

On Nicholasville's Main Street it's still "Service with a smile."

By Jeff McDanald

In this modern age of the convenience store most folks are accustomed to pumping their own gas. The gourmet coffee, fresh muffins, and 11 kinds of beef jerky, are great, but all that does little in the way of keeping your car on the road.

But on Main Street in Nicholasville you can still get service with a smile -- your gas pumped and your car serviced. Within a short two block stretch, you can find three stations that are keeping the service station tradition alive.

On any given morning you can find Poochie Burton behind the desk at Burton's Service Station & Muffler Shop. He is dressed the way you might expect, dark pants and a gray work shirt with the obligatory patch over the left pocket stitched with "Poochie."

The real name is Virgil. He jokingly says he got the name Poochie because he's lived a dog's life. He knows not to get too comfortable in his seat, because it's only a matter of time until the next customer is announced with a loud DING of the bell.

Then he's promptly out the door and manning the pumps just as he's done for the last 45 years. It's usually some lively conversation and service with a smile, but he admits that there are some days when he just doesn't feel like smiling.

He remembers the days before the US-27 bypass when Main Street was a major traffic route. The days when the station was open seven days a week, and it took a staff of eight men to run the station. The days when there were not so many electronics under the hood.

"In the 1960s we stayed busy," Burton said. "We got a lot of out-of-state cars. Vacationers. People out of Ohio going to Herrington Lake. Back then there were ten or eleven service stations on Main Street."

The business began as a Gulf station in the early 1960s. In 1989, the affiliation changed to BP, and today the station is independent.

Inside the station it's a friendly place where you don't have to ask if it's okay to light up a cigarette. Some of the morning regulars like Lloyd Savage, and Poochie's brother Roland are hanging out, shooting the breeze and solving world problems.

Brother Roland ran the station when Poochie was drafted by the Army in '63. Later he had his own service station, Chevron, on Main Street. Another Burton cousin ran an Amoco on Main Street. These days it's still a family affair. Poochie's sons Brad and David are part of the business.

Roland recalled some of the colorful characters that were employed at the station in the old days. “There was Lonnie Bell and then Rock Stevens. There might be some comedians on TV, but these guys had them beat.”

The station survived the Arab Oil Embargo 1973 when there was a shortage of gas, prices were frozen. “There were some days when we wouldn’t have gas,” Burton said. “Then we were supposed to be rationing, but if someone needed gas, I couldn’t see not selling it to him.”

Today most of the customers are regulars, people that Poochie knows. The business is built on trust and good service. The station specializes in mufflers and pipe bending, but does all kinds of repair work. Most of the revenue comes from the repairs, not the gasoline.

Down the street at Charlie Burge’s Marathon (30 years in business), and at Sid East’s Service Station (52 years in business) it’s pretty much the same story. Like neighborhood hardware stores, drug stores, and mom-and-pop groceries, the stations are an endangered species. Most of their business is repairs with the gasoline as a sideline; the station is a social gathering place for a few regulars; their sons are poised to take over the family business; and they don’t open on Sundays.

While you’re visiting, don’t bother trying to find the slot to swipe your credit card on the pumps at these places. The pumps may not be state of the art, but the friendly service more than makes up for it.