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Stories

Kennywood

When he was young, Michael Henninger looked forward to spring as eagerly as some children look forward to their birthdays. Spring meant it was time to prepare Kennywood, his family's amusement park just outside of Pittsburgh, to open for the summer tourist season.

"We could see the buildings go up, and the rides going back together," says Henninger, whose great-grandfather, R.F. Henninger, helped establish the park in 1898. "The excitement of seeing it come together was a neat time of the year for me and my family."

Then, when the park opened on Memorial Day, Henninger could enjoy all the rides — the Thunderbolt roller coaster, the Ferris wheel and the carousel, just to name a few. "The park was always my home away from home," he says.

With such happy memories, it's not surprising that Henninger is now

director of foodservice for Kennywood. He's the fourth generation to help run the park, which has served as a fun-filled back yard for generations of travelers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and even points beyond.

The park's official season runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day, but in recent years, Kennywood has begun staging Halloween-like Phantom Fright Nights on weekends in October. All told, 1.5 million to 1.7 million people visit Kennywood each year.

Historians know the park, which opened as a small trolley park in 1898, as one of the few family-operated traditional amusement parks in the country, and one of the oldest as well: Indeed, two of the park's buildings, the Casino and the Soda Fountain Stand, date from its founding.

Roller-coaster fans know Kennywood for something completely different — its collection of fine, scary rides: The Phantom's Revenge, featuring speeds of 85 miles per hour and a dizzying 232-foot drop; the Jack Rabbit, a 2,132-foot ride built in 1921; The Racer, a vintage 1927 coaster with 2,250 feet of twin tracks, and Henninger's favorite, the Thunderbolt, built in 1968 with 2,887 feet of track.

But Kennywood's not all steep drops and high speeds. Kiddies can enjoy a fine collection of tame amusements, including a miniature Drop Ride, an auto racing track, a turtle ride, a baby grand carousel and a small roller coaster. Seniors whose roller-coaster days are behind can stroll the park's acres of flowers and foliage, which bloom to perfection all summer.

And it's not all rides, either. Seeing that all that roller-coaster riding and walking was creating hearty appetites, Henninger's father, F.W. Henninger, added a new treat to the park's lineup of snacks: the World's Best French Fries. The fries "were my dad's original concept, something he did to take Kennywood in a new direction," Henninger explains.

Back then and still today, the fries are hand-cut from Idaho potatoes, soaked in cold water, deep-fried to order and then served, an entire pound to each



Michael Henninger, Kennywood; Bill Henninger, Kennywood; Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago; Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago.

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order. Michael Henninger remembers savoring the fries with his mother. “My mom liked them with vinegar,” says Henninger; he now likes his fries with cheese, gravy and seasoned salt.

Since his father’s day, Kennywood’s menu of fried foods has expanded to include funnel cakes at \$2.95, a fried cod platter with fries for \$5.25, chicken tenders and fries for \$4.45 and a deep-fried hot dog for \$2.35.

But those hand-cut fries are still the most popular snack at the park. They’re sold at Kennywood’s famous “Potato Patch.”

On a busy day, cooks prepare 12,000 pounds of the fries, an amount that translates to 9,000 to 10,000 orders a day. The one-pound orders cost \$3.50, and the price includes the cus-

tomers’ choice of toppings: onion, garlic, seasoned and barbecue salt, Heinz brown gravy and Dean’s cheddar cheese sauce.

This year, Henninger added a new twist, Bacon Cheddar Fries, to the French fry menu. The two-pound order, topped with cheese and what Henninger calls a “heaping” of bacon, costs \$4.95. He explains why Kennywood, which allows guests to bring in their own food, has kept menu prices so modest: “If we don’t, we won’t get their business,” he says.

Henninger credits the fries’ popularity to the from-scratch cooking method, particularly the soaking, which removes excess starch and therefore creates a crisper fry. He also praises the park’s 35 Keating Instant Recovery Fryers®, most of which are the 24 x 24 configuration.

Kennywood has used Keating fryers since 1976, the year Bill Henninger put fries on the menu. “My dad noticed that a competitor was using all sorts of Keating fryers, and he realized then, they were the best to use,” he says.

The fryers are Henninger’s favorite because of the Instant Recovery® System, which holds a consistent fry oil temperature “no matter what we’re



cooking,” he says. The consistent oil temperature means a consistently tasty, golden, crisp product, Henninger adds.

Henninger also likes Keating’s customer service. For instance, he appreciates the fact that the company is helping him develop a low-tech fryer that will be easier for Kennywood’s 450 foodservice employees to operate.

“With so many team members, there’s a different person working the fryer on a daily basis,” Henninger explains. “So the fewer bells and whistles, the less the chance of mistakes and that things will break.

“We like to keep it simple,” Henninger says. Just like the summertime pleasures of Kennywood.

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Bill and Michael Henninger are at the potato Patch where their popular hand-cut fries are fried in Keating’s Instant Recovery Fryers®.