

## The Parkette at the Beginning

Welcome to the Parkette. We'd like to thank you for coming in to visit us today. And, we'd like to Welcome You Back to the Good Times.

The Parkette is part of Lexington history and we are very proud to be a part of it. The Parkette is known all over the country and we are very excited to be able to bring it back to its' glory days.

When Joe Smiley opened the Parkette on November 11, 1951, he had a dream. He was a pioneer and visionary in the restaurant industry. Joe created his own version of the Double-Decker hamburger called the '**Poor Boy**'. Joe



brought this burger idea with him from West Virginia. He named it after the life that he saw there. Joe said, "When the coal strikes were on, everybody was starving."



When Joe came to Lexington,, he said, "Lord God, this town's wide open for a Drive- In." Even though there was nothing but dirt roads and open spaces, around the restaurant, Joe would not be denied and the Parkette was

born. His first night open, there was a rain storm and Joe was afraid the customers would get stuck in the mud, so he hired a few tow truck drivers to help folks out.

Joe believed that good food at a good price would bring folks in. He was right. We feel the same way. We still use only fresh ground beef and fresh chicken (and we're still using Joe's original *Famous Fried Chicken recipe*).



The famous Parkette sign was built in 1957 and is a symbol of Lexington and stands as a monument overlooking New Circle Road., ready to serve all that pass by. The sign itself is a landmark and a point of reference for this section of the city.

Here are some surprising facts that folks may not know about the Parkette.

- At one time, Parkette's Famous Fried Chicken was called "Kentucky Fried Chicken".
- At one time, there were two Parkette's in Lexington. The original, right here on New Circle Road (back then called the Belt Line) and one on Georgetown Road. The Georgetown Road location opened in 1957, but sold in 1966.
- When the Parkette first opened, a giant billboard in the back listed the Menu items. The Car Hops would sit on bleachers outside of the restaurant and come up to your car to take your orders.
- In its first 40 years (1951-1991), the Parkette had sold an estimated 19.2 million "Poor Boys".

- When the Parkette first opened in 1952, New Circle Road was a dirt/gravel road from Broadway to Liberty Road.



The Parkette Drive-In opened in 1951. The sign, created in 1953 or 1954, was \$10,000 but would cost close to \$100,000 today. It is about 30 or 40' tall. The Drive-In spends about \$1,000 a year replacing transformers and lights to maintain the sign.

### Renovation recapturing nostalgia

Extreme makeover is pushing Parkette back into the 1950s

By Andy Mead [amead@herald-leader.com](mailto:amead@herald-leader.com)

**Brothers Randy Kaplan, left, and Jeff Kaplan plan to restore Parkette Drive-In . It might reopen for business in December.**

§ [Kentucky News Review](#)

The venerable Parkette Drive-In is undergoing an extensive renovation, and the new owners are uncovering some unusual artifacts.

As they took walls down to the studs, out came a 3-cent stamp; empty Pall Mall, Winston and Philip Morris cigarette packs; and Falls City and Wiedemann beer cans from the pre-pull-tab era.



"We figure if the guy was 21 when he drank this, he now is 77," said co-owner Randy Kaplan.

Yes, the Parkette has been around a long time.



A permit was issued to founder Joe Smiley in June 1952 to build the restaurant on what was then called the Belt Line Highway (now New Circle Road) near Liberty Road.

There also was a second Parkette for a time, on Georgetown Road.

Belt Line Highway was a dirt road when the first Parkette opened, and the restaurant was out in the country.

Joe Isaac, who opened Burger Shakes a ways down the road a few years later, said Smiley once told him he could tell a customer was coming by the cloud of dust from the road.

Smiley also said that city officials claimed they had issued the building permit by mistake, and tried to close the place down.

But by then, the Parkette was the place to be — police had to be called to unsnarl traffic on Saturday nights.

Randy Kaplan and his brother Jeff would be happy to see a return to those times when the restaurant reopens, possibly by the end of the year. The Kaplans were born in Philadelphia and grew up in Miami before finding their way to Lexington.

Jeff, 49, owns half a dozen Subway franchises. Randy, 46, is a former Lexington police officer.

After months of negotiations, they purchased the business in July from a group of well-known investors that included Alan Stein, the president and chief executive officer of the Lexington Legends.



The partners bought the restaurant in 2003 after it abruptly closed. They said at the time that they were motivated by the desire to keep a landmark alive. But they closed it again late last year for renovations that never took place. The Kaplans now are in the midst of an extreme makeover that they say will make the old restaurant a showplace of 1950s style.

"We are trying to preserve a part of Lexington history," Jeff Kaplan said. They are acting as their own general contractors, and they are doing a lot of the hot, heavy work themselves.

There will be new walls, new floors, new roof, new wiring and plumbing, new air conditioning. For a while, the sign said the restaurant would reopen in the spring. Now it says fall. This week, the brothers said December is a good bet.

Jeff Kaplan said it will be worth waiting for, and he talked excitedly about "the beauty of what we're trying to accomplish."

The exterior of the building will be wrapped in quilted stainless steel of the type found on diners of the era.

The interior will be have vinyl-covered booths next to wall-size period photographs. There will be a jukebox, video games, pinball machines, and Parkette souvenirs.





A covered deck and patio will be added to the back of the building. The idea is for people to be able to sit there and see the many antique and hobby cars and motorcycles that have frequented the restaurant, Jeff Kaplan said.

The sign with the stylized carhop will get new lights and neon. The drive-in area also is being refurbished, and there will be a high-tech twist: When a carhop brings the food to your car and you pay with a credit card, it can just be swiped on a hand-held device that communicates with the cash register.

The menu will be much the same, including the Poor Boy double-decker hamburgers and hand-dipped and hand-breaded fried chicken.

But there will be an important difference, Jeff Kaplan said: The food will be of a higher quality than what has been served in recent years.

"It's going to taste like it did when Joe Smiley opened this place," he said.

And the brothers will add a menu item: Chicago-style hot dog made of Vienna beef.

They had been thinking of opening a hot dog place when Jeff drove by the Parkette and noticed it was closed.

"We thought this was meant to be," Randy Kaplan said. "We can save some history. It's been in town 56 years, and we didn't want to see it go away."