

Gene Fleming, Dairy Center, remembered

March 14, 2019 [mtairynews News, Top Stories 0](#)

By Jeff Linville - jlinville@mtairynews.com





The parking lot is full at the Dairy Center on West Lebanon Street where Gene Fleming called home for four decades. - Jeff Linville | The News



Gene Fleming bought the diner in 1960 and rebranded the Dairy Queen as the Dairy Center, although some of the older generation still remembered it by the old name for many years after. - Jeff Linville | The News



Decades of high school students worked for Gene Fleming while in school, then returned to visit Gene over the years. - Jeff Linville | The News

Mount Airy lost one of its historic figures when Gene Fleming passed away recently.

Fleming was well known in the Granite City for his four decades spent at the Dairy Center, most of it as the owner.

In 1993, Fleming was 68 years old and still working everyday in the diner, but he would soon sell the business and retire. At the time The Mount Airy News interviewed Fleming about his life. Here are some of the details he shared.

Fleming was the ninth of 11 children born to Fletcher and Cora Fleming, entering the world on Feb. 17, 1925.

He attended North Main Street Elementary, then Mount Airy High School. He turned 18 while still in his junior year in 1943. He tried going into the U.S. Army but was rejected, citing flat feet, he told The News in 1993.

He played football for two years under local legend Wallace Shelton, then after graduating, he was drafted in 1945 by the same U.S. Army that had already rejected him.

By this point, however, the German army had just been defeated (Victory in Europe or V-E Day was May 8), and the Japanese would surrender by Sept. 2. That meant by the time he went through training, Gene didn't have to serve in battle.

After a year and a half in the service he returned to Mount Airy and soon met Nan Booker, his future wife, through a friend who was dating Nan's cousin. The couple were married in November of 1947 and would have three kids.

During that same time he went to work at North Main Grill and stayed for two years before going to work for Simpson's Laundry for three years.

In 1952 he was lured back into the food sector, taking a job at the North Side Cafe.

Two years later he would find his final destination, taking a job in June 1954 at the diner on West Lebanon Street that had opened a few years earlier under the name Chicken in the Rough.

When Fleming came on board, the diner had been rebranded the Dairy Queen. Six years later he would buy the business and change the name to the Dairy Center. In 1963 he would also acquire the lot from well-known Mount Airy businessman H.O. Woltz.

He would stay as owner of the business for 33 years before Freddy Hiatt came on board and later bought the business himself.

Why the fascination with the food business?

"It just grew on me," Fleming said in 1993. "I loved the people and meeting people. The greatest people in the world are customers who come in the door."

Asked about the secret to his longevity and success, he replied, "I've stayed with the basics. I always put the customer first — service first, plus quality food."

Two of the staples of the Dairy Center were Fleming's ground steak sandwiches and hot dogs. Many folks would swear by his ground steak.

As he got up into his 60s, Fleming finally learned to ease back on the gas pedal a little bit. He still went to work every morning, preparing the ground steak and hot dog chili for the lunch rush, but then he would find some free time to get out of the diner.

He liked to go hang out at Russell's, said Freddy Hiatt.

That was a reference to Fleming's longtime friend, Russell Hiatt, who passed away in May 2016 at 92. According to his obituary, Russell was the owner and operator of Floyd's Barber Shop on Main Street in Mount Airy for 70 years.

Fleming said one of the highlights over the decades was welcoming back the former high school students who worked for him while they were in school.

"There were a lot of people who came through there working for him," said Tommye Phillips, the longtime girls golf coach for Mount Airy High School.

“He was a very nice person,” said Phillips. “I worked with him for several years. I got to know him pretty personally.”

“I thought a whole lot of him, and I appreciated the job,” said Phillips. “He taught me how to work hard, how to make a dollar. He was a gentleman to me too.”

Freddy Hiatt said the tradition still continues with some of Fleming’s old employees stopping by from time to time. And, he added, there are folks who return who tell him about how they met their future spouses at the Dairy Center while being served by Fleming.

“He was a humorous man, as funny as he could be,” said Phillips. “He never met a stranger.”

Fleming was a fun-loving guy, said Hiatt. He enjoyed talking politics, though, and that could get him a bit wound up.

He was also a generous man, such as supporting local charities or youth sports, according to Hiatt. Sometimes his generosity was quietly behind the scenes because he didn’t want the attention on him.

When he finally decided to sell the business, Fleming could have just washed his hands of it and been done, Hiatt said, but he cared about his customers too much. He stayed on and helped make the transition as smooth as possible, such as passing on his personal recipes for ground steak and hot dog chili.

“He was the kindest man I know.”

Eugene “Gene” Fleming, 94, is survived by his daughters and sons-in-law, Denise and Kester Lowe and Diane and Mark Wilson; a son and daughter-in-law, Stephen and Anne Fleming; seven grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and a sister, Louise Fleming of Asheville.

In addition to his parents, Fleming was preceded in death by his wife, Nan Booker Fleming.

A graveside memorial service will be held Saturday, March 23, at 2 p.m. at Skyline Memory Gardens, with the Rev. Kevin Wilson officiating. After the service, the Fleming family will have a time of visitation and reflection on Gene’s life at Cross Creek Country Club, 845 Greenhill Road.