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NORMAL, Ill._The good news is that the site of America's first Steak n' Shake restaurant is going to be saved. The bad news for burger lovers is that you will only be able to order pizza.

Normal residents Gus and Edith Belt started Steak n' Shake in the 1930s. There are now 354 Steak n' Shakes in 16 states. Parent company Consolidated Products of Indianapolis plans to operate 600 Steak n' Shakes nationwide by 2004.

But in the chain's hometown, the original Steak n' Shake building is giving way to a Monical's Pizza parlor. The location is 1219 S. Main St., on old Route 66, slicing through downtown Normal. Monical's will remodel the building and erect a marker to recognize its historical significance.

The restaurant is in a flood plain bordered by old willow trees and Sugar Creek--an area that would be in the center of flood waters during a 100-year storm. The Monical's chain gained approval from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources because Monical's plan increased the amount of water that will stay on the property. Steak n' Shake's plan decreased the amount of water that remained on the property.

So last August Steak n' Shake took the high road and opened a new restaurant on 614 W. Raab Rd., just west of Main Street in Normal. In January they sold the original parcel to Monical's for \$250,000.

A colorful group of four original Steak n' Shake ``curbies," soda jerks and regulars get together over breakfast four times a week to talk about old times at the new Steak 'n Shake.

"Gus opened it 1933 as the Shell Inn," says Mel Tulle, a "curbie" from 1941 and '42. "It was all the beer you could drink and all the chicken you could eat for 35 cents. There was also a Shell (gas) station on the property. Prohibition came, so he started selling steak (hamburgers) and shakes."

Belt used to bring in steaks during the restaurant's busiest times and grind them into burgers while customers sat at the counter watching. That's how the restaurant's slogan, "In sight it must be right," came about.

The original Belt building was mostly destroyed by a fire in the 1960s. One wall remains from the site, but that won't stop the pizza chain from celebrating all that is Steak 'n Shake.

Monical's is installing cream-colored stucco that replicates the original Steak 'n Shake.

Monical's also resurrected a 30-year-old black and white laminate counter and red-top vinyl diner stools with chrome bases.

"The counter doesn't go back to Steak 'n Shake One, but it goes back a long time," says Chip Rorem, architect for Monical's. "We saved what we could.

"And we're still going to have a drive-through."

Belt renamed the roadside diner Steak 'n Shake in 1934. A butter-grilled steak hamburger was a quarter. It came with home baked beans and potatoes.

"Mrs. Belt's Personal Specialties" included homemade chili (seasoned with ground Spanish cumin seed, paprika and chili powder) for 15 cents a bowl, accompanied by crackers and sliced dills.

A few things set Steak 'n Shake apart from other roadside diners:

They slice pickles the long way.

"They had a long wooden board with a blade in it," Tulle explains. "The pickles came in a barrel. They'd lay the pickles over the board to slice them, which was the easiest way to do it. They also fit the bun easier that way."

There are "Four Ways to Enjoy: Car, Table, Counter and Takhomasak."

Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert is a Steak 'n Shake fan, having been weaned on the burgers in his hometown of Urbana-Champaign, not far from Bloomington-Normal.

Tulle says, "Steak 'n Shake was real busy. People were driving circles around the restaurant because there was no place to park. The menu was limited so they could move the traffic. They even had a Normal policeman out there directing traffic in the evening."

Bob Rogers worked the Steak 'n Shake grill in 1939. "A drive-in with curb service was a novelty," he says. "High school kids would drive around the lot.

They called that 'buggin' the Shake.' "

Rogers left Normal for the Pacific between 1942 and 1945 to serve in the 24th Cavalry Reconnaissance during World War II. Tulle enlisted in the Air Force in 1942 and flew the hump in the China-Burma operation. Flying the hump is a lot tougher than buggin' the shake. Tulle was discharged in 1946.

Like all fellow "curbies," Rogers and Tulle returned to their hometown.

Between 1964 and 1967 Rogers even came back to Route 66 when he owned and operated the Redwood Motel on the old road. "That was a bad mistake," he says. "Route 66 was changing at Lincoln and bypassing Normal. I told my wife I had to get out of there. The new line took all the old business."

Now, here's what I like about old-fashioned road reporting: Folks talk to you as if you know everyone in the community. Dave Graves was an original Steak 'n Shake "curbie" from 1938 to '41. "When they got busy, Gus would come out jerkin' trays and stuff," Graves says. "I was working up front with Les Baylor. I had six milk shakes. So I'm comin' around the corner with the milk shakes and Gus is comin' the other way with two empty trays_and BOOM! I got six milk shakes right over Gus Belt. I thought he'd fire me."

Another night around 1940 a fancy stretch limousine backed into the north end of the Steak 'n Shake lot. Graves was working the area. "The procedure was to walk up to the driver's side where he'd give you the order," Graves says. "I walked up to the driver's side and nothing happened. Pretty soon two guys get out of the back on each side. Big guys. Panama hats. They ordered." Graves returned to the limousine while juggling three trays. He asked the gentlemen to roll down a window. "They said, 'We ain't rolling down no windows,' " Graves says. "These two guys ate theirs on top of the car. They tipped us a buck_Wow, man! They pulled around to the gas station. They were probably going to St. Louis. This time the driver rolled down the window to pay for the gas. The attendant looked in the window.

"And he saw Al Capone."

But the "curbies" agreed the most lavish tips came from out-of-state license plates. Around 1938 the Belts hired an "efficiency expert," in the words of Graves. The consultant observed the staff and took notes. Graves recalls, "All the curb boys had nicknames. Mine was 'Ding'_like a bell. There was 'Buck,' 'Pete.' He decided to do away with these hokey names. He gave us numbers."

"Ding" became "Number Five."

That plan lasted about two weeks. Edith "Edie" Belt insisted the curb boys' nicknames be reinstated. Customers told her they hated the numbers. But as years passed, Steak 'n Shake became No. 1 in the minds of folks motoring through America's heartland.