

SEK Fried Chicken

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Some call it a major rivalry in Kansas. It was even mentioned by ESPN announcers during a college football broadcast in fall 2018. But this wasn't K-State versus KU. It was about fried chicken. These announcers were talking about the preferences of one football player who pointed out that there are lots of places to get good fried chicken in southeast Kansas, but people's restaurant choices can get competitive. Some people like a restaurant called Chicken Annie's. Other people prefer a restaurant called Chicken Mary's. Whatever the preference, it all means that there's great fried chicken in southeast Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

The southeast region of Kansas, and particularly Crawford County, has long been known as a great place for fried chicken. Historic restaurants have helped establish this tradition.

According to the Kansas Guidebook 2 for explorers, written by Marci Penner and WenDee Rowe of the Kansas Sampler Foundation, the tradition goes back to 1933. In that year, a coal miner named Charley Pichler suffered a disabling accident in Yale Mine No. 13 near Pittsburg, Kansas. His wife Annie needed a way to support the family, so she started selling fried chicken dinners out of their home. In addition to mouth-watering fried chicken, she offered German potato salad, German coleslaw, a strip of green pepper, and a slice of tomato.

The response was so positive that it grew into a famous restaurant known as Chicken Annie's. Annie's descendants run the restaurant today.

A similar situation led to creation of another famous restaurant at Pittsburg. When Joe Zerngast was unable to work in the coal mines in the early 1940s, his wife Mary also started marketing meals to support the family. They began serving chicken dinners in their home, moved into an old mining camp pool hall in 1945, and have operated in their current location since 1966. This restaurant became famous as Chicken Mary's and is also operated by family descendants.

The restaurants are friendly competitors and neighbors, located near each other just north of Pittsburg. Just like a football team, each has loyal fans.

One of those is K-State running back Alex Barnes. He grew up at Pittsburg, came to Kansas State and became the top running back in the Big 12. When ESPN announcers visited with him before the Oklahoma State game, he let them know his preference of the fried chicken restaurants at his hometown. The announcers said on air, "(Alex) would like to let everyone know that, of all the great fried chicken places in southeast Kansas, Chicken Annie's is the best."

This fried chicken rivalry took another turn, in a plot twist reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet. Chicken Mary Pichler's granddaughter Donna married Chicken Annie's grandson Anthony. Together, they opened Pichler's Chicken Annie's. Wow, make it a combo, please.

The great fried chicken story doesn't stop there. When the Kansas Sampler Foundation had a contest to select the 8 Wonders of Kansas, one of the entries in the cuisine category was a broad group called Crawford County Fried Chicken, which included both Chicken Mary's and Chicken Annie's plus more. The group won! Crawford County Fried Chicken was selected as one of the 8 Wonders of Kansas cuisine.

Not only does Crawford County include Chicken Mary's and Chicken Annie's, it also includes other restaurants such as Pichler's Chicken Annie's and others. In addition to the original restaurants in Pittsburg, one can get fried chicken in other restaurants in the county. These restaurants include Chicken Annie's in Girard, Barto's Idle Hour in Frontenac, and Gebhardt's Chicken and Dinners in the rural community of Mulberry, population 519 people. Now, that's rural.

For more information, see the Kansas Guidebook 2 for Explorers and the 8 Wonders of Kansas Guidebook. Those are available in local bookstores or from www.kansassampler.org.

Some call it a major rivalry. It even made it onto an ESPN sports broadcast. But this rivalry is not about football, it's about fried chicken. We commend all of the families and owners who are making a difference by continuing these traditions in Crawford County. At dinnertime, regardless of the rivalry, we can now say, "Winner, winner, chicken dinner."

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.