

# The New Criterion

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## Curb service

by Timothy Jacobson

Those of boomer age and older will remember curb service firsthand. From the time between the World Wars, when the explosion in car ownership created a novelty market for “drive-in” eating, and even more easily in the early post-war years, one could get short-order food served at the curb through the window of your car by pretty, short-skirted “carhops” in just about every small city and town in America. Today, the market for nostalgia accounts for some modern pretenders, but only a handful of originals survive. If Uber Eats is your idea of fast-food delivery, then you were probably deprived of this uniquely American cultural experience, though the Zeitgeist of that moment has been recorded on film: *American Graffiti* (1973), George Lucas’s classic about a small-town California graduation night in 1962, famously captured the scene in its depiction of the real-life Mel’s Diner.

One of the other holdovers can be found in the small Virginia town where I live: Wright’s Dairy-Rite. It sits on U.S. Business 11 (Greenville Avenue), a block from the railroad tracks and close to the road. A large but not too large neon sign marks the spot, just as it has done for the past sixty-eight years. In addition to announcing a commercial presence, the sign carries a pertinent cultural message: “Family Owned, Serving Staunton Since 1952.”

“Now we’re back to where we started, in 1952.” That remark, of Elwood Cash, the son-in-law of the founders, Forester and Alka Wright, is a comment on the recent uptick of business at the curb, since the coming of the virus crisis in mid-March has rendered inside dining verboten. Wright’s began its life serving hamburgers and hot dogs in brown paper bags to walk-up customers through a window. In 1957, a curb-service section was added, with carhops bringing freshly prepared food to customers parked under a long carport-like roof. In 1977, they added a few seats inside, and in 1990 a larger “dining room” with vinyl booths, Formica tabletops, and a jukebox. Today it all feels out of another age: friendly, unpretentious, well kept and swept. It is a textbook mom-and-pop business, preparing and serving simple food at modest prices to every class of customer. Descendants of the founders still own and operate it and provide work for twenty-five full- and part-time employees. The average per-customer sale these days is \$8.75, the average wage for March \$13.36 an hour. Except in snowstorms, it has never closed.

Jim Cash, of the third generation, has no plans to close it now, unless the government so decrees.

He stays open by the very grace of obsolescence. This is what his father Elwood meant when he said they were back to where they started in 1952, with curbside service—“Back then, all we had.” Sales are almost what they would be in times of full operation, and at Saturday lunch it can be hard to find a slot at the curb next to a “Serv-Us Phone,” the vintage squawk box through which you place your order. Towering country-boy pickups with “Don’t Tread On Me” plates are common, but Volvos with Episcopal Church decals are not unknown. Curbside service never was just a preening-teenager phenomenon but had an element of general sociability about it. Today, teenaged customers are a minority, behind older folks and thirty- and forty-something parents with young children. Though you stay in your car (which is the whole idea and thus also, these days, correctly “socially distanced”), windows do come down and people still talk, sometimes even to strangers. Carhops bustle to-and-fro with onion-ring laden trays and are thrilled with tips.

Virginia, at this writing, is “socially distanced” but not yet locked down, and small service establishments struggle to profit from what dwindling clientele remains to keep the lights on and the register ringing. Business activity, small or large, is what ultimately pays for public-health and other state benefits. Small business owners do not play fast and loose with dire health warnings, but they do feel competing responsibilities nearer to home than most of us. Cash’s twenty-five hourly employees could probably, for a time anyway, make more money under the increased unemployment benefits of the federal aid package than they can working. And Cash, who is sixty-one years old and majored in economics at Hampden–Sydney—one of only three all-male colleges remaining in America—could probably afford to call it quits if need be, but he resists. Those he employs live closer to the line. Wright’s workers, some of whom have been there for years, are grateful—not just for the income but for the dignity of work. These are not the exalted of the earth, but their labor is as worthy as any scribbler’s, economist’s, or epidemiologist’s. The prospect of unemployment, however generously padded, is mortifying.

C. S. Lewis hammered modernity from many angles, landing some of his heaviest blows with warnings about positivist snobbery. If, he famously warned, we find ourselves on a questionable path, then mulishly pressing on only further confounds our confusion and assures that we will in the end be lost. Contrary to the modern dogma that time marches in step with progress and that the only way out of trouble is through innovation, reality spins us in circles. When that happens, it is essential to back up, find our wrong turn, and only then renew our pilgrimage ahead. Lewis’s big ideas have power because they scale down easily to the local level of ordinary human experience, where even the thickest among us can see the evidence. When Elwood Cash smiles wistfully about 1952, and his son Jim somehow still makes it all work, they bring Lewis’s idea to life: let’s go back and consider things again. That to which Wright’s curbside-service customers return—once thought an outdated mode of service killed off by fast food in the 1970s—becomes a lifeline of survival.

This is not to say that, when skies are blue again, curbside service and mom-and-pops will have much dented our touch-screen, drive-through corporate culture. They won’t, and they’ll probably continue to dwindle. Wright’s provides a poignant illustration, however, of how one of them makes opportunity out of obsolescence and for a little while longer keeps the show—one little

world of work and service—on the road. Remember the sign. To the longstanding “Family Owned and Serving Staunton Since 1952,” Jim Cash, who is a Churchill man, last week added the Old Lion’s famous admonition for a crisis: “kbo.”

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