



MUGSY'S GRUBHOUSE: HOME OF THE "WOO HOO!"

BY J. D. MEISNER

Auctioneer, oilman, catfish farmer, beef cattle raiser, entrepreneur and Yale native, Darrell Mueggenborg and his wife Jennifer opened Mugsy's Grubhouse in July of 2017. Their reputation for offering tender steaks, amazing comfort food and a hometown-friendly atmosphere spread like an Oklahoma grassfire.

This isn't only one of the finest steakhouses in central Oklahoma, it's a showpiece, a jewel in the little city of Yale, home to about 1,200 people.

Sitting on State Highway 51, between Tulsa and Stillwater, Mugsy's is a restaurant that would undoubtedly hold it's own in any big city, but this Grubhouse belongs to Yale.

Darrell is present pretty much every day, greeting guests at their tables with a hearty "Woo Hoo!" Show the slightest interest in any of the decor and you're destined for a fast-paced, all-access tour of the Grubhouse, where fragments of Yale's history and Mueggenborg history intertwine.

Sepia-toned photographs recall Yale's economic boom and bust of the late 1800s when oil derricks clawed at the horizon and rail cars loaded with Oklahoma sweet crude made the circuit from Yale to the refinery in Cushing.

"Look here," said Darrell, pointing at a photo hanging in his back hallway. "Rail cars — tankers from the Southern Oil Corporation — tracks six wide. Right here in Yale. Unbelievable."

Darrell explained that these photos in the back came from a man they used to call Mr. Yale, Carl W. Hensley.

"He loved Yale, and had all these pictures and told me they needed to be hanging at the restaurant," he said.

Darrell said Hensley used to sit at Mugsy's and show his photos like he was curator at a museum.

"He was so proud of these pictures. He even got tips for giving tours, Woo Hoo!" said Darrell.

Everything in the Grubhouse is a piece of Darrell and his family's past. Even the lumber on the walls has special meaning. In the main dining room, the waitress station is roofed with the tin from the old milk barn and you can still see the red paint on the recycled wood that serves as the wall covering.

"That wood came from the milk barn too," Darrell said. "We tried to create an 1890s to 1920s theme."

They succeeded.

"I'm not a decorator. Jennifer is my designer/decorator," said Darrell. "She is in charge of all the decor in Mugsy's Grubhouse."

In the corner of the front room stands a 80-year-old cream separator as clean as the day it was new. It came from the Mueggenborg farm west of town.

"I cranked that rascal when I was six years old," said Darrell. "This is the Cadillac of separators. We poured that cream over the blackberry cobbler Mom used to make. I think it was so good because we picked them blackberries ourselves, you know. Woo Hoo!"

Mugsy's blackberry fried pies are on the menu at the restaurant, and are the most popular dessert order.

Just who is Darrell Mueggenborg?

Darrell's granddad, Henry Mueggenborg, arrived on a boat from Germany in the 1890's. He married Dora in 1898 and they started their lives together in Okarche, Oklahoma. Photos of that family are on display in the main dining room.

"There's dad," said Darrell, pointing at the smallest child in a sepia-stained photo chock full of young Mueggenborgs.

Darrell's dad, Tony, was born in 1921, the youngest of nine siblings.

"They were wheat farmers, cattle farmers and pig farmers," said Darrell.

In 1943, Tony Mueggenborg married Ruth Laughlin in Oklahoma City, and eventually they bought 80 acres of land along Old Highway 51, seven miles west of Yale.

Tony and Ruth had five children: John, Lewis, Mildred, Virginia and finally Darrell.

Darrell grew up a farm kid — helping his dad on the farm. Dad was a wheat, cotton and peanut farmer and raised cattle. He also grew alfalfa and prairie hay along with the milk cows.

He went fishing when he had free time, but as he grew older, that time went to activities like the Future Farmers of America.

Darrell is a strong supporter of this organization that influences young people and prepares them for the practicalities of living in rural Oklahoma.

In high school, Darrell served as Yale's FFA Chapter President for two years and he took his show steers to show at the Payne County fair every year.

Hanging in chronological order in the hallway that runs down the center of Mugsy's Grubhouse are dozens and dozens of photos of 4H and FFA kids with their prize-winning pigs, steers, goats and dairy heifers — most accompanied by their premium buyers.

Darrell is pictured in the earliest photo with a show steer, taken during the Payne County premium sale in the late 1970s.

He appears in most of the photos on that wall — some as a teenager with a prize-winning show animal, then transitioning to being the man standing with the kids as a premium buyer.

"We kept all these pictures in a box for a long time," said Darrell. "We had no idea they would have such an important impact at the Grubhouse."

"FFA taught me public speaking. FFA taught me to shake hands. Everybody who was in FFA knows how to shake hands," said Darrell. "That's the stuff it did — forced the shy right out of me. I'm a product of FFA, that's the bottom line."

It was FFA influence that sent Darrell down a path that would define his life for the next 35 years.

"Ferlan K. Dean was my FFA instructor in high school," said Darrell. "He's still here — lives right down the road. Ferlan K. Dean told me that I talked fast, so I needed to be an auctioneer."

