

50
GOLDEN
YEARS 

with
Herman
Weber






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by
Joseph Frederic Clayton





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What do you think Herman Weber, founder and chairman of Weber's Inn, is doing right now? Unless it's the middle of the night, and often even then, he may be found walking briskly down the corridors of his sprawling award-winning hotel and restaurant on his way to the housekeeping department, having just come from the kitchen. His next stop may be the loading dock to observe the delivery of fresh vegetables, and then on to one of the eight banquet rooms to supervise the set-up for a convention dinner. Always on the move, Weber is just as likely to be greeting diners "up front" in the main dining room as talking about air conditioning with the maintenance staff.

"The secret of a successful property," explains Weber, "is the ability and willingness of management to keep a firm hand on the total operation, to develop a sixth sense about which parts of the operation may be slipping a bit — which departments may need help or just a little encouragement." He should know. Weber's restaurant has been Ann Arbor's most popular for decades, while Weber's Inn has rated four stars in the



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Mobil Travel Guide for the past 15 consecutive years. The hotel also has received the AAA Four-Diamonds award for as long as the Auto Club has rated travel establishments.

With all his traveling around the property, does Weber spend much time in an office? He doesn't even have an office; he never has needed one in all his years in the restaurant and hotel business. When necessary, he just digs into his jacket pockets, pulling out his own notes and a few communications from the staff, and he never forgets to say a good word to staff whose departments have made a significant contribution to the Weber's tradition of excellence.

Herman Weber turned a youthful-looking 73 in May 1987 and also celebrated 50 consecutive and successful years in business in Ann Arbor. Today, Weber's Inn is one of the very few independent family-owned and family-managed hotel and restaurant properties in the United States. Annual sales



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from the luxury 160-room hotel and restaurant, including its 10 dining and banquet rooms seating 600, consistently rank the establishment high among the 100 top independents in the country.

Fifty years ago, in 1937, Weber's business consisted of a single room that seated 40 (if everyone squeezed together a little bit), and there were two "Hi-Speed" gas pumps outside the front door. In fact, the business was called the Hi-Speed Inn, and Herman Weber was its first cook, busboy, and occasional pumper of gas, with his white apron flapping in the breeze. This "hands-on" tradition is still very much alive and well at the modern Weber's Inn.

"Attention to detail and a feel for the living pulse of the enterprise are only partly responsible for our success," explains Weber. "I also believe strongly that the property must be continually improved and upgraded long before anyone outside our organization perceives a need for it."

It's no surprise, then, that Weber's is periodically renovated. In 1984, all 125 existing rooms were completely redecorated, the Atrium Ballroom was added,

1987

and a 700-square-foot outside deck was constructed to provide new service and entertainment space overlooking Ann Arbor's Dolph Park. In 1986, a \$2.3 million expansion was completed to add 35 more rooms including luxury poolside suites. So far in 1987, diners in the main dining room have commented favorably on the new banquettes, carpets, and tasteful redecorating that maintains the comfortable ambience that has become so familiar to three generations of restaurant patrons.

Weber's wife and business partner, Sonja, has more than matched her husband's dedication to long hours and hard work. Sonja has shared in all managerial decisions. She has been especially responsible for the elegance of the interior decorations in both the restaurant and hotel. Their children, Kenneth Weber and Linda Weber Fox, are also part of the management team. Ken serves as president while Linda is treasurer and also handles marketing and special projects. Both Ken and Linda are graduates of Michigan State University, Ken in hotel and restaurant management and Linda in advertising and marketing.

Herman Weber has lived his entire life in the Ann Arbor area. He was born

1937

and raised on a farm near Chelsea, Michigan, only a few miles west of Ann Arbor. As a very young man, he worked for Bill Metzger, the founder of Metzger's Restaurant, then located at the corner of Ashley and Washington in Ann Arbor. "It was during that period," Herman recalls, "in the early 1930's, that I decided I wanted a business of my own — a restaurant no less — even though times were difficult in those Depression years. Those of us that were working often were earning only 25 cents an hour."

