

RANDOM SAMPLES

COL. SANDERS' CAN-DO SPIRIT BEAT HARD TIMES

Originally published in *The Blade* on Friday, April 24, 2009

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To everyone searching for a sign of hope in these dreary economic days: I think I found it in a bucket of chicken. Well, next to one.

It happened during a recent road trip that took me through southern Kentucky, up and down lovely mountain slopes as the spring colors began to show. Led by a sign from above — in this case, a cleverly placed billboard — I got off the expressway in the town of Corbin.

That's where I saw it. The sign. Bronze and official-looking, it read, "Birth of a Legend: Kentucky's Most Famous Citizen."

Maybe you know that Abraham Lincoln was born in the Bluegrass State and maybe you don't. It doesn't matter; the sign doesn't refer to him.

Instead, the marker, basking in the neon glow of a fast-food restaurant, celebrates Harland Sanders, better known as Col. Sanders (an honorary title bestowed on him by the governor in 1935 for making food that was finger-lickin' good). It does so for good reason — an independent survey ranked the Colonel as the world's second most recognizable celebrity in 1976 and more recent researchers found that his likeness was recognized by 98 percent of Americans.

AUDIO SLIDESHOW

[See and hear more about Col. Sanders](#)

Not bad for a sixth-grade dropout who held a string of jobs from streetcar conductor to railroad fireman to insurance salesman before starting a service station in Corbin during the Depression.

Like many struggling today, Sanders was just worried about supporting his family at the beginning. It wasn't his plan to start a real restaurant. Rather, he cooked for his family, and if some hungry customers came along he would sell the meals and cook again for his family.

Eventually this expanded to a successful cafe and motel, and the plaque that I found stands next to the restored Sanders Cafe and Museum. Inside is a modern KFC, the fast-food empire spawned by the Colonel after he started selling his secret mix of 11 herbs and spices to franchisees in 1952.

At the time of my visit, I was seduced by the kitsch factor as much as the aroma of fried chicken. I bought some cole slaw, had my smiling picture taken with a statue of Sanders — always ready in his white suit and unmistakable goatee — and stared puzzling at a "Christmas Eve with Colonel Sanders" album cover on display.

For decades Sanders, who died in 1980, has been the face of KFC, a marvelous piece of modern marketing. Only after my visit could I see him as more.

Just like us, this was a man who had to take on the challenges of a changing world. Before starting his restaurant, Sanders once lost all his money in a gas lighting venture when a better electrical system came along. Another endeavor was wiped out by the great crash of 1929 when farmers couldn't pay for what he'd sold them on credit. And when an interstate highway was announced that would divert traffic from his restaurant in the 1950s, he sold it and hit the road to recruit franchisees.

It reminds me of all the unfortunate headlines splashed across newspapers today, all the gloom and doom, layoffs and bankruptcies. To get by, more unemployed and laid-off workers who can't find jobs are considering starting their own business — one in four, according to a survey by CareerBuilder.com.



Who knows, maybe one of them, with a little spunk and perseverance, will turn out to be another Colonel. It may not have been written on that sign in Corbin but its existence should give these entrepreneurs heart: There will always be hard times; sometimes all you need to defeat them is the courage not to be chicken.

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