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GTPulse: The Big Pie

Written by guest columnist Christal Frost

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(<https://www.9and10news.com/content/uploads/2020/07/the-big-pie.jpg>)

If you've ever driven around Traverse City, chances are you've seen it. A giant pie tin that has remained outside the entrance of Sara Lee on Cass Street for so long, it's managed to blend in to the scenery.

What you might not know, however, is the story behind the colossal cherry pie that served 35,000 people on a hot summer day in 1987.

"We made it out of stainless steel, which I thought at the time was crazy. 1/4 inch stainless steel. That's a bear to work with." Gary Clous was the fabrication shop foreman for Jackelin Steel when he was given the direction to create a pie pan capable of baking what would become the world's largest cherry pie.

"Chef Pierre (currently, Sara Lee) approached us and it just so happens that we had just purchased a machine that was



capable of doing it. [_ \(https://www.9and10news.com/content/uploads/2020/07/the-big-pie-2.jpg\)](https://www.9and10news.com/content/uploads/2020/07/the-big-pie-2.jpg)

So, George Barker who was running Jackelin at the time said we would do it. That was George, he was the kind of guy who would tackle anything."

Of course, the pie tin would need filling, and Rod Wells, an engineer for Chef Pierre, became the project manager. "The big pie project," says Meredith Hawes recalling a conversation she had with her Dad. "We were actually talking about the pie a few years ago when the National Cherry Festival was celebrating its 90th. My dad took great delight in the details, he knew everything—how many thousand pounds of this, the injection of that," she smiles, "I wish I would have recorded it...he just thoroughly enjoyed every moment. Every time we drove by the pie pan, he would say 'There it is kids, the world's largest cherry pie.'"

The world's largest cherry pie was not a National Cherry Festival event. It wasn't a marketing ploy from Chef Pierre, either.

The idea to create the world's largest cherry pie was born from the mind of Bob Underwood. A combination of driving and good old fashioned envy,

"Every time I drove through Charlevoix and saw the world's largest cherry pie, I thought that should be in Traverse City."

Once the idea was firmly planted in Underwood's mind, he was determined to see it grow.



(<https://www.9and10news.com/content/uploads/2020/07/the-big-pie-3.jpg>)

“The first ever National Governor’s Conference was going to be held in Traverse City at the Grand Traverse Resort. And, I thought ‘well, that would be a great thing for the governor’s conference to build the world’s largest cherry pie at the same time’ so I called Governor Blanchard.”

Bob’s conversation with Governor Blanchard led to further conversations with people who had connections to organizations that could offer support. Then, those conversations led to a \$75,000 commitment to make the world’s largest cherry pie happen.

With the cash commitment secured, Bob worked with Roberta Teahen who was with Northwestern Michigan College at the time, to gather the team and get things cooking.

They needed a pan, which is where Jackelin Steel came in. They also needed pie filling and pie crust, which introduced Chef Pierre (Sara Lee) to the recipe. The pie would need an enormous oven which would be built by Grand Traverse Construction. The pie needed to be heated, of course, bringing MichCon (now, DTE Energy) to the table and, once assembled, the pie would have to be moved into an oven, requiring a crane from Team Elmer’s.

Butch Broad had owned Team Elmer’s for ten years when he got involved.

“We took our crane down and picked up the pie, (we) weighed it on a portable Department of Transportation scale to make it official.”

His sons, Troy and Todd, were on site the day the baking took place.

“I sat on the crane and saw all the people, lots of excitement, lots of people just checking it out,” recalls Troy Broad who was 13 years old at the time. “I remember the challenges they had trying to figure out all the issues before hand because they had never done it before. There were so many unknowns and it was tense on site.”

Despite many uncertainties, everything seemed to come together and on July 25, 1987, a cherry pie was baked that shattered the previous record set by Charlevoix as the pie weighed in at 28,350 pounds; 17 feet, 6 inches in diameter.

Unfortunately, the title would be taken from Traverse City just five years later as the tiny town of Oliver, British Columbia baked a cherry pie weighing a monstrous 39,683 pounds.

“I’m told (the Canadian pie) didn’t taste very good,” says Meredith Hawes, remembering the delicious pie her Dad and the team baked, “But still, I was really disappointed, and I know my Dad was, too.”

Hawes is currently serving as the president-elect of the National Cherry Festival, "My intent is to serve as the president starting in September, and if I'm voted in, I know we will want to come back after the pandemic with some big enthusiasm."

Hawes' father passed away in October of 2019, but the legacy of the big pie lives on, "he kept the knife they used to cut the pie all these years," she says. "It was just in the basement, but he kept it."

Her plan is to donate the knife to the National Cherry Festival after engraving her Dad's name into the stainless steel, "He was just so proud of that day. And, I was so proud of him, and everyone who worked to make it happen."

Gary Clous is still with Jackelin Steel, but he doesn't know if Traverse City could pull off another pie project, "I don't know. There was an old school way of thinking from the gentlemen who made this happen so many years ago. And, a lot of anticipated in that project are no longer with us. That's just the kind of stuff that the old guard of Traverse City would get an idea and they would make it happen."

The old guard may have moved on, some of their children have continued in their place. Todd and Troy and their sister, Tonya, purchased Team Elmer's from their parents and they continue the legacy of coming to the festival. "I wish Tonya was able to be there the first time."

"I was too little to go and I was mad," says Tonya. "I listened to my Dad and the crane operator, Ray, talk about lighting the burners and hearing the metal on this inside shift with expansion." Troy adds that at the time and the biggest one could barely lift it at 35 tons. Now, we have a crane that can lift up to 100 tons. "The way things have changed."

"I'm excited for the 95th National Cherry Festival," laughs Meredith Hawes. "We have a lot of other stuff to focus on leading up to the Festival's postponement due to Covid-19, "but maybe this is exactly what we need to get a lot of cherries."

"There are no current plans in place to reclaim the title, one can only hope that, like Bob Underwood, who drove by the giant pie tin, along with a little envy over having lost the title, might be the exact ingredients needed to make the big pie happen again."

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