In the fall of 1936 Weber's "moment of truth" arrived. He had to decide if he should continue to work for others and buy a much-needed new car, or use his hard-earned savings to gamble on a business venture. At the time, Weber had an old 1930 Ford Roadster and had saved nearly \$800, which was more than enough to buy a very handsome new 1937 model car. By then he had left Metzger's and was working at the Michigan League. After much consideration, Weber sold his old roadster, but didn't purchase a new car. Instead, he started reading the papers, watching the billboards, and walking the streets of Ann Arbor, looking for a business to buy or start that would only require an \$800 or \$900 investment.

In 1936 Ann Arbor was a small, quiet, moderately prosperous town that de-



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ended pretty much on the University of Michigan for its economic well-being. Matters of intense local interest included Mickey Cochrane and his World Champion Detroit Tigers, emergence of the United Auto Workers' union at the nearby Ford and GM plants, and indignation at the German Chancellor's recent insulting behavior toward an Olympic gold medalist, U.S. sprinter Jesse Owens.

Weber had just turned 22. His older brother, Rheinhold, was 25 and was working at the American Radiator plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan. "I was an automobile radiator tester," Rheinie recalls. "I was always covered with water — getting one cold after another. When Herm invited me to join him in business, I didn't even ask what he was going to make or sell. I just accepted his offer and even threw in a couple hundred dollars of my own."

Herman Weber had set his sights on an Abbott Gasoline Company station,

1938

which was located on Washtenaw Avenue at Platt Road. The Abbott Company has agreed to lease the station to the Webers for \$40 a month, as long as the Weber's agreed to keep pumping Abbott's Hi-Speed gasoline. Weber turned 23 in May 1937, and celebrated by erecting a sign over the station announcing the "Hi-Speed Inn." The Inn consisted of a grill, a few tables and chairs, and a juke box to help pay the rent. The first Weber menu was hand-lettered and read "Hamburgers — 15¢; 12 oz. of Fresh Beer — 10¢." Breakfast offerings were soon added.

"We opened for breakfast at 7 a.m.," Weber remembers, "and closed at 2 a.m. the next morning. We called that 19-hour period the 'long shift.' We also had what we called the 'short shift' — from noon to closing, only 14 hours. Rheinie and I alternated these shifts every other day. Soon we had enough business to hire Ted, our first employee. He only worked a six-day short shift, but was very happy to have that 'part-time' job. The three of us did everything that needed to be done — cooking, serving, cleaning, pumping gas, keeping the cash book, and sweeping the floor at closing time."

The quality of the food and the attentiveness of the service at the Hi-Speed Inn, soon attracted patrons who would drop in regularly and socialize



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over a beer. Stroh's beer was a popular brew at that time as was beer from the last of Ann Arbor's local breweries. Weber introduced imported Lowenbrau in 1938 and found he could sell it at a veritable king's ransom of 40 cents a bottle. The Hi-Speed Inn soon became the major dispenser of Lowenbrau in southeast Michigan. In fact, the beer's principal importer came down from New York once to see for himself the "gas station that sells more Lowenbrau than is sold in Detroit's restaurants!"

"The station's — excuse me — the Inn's parking lot wasn't paved, and the rest rooms were out back, but we started the first upgrading of our property as soon as we could," Weber recalls. "We planted a few trees, put up an awning over the big front window, and then installed our first 'air conditioning'. A man from Ann Arbor's Fischer's Hardware came down, cut a vent in the wall, and installed a fan in front of it. When the place got too smoky and warm, one of us

would plug in the fan and, presto, automatic air conditioning, circa 50 years ago!"

Rheinie fondly remembers the owners of the house next door to the Inn, which still stands behind Barrett's Furniture at Washtenaw and Platt. "The family that lived there made room for our man Ted. Then they let Herm and I tear out a wall or two so that we could live there as well. With the hours we kept at the Hi-Speed Inn, there wasn't too much time left over for commuting."

