

July 29, 2007----

BOWLING GREEN, KY.----Like frosting on a country cake, the "Recommended by Duncan Hines" exhibit will cover Bowling Green when it opens Friday in the hometown of America's first food impresario.

Visitors can see a 1954 General Electric stove from Duncan Hines' home and an original kitchen sink. There also is a striking collection of matchbook covers and menus from his favorite restaurants. An interactive section will deliver pictures of postcards from places he visited.

Hines, who was the Rachel Ray of his era, would like all this fuss.

If you want to dig deep into Duncan-bilia, check out the Hardy and Sons Funeral Home north of town on Route 31 W, the original Dixie Highway. Hines lived here from 1940 until his death in 1959 when the Hardy family purchased the ranch home. The funeral home preserved Hines original kitchen, replete with red-and - yellow-checked wallpaper and patio area. The patio overlooks a lush grove of Kentucky tulip trees. The Hines/ funeral home is a nice place to visit if you don't mind walking through a visitation as we did earlier this month.

And to think, Hines didn't spend much time in the kitchen. In fact, he didn't really cook.

He was a salesman and obviously a persuasive one. Between 1938 and 1940, Hines drove around the United States designing and writing corporate brochures for RR Donnelley & Sons in Chicago. His Adventures in Good Eating paperbacks were kept in most of the country's automobile glove compartments through 1962. He also published a popular guide to the best places to stay in America.

Here is Hines' entry from the 1950 edition of Adventures in Good Eating on the Mill Race Inn in Geneva: "Close to the river as you approach this small town from the east you will find a little stone inn with a large screened dining room at the rear. Besides roast beef and ham the menu includes unexpected Continental dishes such as flounder in white wine, Italian casserole of chicken and the like. Lunch, \$1.75-\$2.25 ...Dinner, \$1.75-\$2.75."

As Hines' reputation grew, he lent his name to ice cream, barbecue utensils, a hamburger press and the cake mix for which he is best known today. The exhibit features a life-size version of Hines' kitchen, which includes cabinets filled with branded artifacts. The 11-section exhibit debuts at the Kentucky Museum on the campus of Western Kentucky University in conjunction with the 11th annual Duncan Hines Festival in Bowling Green (population 55,000).

You're not alone if you're one of the many who thought Duncan Hines was just a cake mix. "When you have someone like that who represents a brand, sometimes they're a real person, sometimes they're not," said Donna Parker, museum exhibits curator. "Our challenge was getting out the fact he was a real person and telling his story."

Interest in convenience foods heated up after World War II, and in 1951 Hines was approached by the director of a farmers cooperative. The cooperative's first product was a cake mix that called for fresh eggs instead of the dehydrated eggs then included in box mixes. The use of fresh ingredients made the cake mix a hit. He'd already endorsed an ice cream when Hines lent his name to the cake mix. By the end of his life, Hines' name was on 150 products, according to Jonathan Jeffrey, manuscripts curator at the Kentucky Library Museum.

Hines and his wife, Florence, had no children. His closest living relative is great-niece Cora Jane Spiller of nearby Oakland, Ky. She donated Hines' personal cone-shaped ice bucket (circa 1940s) and hot dog maker to the exhibit.

"Uncle Duncan always had somebody else to cook for him," she said during a conversation at the Kentucky Museum. "Men don't cook in the South." She looked at me and my traveling companion and then asked curator Parker, "These people aren't staying, are they? They will be confused about the way we do things. Men cooking in the South came very late in the 1950s, with the grill."

Spiller recalled hitting the road with her husband Robert in the 1950s to rendezvous with Hines in New Orleans when he introduced his cake mix to grocers there.

Hines had a larger-than-life persona to his great-niece. "Uncle Duncan was always in a coat and tie," she said. "And he always wore a felt hat that he got from Marshall Field's in Chicago. He drove a Cadillac. He would have a Duncan Hines Dinner at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago for all the people in his book and they would present him with a new car. Once they gave him a gold bird cage with little wind-up birds inside that tweeted. He was a child at heart. He loved gadgets. "

Hines saw a world of possibility through his windshield.

Carrie Barnette, director of Development University Libraries explained, "Duncan Hines was one of the first to explore diversification. It ranged from dishes to appliances ." Hines partnered up with the Steston China Co. on Route 66 in Lincoln, Ill., to roll out a line of china. In a fun twist, one of Hines' friends was Janet Riebman who portrayed Betty Crocker on the radio and at restaurant conventions.

While looking across the busy Dixie Highway, Spiller said, "He had a standing order for flowers every Sunday. I remember a Saturday when his wife had a

headache, Duncan went into the other room and listened to the opera. He played it softly."

Duncan Hines knew what he was doing. America's first foodie walked softly and carried a big shtick.