

By SAM HATCHER

Long before he thought about folks eating in a restaurant with a country, almost hokie, theme, where the first menus would spell eggs as “aigs,” Dan Evins earned a reputation locally as a dreamer.

Today he would be considered a visionary, but in his early days he was best known as the guy with all those crazy ideas. In his 76 years, he did much.

There’s no way to tell the whole Dan Evins story in the space provided on this page, but there are some things worth knowing that say a lot about this man, who’s credited with being the force behind the founding of Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Inc.

He was a U.S. Marine, a Shell Oil distributor, a devout Republican, and an admirer of Newt Gingrich. His uncle, U.S. Rep. Joe L. Evins, a Democrat, was one of the most powerful members of Congress representing Tennessee’s Fourth Congressional District, which at the time included Wilson County. Dan’s politics and Uncle Joe’s were completely opposite.

He was the first, at least in these parts, to introduce what today is commonly known as “corporate casual.” A handsome gent, he seldom ever wore a neck tie and preferred for office wear cardigan sweaters when the weather was appropriate.

He was a huge Tennessee football fan. In 1968, he and several friends made a trip to Miami to see the Tennessee Vols play Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl.

At the time he was the owner of a semi-professional softball team, the Shell Oilers. Based in Lebanon, the team played a national schedule and was ranked as one of the best teams of its kind in the U.S. The team traveled in what looked to be a converted Trailways Bus. For the trip to Miami, Danny commandeered the bus.

But that wasn’t the end of the story.

Once in Miami, the group got caught up in the glitz and excitement of the surroundings and crashed the Orange Bowl parade. For several blocks before being escorted out of the parade, a dozen or so folks from Lebanon were waving out the windows of their Shell Oiler bus to spectators who had lined the streets along the parade route.

In the mid-1980s, Danny's prep-school alma mater was in serious financial trouble. He had a passion to save Castle Heights. He spent countless hours on campus and tried desperately to rally the community in an effort to save the once prominent military academy. Despite his efforts, his mission failed and the school closed in 1986. He gave money and raised money.

He brought in a well known chef for the dining hall and made a number of other changes trying to get the school back on track. He had one idea after another, but in the end it wasn't a very popular era for prep-school military academies and Heights became a victim, as did other schools in the South, to the challenges of the times.

When he and a best friend Tommy Lowe, another Lebanon native, launched Cracker Barrel in 1969, few around town gave the idea much of chance.

One tobacco chewing country lawyer said "Why would I want to buy stock in a restaurant chain started by Danny Evins? Who knows, tomorrow he may be wanting to buy a train." Dozens, perhaps even hundreds were offered the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of Cracker Barrel at 50 cents a share. And still one of the town's favorite haunts by those old enough to tell it, is "No, I passed because I thought it was another crazy idea."

The ones who didn't pass and made the initial investment saw their return multiply over and over again. They made millions.

Today Cracker Barrel has some 600 locations and a national reputation that is second to none.

Who would have ever thought back in the late 1960s that Uncle Herschel's Breakfast, an item

Thanks Danny

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still on the menu today, would be so important to Lebanon, Tennessee, the place known nationally as the home of Cracker Barrel?

When he opened the first Cracker Barrel near the corner of Leeville Pike and Highway 109, another one of Dan Evins' dreams was begun.

But this one was the big one. It was the real deal.

He's left quite a legacy.

His death has been publicized by newspapers and media outlets all across the U.S. including the likes of *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and others.

The Silicon Valley had its Steve Jobs, but we, too, have a national icon.

Thanks Danny for continuing to be persistent with all your crazy ideas.

That Cracker Barrel restaurant thing is a keeper.

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