Early on, Weber learned a valuable lesson in restaurant management: "We had two classes of customers after a while. The 'good trade' were serious people who worked at the University. Then there were the 'roughnecks' who came in and drank a lot of beer. Some of these 'roughnecks' we simply had to ask to leave, but we were worried that the others would drive away our good trade. Then I had an idea. We put white tablecloths on the tables. The roughnecks stopped coming."

But another problem couldn't be handled quite so easily. Washtenaw Avenue from Platt Road east to Hogback Road was a residential street in the 1930's. The Hi-Speed Inn and the Superior Dairy down the hill were the only commercial establishments in this Pittsfield township area located just outside the Ann Arbor city limits. The Inn's popularity became a problem for the neighbors who didn't appreciate the cars and



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people coming and going at all hours of the day and night. The Weber boys were too busy and too young to recognize the value of lobbying and politicking for their business. Consequently, when their beer license came up for renewal in 1938, the Township officials turned it down, and the Webers were forced to close.

Undaunted, the Webers soon discovered an old turn-of-the-century tavern, available for rent, outside the city's western boundary. The Oak Grove Tavern had been closed for a long time, but it was in an excellent location, on US-12, the main road from Detroit to Chicago, which in those days ran through Ann Arbor. There were a couple of gas pumps in front and a few cabins to rent in the back that needed work, but the Webers' first concern was to renovate the restaurant. New kitchen equipment had to be purchased and the inside of the building needed considerable remodeling to meet Herman Weber's exacting standards.

Just as the Oak Grove business was beginning to boom (in the last half of the

Webers' first year there), the owner sold the property. The new owner did not want to extend the Webers' lease because he wanted to get into the restaurant business himself. Rheinie still bristles when he thinks of this time: "He had the nerve to ask us to give him our beer license and all of our equipment. 'Just throw it in,' he said. I told him we could sell it to him for what we paid for it, but why should we give it up? Instead, we packed up and left, taking our new kitchen equipment with us!"

Without the Webers' beer license, the prospective Oak Grove restaurateur could not stay in business. He was able to make only one payment to the original owner, who thereupon took the property back, remodeled it into a residence, and moved in himself. The old tavern-turned-residence still stands, perhaps dreaming, it buildings do, of what could have been.

That setback occurred in 1939. Herman Weber recalls that the economy of the area was picking up at that time, and more and more cars were appearing on the highways. "We considered ours to be a highway business. We felt that travelers along US-12 would prefer to stop on the edge of town rather than go all the way in to a restaurant." Based on this remarkably accurate forecast, the Webers stored their equipment in a local barn and went to their bank to borrow enough money to buy land and build their own restaurant on US-12.



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The Webers wanted to purchase a vacant three-acre site on the US-12 highway just west of the Wagner Road intersection. The price of the three acres was a hefty \$1800, however, and the estimate on construction and outfitting of a minimally sized building was \$3200. Messrs. Gross and Staebler of Ann Arbor's State Savings Bank were impressed with their young clients' success at the Hi-Speed Inn and were inclined to loan them the money to start a new restaurant. But the bankers felt \$1800 was too much to spend on land since they wanted to limit the Webers' loan to \$4000. Also, the bankers insisted that the land on which the building was to be erected must be owned by the Webers. The Webers considered purchasing a less expensive lot away from the highway but they decided such a location would not be a wise investment. What a predicament! The dilemma was resolved when the owner of the land agreed to sell

1939



The first building to carry the name "Weber's" was 32 feet wide, 40 feet long, and built of cinderblocks.

the Webers one of the three acres outright for \$600 and to give them an option to buy the other two acres for \$1200. The bankers were not overjoyed at only having one acre of farmland as hard collateral for a major loan, but the energy, enthusiasm, and track record of the Weber brothers carried the day.