That got Darrell's wheels turning.

An entrepreneur from an early age, Darrell was selling fireworks from a stand at the edge of Yale. Young Jennifer Brown was in town visiting her grandmother, Treva Courtney, the Yale Postmaster.

"In July of 1980 Jennifer came up to my firecracker stand," said Darrell.

In April of 1981, Jennifer and Darrell got married. In 1982, Dustin was born. Derrick came in 1985.

Jennifer's grandmother was the only postmaster Yale had from 1953 to 1979. There's a photo of Treva in Mugsy's main dining room and as chance would have it, Treva's husband, Glen, was an auctioneer, too.

A year later, Darrell packed off to Kansas City to attend Missouri Auctioneer School.

When he finished in Missouri, he went to work for Tom Berry and Gene Boyce Auctions in Stillwater.



For the next decade, fast talking-Darrell sold items at auction for Tom and Gene.

In 1997, Gene had a heart attack.

"He told me, 'Darrell, you've got to keep this thing going,'" said Darrell.

Mueggenborg Auctions was born.

"We did 25 years of public auctions, specializing in selling real and personal property at public auction," said Darrell. "We run an 80-mile radius around Payne County."

Darrell and Jennifer bought a large building on Yale's west end — the former home of OTASCO, Oklahoma Tire and Supply Company, owned by Jim and Sue Rhoades.

According to Darrell, Sue sold everything from appliances to tires up front and Jim worked in the back in the mechanic shop.

"See that dark stain on the floor?" Darrell asked, pointing at a dark portion of the concrete in the restaurant's banquet hall. "That's a 35-year-old oil stain. We scraped on that for days getting off the crusted up oil. It's clean. Its just stained."



The back room at Mugsy's no longer has the garage doors from its OTASCO days, but you can see their outline in the windows. The former mechanic shop is now used as seating overflow on busy nights, and can be reserved for parties and large gatherings.

"We had the Oklahoma Boer Goat Association meeting here just last week," said Darrell. "It was their state meeting. We set them up a real nice buffet."

An aroma of wood smoke and slow-cooking meat permeates the Grubhouse, sneaking in from the Smoke Shack, where the framework of Mugsy's incredible menu is forged. Pitmaster Josh Endicott is here keeping a careful eye on time and temperature.

Darrell and select members of his culinary team went to Unadilla, Georgia, to learn how to cook meat from Myron Mixon, one of the country's most decorated and respected pitmasters.

"He's a four-time world champion smoker," said Darrell. "He wears the rings. We watched his shows on TV. We went to his school in March of 2017, five months before we opened the restaurant. We wanted to do it right. We ate real good for three days. He sent us home with all his secrets and recipes."

Yes, there is a photo, autographed by Myron with the blessing, "Keep on smokin'."

On the east side of the restaurant is an overflow dining area that Darrell calls the loafing shed.

"You know, that roof you stick off the side of the barn that makes the shade where the cows loaf? That's the loafing shed," Darrell said.

The walls of the shed are made from the horse stalls that came from the Oklahoma State Fair horse barn Darrell bought at their surplus sale. Inside the loafing shed, the tables and chairs are uniquely Mugsy's.

"Out here, we've got our Jack Daniels kegs for tables," said Darrell. "I had a vision. I needed wagon wheels. So I bought an old wagon that had four wheels and I put holes in the tops of the barrels and put those wheels on them and covered them with glass and now I've got tables. I knew exactly what I was going to do."

It seems like Darrell has always known exactly what he was going to do, even if he wasn't quite aware of what that might be.

Today, he wants to see Mugsy's Grubhouse expand to other cities.

Darrell's energy and spark permeate the atmosphere at the Grubhouse. Returning customers wait in anticipation of his expected, "Woo Hoo!"

It's his trademark — literally.

He said when the restaurant had first opened, he was asking people where they were from and said, "Woo Hoo!" after they answered.

"North Carolina... Woo Hoo! Kansas... Woo Hoo!"

Jennifer was listening and she told him this was something he needed

to keep doing — that it was part of Mugsy's charm.

Darrell has printed license plates that read "Woo Hoo!" and "Got Grub?"

Darrell is a marketing juggernaut. He gives these plates away by the hundreds and they are seen on the fronts of pickups and cars everywhere in the Cimarron Valley.

He prints his slogans on t-shirts and hoodies and sells them at the Grubhouse.

Darrell recently trademarked these phrases in anticipation of his plans to offer Mugsy's Grubhouse franchises.

He knows that good food is important, but it's not nearly as important as the people who come through his doors every day.

"When I was an auctioneer, I was a people person — 35 years in the business. It wasn't an auction business, it was a people business," he said. "Now I own a restaurant but I'm not in the food business, I'm in the people business."

"I'd put my servers and my steaks up against any restaurant in Tulsa or Oklahoma City," he said. "I ask people everyday, 'What brought you to Yale, Oklahoma?' and they say, 'Mugsy's good food and atmosphere.'"

If you're lucky enough to get the tour of Mugsy's Grubhouse, you'll realize this place is not about Darrell Mueggenborg. It's about the people who touched his life and made him the man he is today — a people person who's in the people business."