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CORBIN, Ky.--The Col. Harland Sanders Cafe and Museum has an extra spicy collection of roadside attractions for people interested in the history of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). The tiny cafe on the old Dixie Highway is the birthplace of KFC.

The museum includes a 1967 Col. Sanders bobble-head doll, a Col. Sanders Halloween mask and a 9-foot exterior Col. Sanders sign made in 1969 for a Kannapolis, N.C., franchise. For \$5 you can even buy a record of Sanders leading a gospel mandolin group.

My visit was going finger-lickin' good until I peeked into what used to be Sanders' office, adorned with his original maple desk and chair and a manual typewriter.

I noticed an empty hamster cage on his desk near the front window. Col. Sanders loved to watch a pair of hamsters in his spare time. What's up with that?

I began to ponder that secret KFC recipe.

Nearly 3,000 people visit the museum each week. The KFC restaurant adjacent to the museum brings in \$1.5 million in sales annually, which makes it one of the most successful franchises in the South. Now headquartered in Louisville, Ky., KFC has more than 12,000 restaurants in more than 82 countries.

The company does not own or operate the museum, which opened in the fall of 1990. The original Sanders Court & Cafe and gas station across the street burned down in the 1930s, but visitors can eat in the restored 1940 cafe lined with dark worm-marked chestnut wood. Sanders built the restaurant with old chestnut barn lumber, which is hard to find today.

Besides Sanders' modest office, the museum includes the open kitchen in which Sanders prepared his food. He wanted the walls, floors and ceiling white so customers could see things were clean. The cafe also features a strangely misplaced replica motor court room with a maple bedroom suite. Notice the twin commodes and pay phone inside the room.

Sanders built the model room in the cafe so a woman tourist could see what the clean room looked like before allowing the rest of her family to check in. He also correctly assumed women on the road need to use bathrooms. He ensured that women would inspect the accommodations by locating the entrance to the restroom inside the motel room.

A nearby museum cabinet includes an original 1956 receipt from the motor court. Room 11 rented out for \$4, roughly equal to the price of a bucket of chicken today.

September is a good time to check out the cafe and museum.

The 13th Annual World Chicken Festival takes place Sept. 26 through 29 in downtown London (pop. 5,692), about 10 minutes north of Corbin on Interstate 75. The free four-day festival includes a themed chicken parade and the "World's Largest Skillet," which is 10 feet, 6 inches in diameter and 8 inches deep with an 8-foot handle. Filling the skillet requires 300 gallons of cooking oil.

A Commonwealth of Kentucky roadside marker in front of the Colonel Sanders Cafe and Museum commemorates the "Birthplace of Kentucky Fried Chicken" and says Sanders was Kentucky's most important person. (Never mind Abraham Lincoln and Muhammad Ali.)

The truth is that Sanders was born Sept. 9, 1890, near Henryville, Ind.

Sanders was 6 years old when his father died. His mother was forced to go to work. Sanders had to take care of his 3-year-old brother and baby sister, so his mother taught him how to cook. Legend has it that Sanders could prepare an entire meal by age 7.

This must not have impressed his stepfather, who threw Sanders out of the house at age 12. Sanders found work on a farm near Greenwood, Ind., and later was a streetcar conductor in New Albany, Ind.

Sanders' chicken operation began to take off when he sold stock in a company that purchased a steamboat ferry that was to run cars and passengers between New Albany and Louisville, Ky.

In 1930 Sanders purchased a gas station along the Dixie Highway in Corbin, which in the 1920s was known as "hell's half-acre" due to the abundance of shady bootleggers. The Dixie Highway was a popular route for more upscale motorists traveling between Detroit and Miami and Cincinnati and Atlanta.

Sanders had just turned 40. He began serving travelers breakfast, lunch and dinner in the living quarters of the service station. While Sanders was famous for his fried chicken, it was his country ham that brought folks in for breakfast. Sanders used Smithfield ham and served a large portion complete with biscuits, redeye gravy, fresh eggs and grits. The museum features the original china Sanders used on his dining room table.

Going back to lessons he learned from his mother, Sanders discovered what seasonings went well with meat and vegetables. He spent nine years perfecting his

secret blend of 11 herbs and spices that is still used today. Sanders hand-mixed the herbs and spices with flour to create his breading mix. The chicken always is dipped in milk before it is breaded. ChickenHeads can have their photo taken in front of an extremely rare 100-pound barrel (circa 1956) bearing the label "Colonel Sanders Basic Formula."

Junior Woods is assistant manager of the KFC next to the museum at the junction of U.S. 25 E & W in Corbin (pop. 8,500). Woods, 37, was kind enough to take time out from a busy lunch shift to show me around. "I never met the Colonel," says Woods, who has been with KFC since 1985. "But there's three or four lookalikes who come in during the chicken festival.

"We pretty much do it the same way the Colonel did it; we cook four chickens at a time Sanders cooked two at a time. It cooks for 15 1/2 minutes. We also use the same breading flour and mix the Colonel used. It all comes separately packed from different companies so nobody has the same ingredients."

Through the mid-20th century word spread about Sanders' fine chicken.

By 1935, Gov. Ruby Laffon had made Sanders a Kentucky Colonel in recognition of his contribution to the state's cuisine. At last, Kentucky was known for something besides bourbon. In 1939 the Corbin diner was featured in Duncan Hines' *Adventures in Good Eating*. Also in 1939, Sanders introduced the pressure cooker to speed up the tedious process of frying chicken. This reduced the cooking time of chicken from 30 to nine minutes.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first KFC franchise, which got under way when Pete Harman opened a store in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sanders sold his Corbin franchise in 1956 and hit the road to enlist more franchisees. He kept cookware and herbs in the back of his car to make chicken for restaurateurs and their employers. Launched with this Johnny Appleseed approach in Appalachia, Sanders' modest idea took flight.