The first building to carry the name "Weber's" was 32 feet wide, 40 feet long, and built of cinderblocks. "Herm and I dug the footings, and I mixed the mortar myself," recalls Rheinie. "We saved a little time and money by doing this, and we also kept the contractor's people moving." One of those was stonemason Albert Storer, who happened to be Sonja's great-uncle. It was Mr. Storer who eventually introduced Sonja to Herman Weber, the young entrepreneur whom he had come to admire and respect.

The new Weber's restaurant opened in the winter of 1939-40. However, storm clouds were on the horizon. War had broken out in Europe in September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. A draft law was passed in the United States, and both Herman and Rheinhold had to register. Each month, draft numbers of young American men were placed in a big fishbowl in Washington, D.C., and drawn out in a public ceremony. In March 1940, Rheinie's number

was drawn and he entered the Army for what was supposed to be one year's service. Herman was deferred from the draft because he had the sole responsibility for the new business and for the support of his mother. (Mrs. Weber's first husband, Jacob Frederick Weber, the father of the boys, had passed away in 1921. Her second husband, Ernest Meyer, had died in 1939. Mrs. Weber lived for many years in a little apartment that Herman Weber built for her behind the restaurant. She lived to be 90.)

Rheinie came home after his enlistment was up in the spring of 1941, but after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December he was called back "for the duration." While in the service, Rheinie married a West Coast girl. The couple returned to Ann Arbor briefly after the war, but then decided to live permanently in the West. Rheinie sold his half interest in Weber's to Herman Weber, who has been the sole owner of the business since 1947.

The restaurant was originally called Weber's, then Weber's Supper Club. "We were successful under both names," said Herman Weber, "but after we had erected many road signs advertising the restaurant, we felt that 'Supper Club' might not be the most appealing name for people traveling on the highway." By the mid-1950's the restaurant was known simply as Weber's.



"We hung in there during those W.W. II days. We stayed open only five nights a week because that's how long the food and help would last."

Weber is characteristically modest about the immediate success and popularity of his restaurant on Jackson Road. "It's true we were the only restaurant outside of town, but there weren't very many in town then either—the Old German, Metzger's, the Allene Hotel, a typical old Greek 'sweet shop' called Preketes' Sugar Bowl, Manikas' on Main Street, and the Pretzel Bell. Let's not forget Starbucks on Main Street where Wilkinson Luggage is today."

The war years were a mixed blessing for Weber's business. On the one hand, the economy boomed; everyone had a job. On the other hand, restaurant workers were very attracted to the Willow Run Bomber plant in nearby Ypsilanti because it was paying wages that most workers formerly only dreamed about. Herman recalls that when the plant opened, all of his help quit, and he could not hire replacements. "The bomber plant could have paid one quarter of the wages they were offering and gotten all the help they needed," Herman argues. "We hung in there during those days."

1941

1959

We stayed open only five nights a week because that's how long the food and help would last. Some days, our gross receipts were only \$15. After a year or two, however, some of our ladies started to come back. They found out that working in an assembly plant was very difficult for them and that with the tips at Weber's they could earn about the same amount."

Because of the shortages in both food and help during the war years, the restaurant only occupied Herman's time for 40 or 50 hours a week, very much a part-time enterprise for a man of his energy and determination. To keep busy he leased a 130-acre farm that extended east of Wagner Road (where Varsity Ford and the eastbound on-ramp to I-94 now stand), south to Jackson Road, and North to Ann Arbor-Dexter Road. When local people hear this story, they immediately envisage these boundaries in their mind. And they are surprised to realize that some of the land on which the modern Weber's Inn now stands served as a pasture for Weber's cattle in 1945 — long before the advent of I-94, liquor sales by the glass, and "luxury" hotels!

With his older brother, Fritz, Weber also bought an 80-acre farm on Waters Road near Saline Road, which they worked together. "Farming was good business then," Weber relates. "Prices were right, and I put all my profits into upgrading the restaurant."

