

Oct. 12, 2003---

RIO GRANDE, Ohio -- Some escapes can be difficult to digest.

In countless efforts to share my love of America's back roads, I'll take frequent fliers to the Route 66 Hall of Fame at the Dixie Travel Plaza in McLean, Ill. I exit at Funk's Grove and drive the two-laner six miles south into the 43-year-old truck stop. I've brought hockey fans to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., to illustrate the sport's humble beginnings.

This is how I wound up at the Bob Evans Homestead Museum in rural Ohio.

I don't get the Bob Evans thing.

My parents live in west suburban Naperville. In April 1984, a Bob Evans Restaurant opened in Naperville. It was Evans on earth.

Now my folks want to go to Bob Evans for dinner. At 4:30 p.m. Five nights a week.

As is the case with every other Bob Evans, I enter through the restaurant's general store, which is stocked with stuffed animals, candy and the smell of potpourri.

Nothing warms you up for a hearty meal like a hospital gift shop.

Then, I check out the menu: Shroomin' Onion Cheeseburger, Fisherman's Fried Cod, Pot Roast Sandwich (slow-roasted beef, carrots, onions and American cheese piled as high as the Naperville Carillon on grilled sourdough). I have to take a nap at the next-door Days Inn before driving back to Chicago.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Bob Evans Farms Inc.

I figured the museum would give me insight into the Bob Evans phenomenon. Last month I was at Farm Aid (appropriately enough) in Columbus, Ohio, and heard the new museum was just a holler down the road. That was bad information. The museum is in Rio Grande (pop. 750), about 95 miles south of Columbus and 12 miles from the West Virginia state line.

The museum is part of a rolling 1,110-acre farm that was the home of Bob Evans, his wife Jewell and their six children between 1953 and 1970.

The museum is in the red brick farmhouse where Bob invited neighbors to try out his sausage, which he liked to say was "made by a farmer on the farm." The recipe is still in use today, and while it remains a secret, I can report the Evans sausage includes all of the hog, including the hams and tenderloins, black pepper and sage.

The Evans house was built in the early 1820s and became a stagecoach stop along what is now U.S Route 35. The nine-room house is on the National Register

of Historic Buildings. Hay, sorghum cane, wheat and corn are still grown on the property.

Bob and Jewell Evans now live about six miles from the homestead. Evans is 85 years old. He had surgery in May. Evans retired in 1986 and is not involved in promoting the museum. He still has dinner once in a while at the Bob Evans Restaurant that is a short walk from the museum.

The Evans company built this eatery in 1962 as a 12-stool "Sausage Shop" to handle the overflow of guests in his home. It has since been enlarged three times before morphing into a restaurant that looks like any other Bob Evans Restaurant in the country. That's one clue with the World of Bob: There are no surprises.

Farm Manager Ray McKinniss was my tour guide. He oversees museum operations as well as a craft barn and the cattle and horses that still roam the grounds.

"Bob started a steakhouse in 1946 that was very well-known around here," said McKinniss, 49, who grew up in the region. He studied communications and marketing at the University of Rio Grande, across the highway from the homestead.

With this kind of background, I figured McKinniss could explain the magic of Bob Evans. "Bob was a farmer," McKinniss said in straight-ahead Ohiospeak. "People believe in him because they believe in a farmer."

Bob Evans' first steakhouse was next to the Gallipolis Terminal, a truck stop partly owned by Evans' family. He named his operation the Terminal Steakhouse. The southeastern Ohio eatery was a popular with truckers hauling automobiles from Detroit.

"I was giving a speech to the Rotary Club one day," McKinniss said. "I told them to listen carefully, that it was the 'Terminal Steakhouse,' not for the reasons you're thinking of." The truckers delivered a big breakfast business. McKinniss said, "That's how he got into the sausage business. He couldn't buy sausage wholesale that he liked. He knew his family had a good sausage recipe, so he used that."

At this museum, I saw the most realistic museum pieces since I bumped into Dale Evans in the lobby of the Roy Rogers Museum in Victorville, Calif.

Visitors can sit at a replica Terminal Steakhouse counter and there's a very lifelike resin replica of a young Bob Evans working the counter in front of a can of New Era potato chips. Robert Dorfman of Dorfman Museum Figures in Baltimore, Md., designed the mannequins. The museum also worked with the Designing Eye, an exhibit and design company in South Bloomingville, Ohio.

The museum pays attention to detail.

The steakhouse includes an antique Wurlitzer jukebox with period songs such as "Just Rehearsing," by the Louvin Brothers, "A Million Miles From Home" by Ernest Tubb and Bill Haley's "Burn That Candle." In the adjacent kitchen Bob and Jewell are taping a television commercial while serving sausage patties on a red and

white tablecloth. Several ads were filmed in the homestead's kitchen. While staring at Bob and Jewell, I could almost smell the sizzle of the sausage. "We have people come in who are just startled," McKinniss said.

The museum is accented with Evans' personal artifacts, which shed light on his humble beginnings. He donated his Tampa Nugget mild cigar box (2 for 15 cents) where he kept the money he made while delivering sausage from a 1949 Studebaker truck. Evans called the cigar box his "first cash register."

The company incorporated in 1953, when Evans and a group of five friends and family members created a partnership. Today, Bob Evans Restaurants consists of a chain of 509 locations that serve 161 million people a year. I often believe 1 million of those visits can be attributed to my parents.

During the early 1960s Evans and his company designed handouts given to regional grocery stores that promoted his product. The primitive form of public relations can be seen in the museum: "*Rural Route to Friendliness*," "*I've Been Down on the Farm (Bob Evans Farm)*."

The museum is also full of the company's promotional efforts, including jacket patches, miniature Bob Evans mailboxes and postcards. The first trademark of Bob Evans Farms Sausage featured a dancing pig. Until 2001 everyone from restaurant managers to staff members were required to wear Evans' trademark string ties while at work.

The museum is honest. It calls attention to Evans' failures, devoting wall space to the ill-fated Cantina Del Rio restaurant. Bob Evans Farms opened 15 Mexican restaurants during the mid-1990s but pulled back to maintain focus on the company's farm image.

Bob and Jewell's second-floor bedroom has been converted into a space for revolving exhibits featuring the work of regional crafters and artists. "The restoration project has been exciting for us," said Stewart Owens, Bob Evans chairman of the board and chief executive officer. "To be able to reopen this historic house which has been virtually closed to the public since 1970 and to offer engaging displays that will give a sense of history of the area and of Bob Evans Farms is something we've worked hard to accomplish."

Another thread that connects my parents with the World of Bob is that between 1957 and 1965 my father was purchasing agent for Swift & Co. on the south side of Columbus. Besides Bob Evans, the Columbus area is the home of the late Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's; the corporate headquarters of White Castle hamburgers, and the birthplace of the late great Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips.

"There is a great work ethic in these parts," McKinniss said. "The average length of tenure for people who work at a Bob Evans restaurant is seven or eight years. The

original plant (in Bidwell, Ohio) longer than that. We're talking 20 years average."

At the Bob Evans Restaurant on the farm, Michael Parvin, assistant restaurant manager, will tell you about his grandmother Jackie Wickline.

"She was the second waitress ever hired at Bob Evans Restaurants," said Parvin, 30. "Bob hired her. That was right here in Rio Grande."

I started to get it. Although Bob Evans has evolved into a \$1 billion company that covers 22 states, there's some 'right here in Rio Grande' in every operation.