

# fast food

*at its finest*

The Camire  
Family

*s t o r y* {Jennifer Camire & Elisabeth Quentin}

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“Cheese, fry and a choc.”

“What’s on those two cheese dogs, sir?”

“I heard about the new grandson, congratulations!”

“Whatcha gonna have, please?”

“Cream in your coffee?”

The patties are flung onto the grill and the fries sizzle in the corner. The steam creates a momentary haze as hot dogs, boisterous greetings and conversations fly through the air. Never missing a beat, the workers put out an order in three minutes. It’s called Rapid Ray’s for a reason.

It’s been fourteen years since Renald “Ray” Camire was dishing

“.....  
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.....”

out burgers, but his business is still thriving today. Located on the corner of Pepperell Square and Main Street, Rapid Ray’s has become a landmark

in Saco; a place famous for its quality of food and conversation.

Today, Ray’s legacy is carried on by three generations of the Camire family. His widow, Lillian Camire, their two sons Don and Norman and three of the grandchildren currently work at the family business.

Ray started his humble business in 1953, selling burgers out of an old bread truck as a part time job. During the day, Ray was a meat cutter at the local grocery store and at night he drove his van to Pepperell Square. He sold burgers until two a.m. serving the late night and early morning crowd.

Back in the 1960’s, even on the coldest of winter nights, the kids from St. Francis College (now the University of New England) visited “Ray’s Lunch Van.” These Franciscans fondly called Ray’s truck the “Garbage Wagon,” meeting there to get a tasty snack off campus after dances, concerts, and football games. They shivered in the night air and watched in awe as Ray’s quick hands got their orders out in a matter of minutes. As Don Camire remembers, that’s where his father’s catchy name

came from, "A bunch of kids would come in all the time, then they just said, 'Ray is Rapid!' and they started calling him 'Rapid Ray.' So 'Rapid Ray' just stuck."

While Ray was throwing patties on the grill and relish on the dogs, he would talk to the kids; he always had a joke or a friendly comment to offer as they waited for their food. A lot of the kids would someday become doctors or other professionals, but while in school they were poor college boys. Lillian Camire remembers, "They had their I.D.'s and they'd want a lunch and they'd be really hungry, so they'd say, 'Ray, I'll give you my I.D.' and that means: 'I've got to have this, I'll come back and pay what I owe you.'" Ray kept all these I-owe-you cards on a shelf in the van. "At the end of the school year, we'd still have a stack of like 40 I.D. cards from the kids at St. Francis College," says Don. Ray knew the kids could easily get another I.D. card at school; he simply liked to help them out and keep their bellies full.

By the early 1960's, other fast food places like McDonalds and Drummer Boy started moving into the area of Southern Maine. "He [Ray] was afraid at first, that the fast food places would hurt us, but every time a new fast food restaurant would come into town, our business would slow down for probably a month or so. Then we'd pick right back up again. After the newness of that business wore off, we got all our customers back and then some more. The people would try us and then try the [new] fast food place and they'd realize we had better food," says Don.

Ray was always very fussy about quality; he insisted on cutting and grinding his own meat and using the freshest ingredients available. It wasn't just the quality of food that kept people coming back though. The people came for the food but they also came to see Ray.

"He loved people, he just loved people. He never had anything bad to say about anybody...He liked to please the customer and talk to them and joke with them and he knew most all of them by name, and he knew what they wanted and what they wanted on it. I never to this day knew how he did that," Lillian says. Whether it was the weather, a new birth in the family, or a controversial political issue, he would always have something to say to anyone who wanted to chat.

Ray's first van was simply an old, rusty bread truck he had bought

from a friend. It had just enough room for him to extend his arms to quickly twirl around and reach what he needed. As the business grew and got more popular, he bought bigger, newer vans. The fourth and last truck was actually a small type of motor home; the interior was specially designed for his needs and was big enough for five guys to work on a busy night.

Without a doubt, the customers felt the cold while waiting for their food in Pepperell Square. Ray and his employees shared the same feeling—the trucks were not heated. There was steam from the cooking, but even that wasn't enough for the coldest winter nights in Maine. "We used to wear flannel shirts and snow mobile boots, three pairs of socks. My feet were frozen. I had a heater by my hands because my hands would constantly be frozen. My knuckles used to bleed," says Don.

Despite the alluring nostalgia of serving burgers and dogs from a truck, Ray had to adapt his business to the changing times. Even though Ray's rapid hands got the orders out quickly, crowds would gather downtown late into the morning, making the city officials uneasy. Overall, the truck wasn't the most efficient way to run a long term business. As Don remembers, "You could drive the truck around, but it wasn't too stable. I remember stopping fast because some car pulled out in front of us and the cash register flew on the floor—and broke! So after that we had to bolt down the cash register and other things."

The big crowds, the lack of storage space and the flying cash registers all led to one thing—the decision to give the business a foundation. At first, people were upset, fearing that a building would ruin some of the tradition they had relished for years. In the end, people supported Ray's idea, as exemplified in this letter he received from a family in Ohio: "Dear Rapid Ray, It doesn't make any difference to us whether you keep the truck or build a carry out stand. We'll still rave about your food...Good luck on your new venture. Just stay in the same location."

"Originally I wanted the building to look like a big hamburger," Lillian recalls. But after Ray and the family consulted with architect Thomas Rouselle, they decided on a classic diner style. "The architect tried to make a new building look old; to make the building look like it had been there for fifty years," says Don.

The building was completed in 1986. Opening day was exciting

for Ray and his customers alike. "We had people sending us bouquets of flowers...The other businesses were all happy to see us," Lillian remembers.

Not much has changed at Rapid Ray's over the years. As Don says, "We try to keep things the same. We have a system we go by and that's the way we've always done it...Why fix something that isn't broken?" You can still go into Rap's and get a burger just like you would've fifty years ago; Ray liked his loaded with extra mustard.

This year, Rapid Ray's will have been dishing out burgers for half a century. Twenty members of the Camire family have worked the fryalators and the grill over the years, helping to make Ray's business a success. Ronald "Red" Bourgault has also been a well known face at Rap's; he's spent most of his life working there. As Don says, "The business is only as good as the people that work there...without the people that work there, the business is nothing."

Today, Ray may not be around to serve twenty -five cent burgers out of a truck, but his legacy lives on. Rapid Ray's is a dependable place; a place where you can still get a cheese, fry and a choc served with some good conversation.