In the meantime, the restaurant on Jackson Road continued to thrive and grow. Seating doubled in the mid-1950's, and then doubled again as the building was expanded. Eventually, Weber's occupied ten acres of land. Sonja became an important managing partner in the business as well as wife and mother. Mrs. Weber worked "long shifts" in the dining room, guided the menu selections, supervised the staff, and selected the restaurant's furnishings and decor.

In the late 1950's two important events occurred that, in the short run, would have dire consequences for Weber's. First, in Ann Arbor, a 100 percent dry town, selling liquor by the glass was approved for a select number of city license holders. Second, the interstate highway system reached the city, and work was begun to make a section of the Willow Run Expressway part of I-94 and to extend the interstate toward Jackson, Michigan, and eventually, to Chicago. Jackson Road, on which the restaurant was located, was to be completely bypassed by inter-city traffic.

Weber's restaurant was located outside the city limits in Scio Township, a



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basically rural area, and residents saw no immediate reason to join their neighbors in legalizing the sale of liquor by the glass. Herman and Sonja personally went into the rural lanes of the township, knocking on doors and asking residents to sign a petition to put the liquor-by-the-glass option on the next township ballot. The election was held in 1961. The Webers sent a postcard to every township resident, pointing out that Weber's restaurant had served the community for 22 years and already stood to lose 40 percent of its business because of the interstate bypass. They told residents that Weber's could probably survive on Jackson Road within Scio Township if a cocktail license could be



Herman and Sonja decided to build a hotel at their new restaurant site — a hotel that would be significantly different in features and amenities than the chain properties that had begun to spring up around the country.

obtained. They urged a YES vote for the liquor proposition. The township voted NO.

The Weber's had already built their first motel property adjacent to the restaurant — a simple seven-room unit that they called Weber's Holiday House Motel Court. The motel had been recommended by the AAA from its first years. The Webers felt the motel could continue to prosper on Jackson Road but, painful as it was, they made the decision to abandon the restaurant that had been successful for over two decades. They wanted to make a major investment in a new location that would be within the new "wet" city limits and that also would be easily accessible for the highway traveler. Herman and Sonja acquired seven acres at the new Interstate I-94's Exit 172, just inside the city limits, where cattle had grazed 17 years earlier. It was here that they would build their new restaurant.

1969

Weber's restaurant opened in 1963 at the new location. It featured a dining room, the Golden Tree lounge, and, best of all, the familiar faces of long-time Weber's staff, thus maintaining the standards of excellence of the Jackson Road establishment. Just as in the old days, billboards were erected along the highway and travelers on the interstate very quickly found the newly constructed Weber's restaurant.

The little motor court on Jackson Road continued to operate successfully, but the era of interstate travel was at hand. Reliable cars, beautiful roads — America was on wheels. Herman and Sonja decided to build a hotel at their new site — a hotel that would be significantly different in features and amenities than the chain properties that had begun to spring up around the country. Built in 1969, the new Weber's Inn was designed by James Livingston who had so successfully executed the restaurant in 1963. By the early 1960's, all successful motels had swimming pools but the new Weber's Inn went a giant step beyond this. The Webers enclosed their pool within an integrated recreation area that could be reached by private staircases from poolside rooms.

Even 20 years later, the design of Weber's Inn appears to be state-of-the-art in hotel architecture. "Another blessing in disguise," says Herman Weber diffidently. "If we had succeeded in the Scio Township election of 1962, I might have been tempted to expand our hotel



Herman Weber has never stopped upgrading his property or serving his customers in the grand manner that began when he brought the first white tablecloths to the Hi-Speed Inn in 1937!

in a fashion that the chains had adopted — all rooms facing to the outside with a drive around the periphery. But we became convinced that was not the way to do it. Weber's Inn has central hallways. We control our entrances and exits and our guests have the feeling of a superior hotel."

