



ON THE JOB

By Caroline Eubanks

Generations of travelers may still recall the sloped teal roofs of stores and the billboards scattered along major highways that for decades advertised the famous Stuckey's pecan log rolls. To this day, Stuckey's is immediately identifiable with nostalgia, whether for its sweet treats or its offbeat souvenirs on offer, like Davy Crockett-inspired hats and drinking birds.

The company, started in 1937 by William Sylvester "W.S." Stuckey and his wife Ethel, began as a roadside stand in rural Georgia. It grew mostly in part to the then-new Interstate System as affordable cars hit the market in the mid-1950s.

The golden age of the Great American Road Trip followed and brands like Stuckey's, along with Howard Johnson and McDonald's, thrived with convenient locations near highway exits. The companies wisely painted their roofs in bright colors or with the neon glow of the golden arches lighting the way to tempt you in.

But by the 1970s, the oil embargo and later deregulation of the airline industry, hit roadside businesses hard and Stuckey's was no different. Long car trips were no longer the preferred method of traveling. The company was sold in 1977 and in the following decades, many of the original locations closed or were taken over by franchisees and that seemed the end of it.





Decades later, though, in November 2019, W.S. Stuckey's granddaughter Stephanie took over the family business. Despite her lack of experience in the field—she had previously worked as a state representative, among other things—she was intent on bringing back the pecan treats and the nostalgia surrounding the road trip. Stephanie remembered being a child and traveling with her parents to meet franchise owners. One of her first orders of business as owner was to travel to the remaining locations to assess them before getting to work.

"Shortly after I bought Stuckey's, I took a road trip to survey 'my pecan log roll empire.' I had a great time exploring America [with my son]. While I was driving hundreds of miles between the few stores that remained, the real reality finally sunk in when I went to a Stuckey store in Marion, Arkansas," she recalls. "It was in such bad shape that the roof was falling in! I sat in the parking lot and started to cry, not a high moment for me."

As she sat in the car with her son, he son joked about losing his inheritance and she fell into a low moment. "But I have learned that those low moments are when you find your solid rock of foundation." She went inside and was surprised to find that people were still shopping there and specifically buying Stuckey's brand products.

"I talked to one man in line and I asked him, 'Why are you here?' He looked at me and got all misty-eyed talking about how much he loved taking road trips as a kid and stopping at Stuckey's," she says.

"After that moment, I realized I had to turn around the company by making pecan snacks and candies again."

Through her work to rebuild, she's become a bit of a road trip ambassador, sharing stories from early childhood trips and current adventures on social media. "My favorite vacation that we took was to Florida in the 1970s. My parents usually had a very organized itinerary, with stops planned out and reservations made. But not this trip. We would pull over anywhere us kids screamed from the backseat. 'We want to see Weeki Wachee,' and they would oblige."

But her favorite is a long-closed landmark called Six Gun Territory. "It was run by a bunch of college kids on summer vacation, who dressed up like gunslingers and women who worked in a bordello in feathered outfits."





It was so crazy," she recalls. They did a Wild West show with fake guns, and really fun stunts that involved the folks in the shoot-out falling from top of rooftops onto mattresses. We loved it!"

It's these memories that have become such a big part of Stuckey's renewed brand identity, where "every traveler is a friend," the company's motto coined long ago by her grandfather. "I think that's what we too often forget about road trips and vacations. They don't have to cost a lot of money. The best ones are the ones where we have spontaneity and time with each other," she remarks. "That's what makes a road trip memorable, who's on the trip with you and who you meet along the way."

Today, the company is making its own pecan treats at a factory in Georgia and has 50 licensed stores in 20 states, including many off major highways like I-75 and I-95.

You can also get Stuckey's products in hundreds of other retail locations. Stephanie Stuckey's travels don't appear to be slowing down anytime soon. "These days, most of my job is being the brand ambassador for Stuckey's.

We can't afford a Super Bowl ad, but we actually have something that is much more effective, and that's word-of-mouth marketing. We are slowly rebuilding this brand, one personal interaction at a time."



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