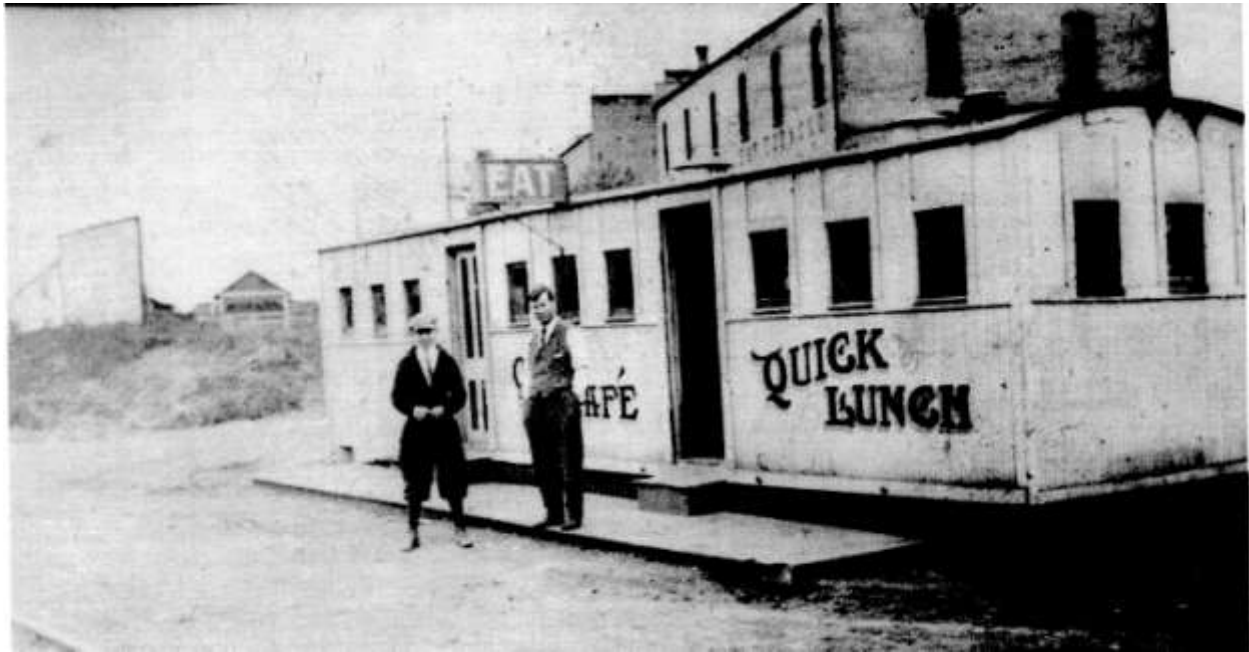


THE DOG WAGON

Researched and written By Ruth Ann Montgomery



In 1910, the Graham Brothers, Luther, Lyle and Walter built a "house on wheels" they intended to take to fairs and other gatherings to provide food to the hungry crowds of people. They placed a sign on their portable eatery reading "Cozy Café" and "Eat".

The official name, "Cozy Cafe" soon gave way to it's nickname, the Dog Wagon. The popular restaurant featured homemade pies, donuts, cakes, and baked beans made by the Graham boys' mother, Harriet Tomlin Graham. Raisin pie and banana layer cake were favorites made by Mrs. Graham. Hamburgers and hot dogs were also featured at the small café that was a gathering place for the community, as well as the trainmen.

In 1916, the restaurant was named The Busy Bee Restaurant. Lyle Graham advertised himself as the proprietor, serving "short orders on short notice." Their baked goods were for sale and advertised as "First Class Home Baking."



February 10, 1916, Evansville Review

Although the building was burned twice, once in 1919 and again in 1920, the Grahams rebuilt and continued to operate the restaurant. The first fire occurred early on the Monday morning just before Christmas 1919. This was during a time when Luther served in the Army during World War I and the Graham brothers had turned the management of the business over to Al Kreutzer. The fire department and others who came to help were able to save most of the food supplies.

The Graham brothers restored the building and took over management of the restaurant. By April 1920, the building was nearly ready for occupancy. The Evansville Review of April 8, 1920 reported that the "Cozy Cafe which had the misfortune to catch fire the forepart of the winter is steadily coming to the front which a new building. The Graham Bros. have taken hold of the cafe again and it is booming as it always does when it comes under their management. The framework of the building is up and in the near future will be ready for occupancy."

Then on a Sunday morning in late May, the fire whistle blew, again announcing a fire at the café. Observers said they could see "red flames leaping against the skies."

Within days after the third destructive fire, the Graham brothers remained steadfast in the desire to operate the business. Within days they were rebuilding and expected to occupy the restored café by July. "These men are to be congratulated on their spirit, they are not only working for themselves, but for the city," the Review told its readers.

The Cozy Café, or Dog Wagon, as it was called by those who owned and frequented the place, was a popular stop for employees of the railroad. The railroad crews called ahead from Janesville or Madison to place their orders.



When the train stopped in Evansville to take on water, coal, freight, and passengers at the railroad station, one of the crew would go to the Dog Wagon to collect the lunches, which the Grahams would have prepared for them. The Grahams said they sometimes sent as many as 100 sandwiches and lunches out to the trains stopping at the Evansville depot.

The restaurant was so successful that in 1927, the Graham brothers added a second story to their building. The Evansville Review account of May 19, 1927, said that the addition would “add greatly to the appearance of the building.”



The restaurant was open 24 hours a day, with each of the three brothers taking an 8-hour shift. The little building was remembered fondly by people who liked the generous portions and the reasonable prices of the food.

It was said that even Al Capone stopped at the little café on the way to his Wisconsin Northwoods hideout. He would stay in his vehicle parked a short ways from the café on the highway and send his henchmen in for food. Then Capone and his companions would continue their journey from Chicago to northern Wisconsin.

The Grahams employed several waitresses during their years in business, including their wives. Minnie Apfel worked at the Dog Wagon for 25 years. Martha Piper, Lydia White Jones, Agnes McCarthy, and Jeanette Wall were other hired to serve the food prepared by the Grahams.

The Dog Wagon was also a popular spot for workers at the D. E. Wood Butter company, Baker Manufacturing, the tobacco warehouses and other businesses. It was just a short walk from Evansville’s business district and became a popular spot for a businessman’s lunch. High school students and others were welcome in the Dog Wagon after ball games or school dances.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, death and retirement brought changes in the management of the Dog Wagon. Luther Graham died in 1939 and Lyle retired in 1947.

Bob Graham, Lyle’s son, the second generation of Grahams at the Dog Wagon, came into the business as an owner after World War II. and Walter and Bob operated the business together. In 1953, Walter left the business to operate his own restaurant in Verona.

Bob Graham continued the restaurant in the building near the tracks until 1957. When truck traffic replaced railroads, and U.S. Highway 14 became an important truck route, the restaurant was closed and the business moved to a new building on Union Street, near a large truck stop.

The old Dog Wagon, or Cozy Cafe, located next to the Chicago Northwestern tracks on East Main Street, was razed in 1967 and the basement was filled in, so that there is no longer any visible sign of this favorite restaurant from Evansville's past. Only photographs and memories are left.