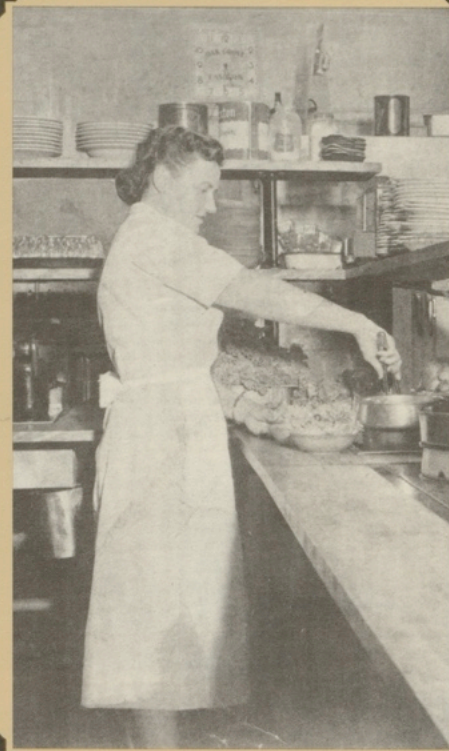
The hotel's South Wing with 35 new rooms and 7 luxury suites, was completed and dedicated in 1986. Each suite has a private poolside balcony with direct access to the expanded pool-recreation area. The South Wing also has jacuzzis in each suite, and luxury accommodations for wheelchair-bound handicapped guests.

Continuing its tradition of recognized excellence in both service and decor, Weber's Inn continues to lead the industry in new features.

It is clear that Herman Weber has never stopped upgrading his property or serving his customers in the grand manner that began when he brought the first white tablecloths to the Hi-Speed Inn in 1937!

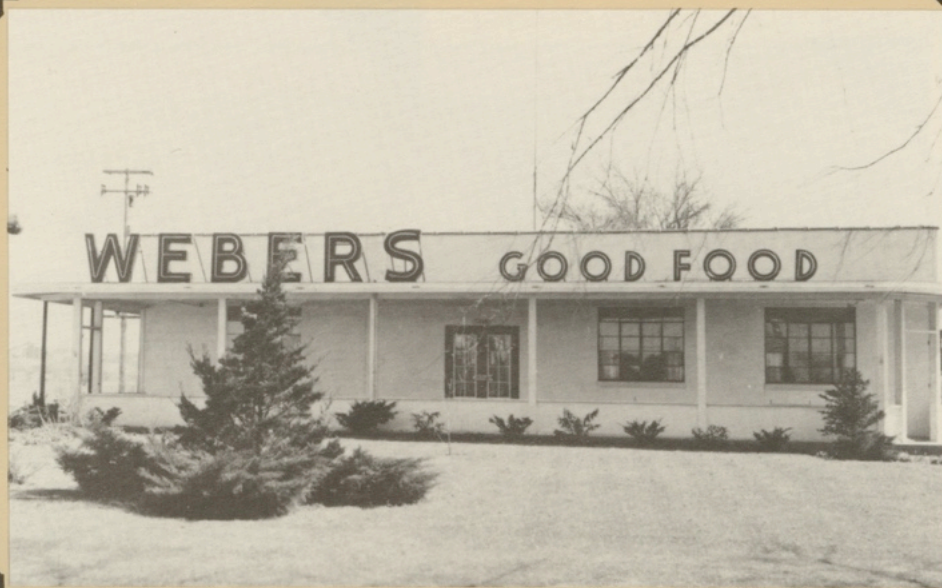


*Herman Weber's first restaurant,
the Hi-Speed Inn, 1937.
The Inn was located on
Washtenaw Avenue at
Platt Road.*



*The renovated kitchen of the
Oak Grove Tavern, 1939 —
Weber's second successful
restaurant venture.*

Weber's restaurant on Jackson Road opened in the winter of 1939-40. This building, the first to carry the name "Weber's," was 32 feet wide, 40 feet long, and built of cinderblocks.



An exterior view of the old Oak Grove Tavern, which was located just outside Ann Arbor's western boundary.

Herman explains his new incentive program, a restaurant industry first, to a Jackson Road employee, 1952.



The Supper Club menu,
mid-1950's.

