

LARRY MCMURTRY AT THE DAIRY QUEEN

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



My wife and I were riding through southwest Louisiana last summer when we decided to stop for

a quick bite to eat. At the first fast-food place off the next exit, we found a locked building. “The dining room’s closed,” an employee told us as she stuck her head out the door. “Drive-thru only.”

We faced the same story at our second stop, disappointed that we couldn’t tuck into a table for a little while before resuming our trip. The third time proved a charm as we pulled into a McDonald’s that was open to sit-down customers. The scene inside reminded me what we can gain when diners gather in the same space for a few minutes, even for a burger and fries.

A family inside, obviously out-of-towners, was discussing Evangeline Parish, which they’d crossed before pausing for lunch. They marveled



In avoiding the drive-thru line during a summer road trip, I found fellowship with other travelers.

at its beautiful name, which made me grateful for a place I’d often visited without much thought.

As we waited at the register, a father told me he was feeding his wife and kids before heading to a Florida beach. We compared notes on the best route, a male pastime once cherished before onboard navigation did the thinking for us.

When a woman squinted at the menu above the counter, the manager patted her on the shoulder. “You need to put on your glasses,” he said, making both of them smile. She was obviously a regular, her coffee order so routine that the staff seemed to know it by heart. Her request for extra chocolate drizzle on her frappé made my wife and I feel less guilty about buying two ice cream cones.

In a summer when national life seemed especially frayed, our friendly respite with strangers at a chain restaurant felt like a bit of grace. Finishing my ice cream, I thought of the late Texas novelist Larry McMurtry, who argued that fast-food outlets could be vital sources of community. For the Texan author of *Lonesome Dove*, eateries like his small-town Dairy Queen offered “clean, well-lighted places” and were “simple local roadhouses where both rambling men and stay-at-homes could meet. To them would come men of all crafts and women of all dispositions.”

The kind of fellowship, in other words, that my wife and I couldn’t have gotten in the drive-thru line.

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