. Deliveries are made daily by Salisbury's fleet of six trucks. The firm also has its own maintenance and security staff.

With more than 700 employees — 60 per cent of them part-time — personnel is one of the most important departments in the organization. As John Frisken, Personnel Manager, puts it: "We are open 24 hours a day, so we have to provide three shifts a day for each House. More than that, each restaurant must have a balanced staff: a short order cook, and fully-trained staff to work with the less experienced employees. There is a natural turnover in part-time employees, so we are

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resident states. "Usually there are eight to ten in a group in the late night hours. But you can't point a finger at any one type of person. We have as much trouble from a 40-year-old drunk as from a so-called hippie. Groups have more power and more strength — and they know it. They cause the fights, the throwing of things, the general rowdiness."

Stewart says that in rare cases where there has been a real disruption of business, the person responsible is banned from all the stores. "We put up with a lot at night. The girls behind the counter sometimes have an especially hard time," he says. A short time ago, the Pembina and Stafford outlet had problems with gangs of people obstructing the operation. That situation, Stewart says, was of the management's own making. "We had a 90-seat dining room open all night with a big parking lot. There would be a buildup of between 100 and 150 customers waiting for service. This large group — without proper control — often threw business into an uproar."

The store has been considerably reduced in size now with the big kitchens and part of the dining area being converted into a rather cramped main office quarters. Even Stewart has only a tastefully decorated cubicle — about nine feet by ten feet.

At the odd spot, the Erwins will hire commissionaires. Their job is primarily traffic control, not people control.

There has been definitely more crime and vandalism in the stores in the last two or three years than in the earlier days. Most of it is just petty theft, but has required the Erwins to put safes in every store and to order a minimum of change to be kept in registers at night.

"Insurance companies will go along only so far in restoring our losses," Stewart says. "There is no trouble where theft can be proven, but companies balk at the "mysterious disappearance of monies."

These are the inside jobs, money taken from the till. "We have to absorb these losses and don't really have any more trouble than the average businessman."

Employees are hired on the assumption that they are honest. With such a large proportion of part-time employees, many of whom have no previous work experience, the personnel officials have to do an extra bit of screening. All Salisbury House employees are cashiers, Stewart points out, and if they prove untrustworthy, they must be dismissed.

Says his father: "Stewart's responsibilities are greater than mine ever were. If he makes a mistake it's likely to be very costly. I had nothing to lose."

What was the secret of Ralph Erwin's success, after such a humble beginning?

Says Stewart: "He understands people. Everybody likes him. He motivates individuals; he is marvellous at human relations."

Not all of Erwin's ventures were successful. He once bought a \$150,000 yacht — the Grace Anne — for \$25,000 and operated it as a cruise ship on Lake of the Woods. Erwin hired the best chef he could find, rounded up some fishing boats and guides, and tried to interest American tourists in a luxury holiday afloat which he called Adventures Unlimited. Once a week the Grace Anne pulled away from Kenora, towing a small fleet of fishing boats behind her. The meals served

always looking for good staff. We assist university students with bonuses".

In the summer all regular full-time personnel on vacations are replaced by high school and University student staffers.

The situation with part-time help has improved in the last couple of years with more married women seriously interested in supplementing their husbands' salaries. Because many women can work only at night, the firm feels it is serving the community by providing this extra-income opportunity.

Alf Wuerch, the Operations Manager, is himself a product of Salisbury House training. He started 23 years ago as a dish-washer, eventually became a store manager before moving up to take charge of all Salisbury House operations.

Stewart Erwin, now Vice-President, also did his turn of dish-washing. A graduate in Agriculture from the University of Manitoba, he operated a cattle ranch near Teulon for several years, but the restaurant business was in his blood, and he re-joined the firm to work his way up to the top spot.

"Our biggest single problem is people in groups," the young Vice-



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