Favorite Of Michigan Businessmen, Faculty, Students



Owner H. E. Weber enjoys view of his modern kitchen, while customers at right seem equally pleased with his kitchen's products.

Since 1940 Weber's Supper Club has mushroomed to pre-eminence in the Ann Arbor restaurant field. Each year has been marked by sizeable increases in dollar volume and by rapid growth of the physical plant.

Such popularity would seem to indicate planning of an unusual order, and we will have to step behind the scenes in order to know the story of Weber's success.

The story really begins when Proprietor Herman E. Weber opened a small tavern on the outskirts of Ann Arbor in 1936.

Weber knew then that a successful operation requires careful planning. He wanted to serve steaks and chops in the tiny tavern, but didn't want to waste time peeling and cooking potatoes.

Salesman H. D. Fish of Detroit H & R, now Manager of that Heinz Branch, suggested to Owner Weber that he stock individual tins of Heinz Spaghetti, Macaroni and Baked Beans.

Hundreds of cases of these items and of "57" Soups flowed into Mr. Weber's little place, which gradually gained a local reputation for superior food.

Manager Fish reminisces, "Weber was one of my favorite Saturday calls, because he always had a cheery welcome—and usually an order."

Things evidently stayed cheerful for the

increasingly-successful Weber until 1940 he moved to a new location and opened his supper club. Since then, volume has shown a substantial increase each year.

Today, Weber's Supper Club will seat 80 in the main dining room, 45 on the terrace, and 46 more in the cocktail lounge.

All these Weber customers know that the food is attractively served as well as tasty, that the service is excellent, and that the prices have shown no appreciable increase in the past two years!

Restaurateur Weber has a three-fold program—(1) holding the food cost to 40%, (2) holding the cost of labor to 25% and (3) still maintaining fine service.

These percentage figures are appreciably lower than they were two years ago, despite rises in food and labor dollar-costs! At the same time customer service has actually improved!

This enterprising restaurateur has cut his labor costs by installing a completely modern kitchen with such labor saving devices as reach-in refrigerators, food mixer and power saw.

Refrigerated open plates for vegetables and fruits enable waitresses to make their own salads quickly, thus eliminating a counterman.

Food costs are cut by such devices as the 6 x 12 walk-in deep freeze which permits Owner Weber to buy fresh fruits, vegetables, and other perishables in quantity.

Food costs are also controlled by a double check maintained on business volume. A cash register just outside the kitchen records all dishes served and thus checks the record of the register at the door.

All of this indicates that a very alert young man is at the controls of Weber's

Supper Club. But Herman Weber's program is unusual chiefly in the way he enlists the support of his employees in maintaining cost control.

He does this by means of a bonus system for kitchen employees based on:

1. Customer count.
2. Food cost percentage.
3. Labor cost percentage.

By considering these three variables, Owner Weber believes he has found the ideal way to bring employee goals exactly into line with those of management, thus making for real employee incentive and efficiency.

The customer can sense the teamwork, the real interest in satisfying his wants, that makes his stay at the Club such a pleasant one.

As a result, the restaurant is always busy. Ann Arbor businessmen, University of Michigan students and faculty, tourists—all flock to Weber's because it's such a satisfying place to eat!

Colored photographs of Ann Arbor at the turn of the century decorate the warm pine walls of the cocktail lounge—the restaurant throughout is a model of good cheer and comfort.

Quality foods, of course, are the backbone of this business. Heins fits right into the scheme of things so Salesman John Copus of Detroit H & R Branch supplies Weber's with practically all of Heins condiments, Vinegars, Tomato Juice, 67 Salad Dressing, and various Fruits and Vegetables.

Neither food quality nor service suffers under Owner Weber's well-planned cost-control program. That's why on Route 12, west of Ann Arbor, Weber's is always the sign of good eating!



Note clean lines, inviting air of Weber's Supper Club near Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Magazine article, circa 1950,
for the popular Weber's
Supper Club.

Weber's Inn
3050 Jackson Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103