



photo North Vancouver Museum and Archives

THE original Tomahawk Barbecue, which occupied a spot on the land that now houses Norgate Plaza. The current restaurant opened across the street in 1960.

Chop talk

NV landmark marks 80 years

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CHUCK Chamberlain has a cruel mistress.

For 62 years, she's been the bane — and the boon — of his existence.

Some days, she makes him feel like the luckiest man alive. On others, she's the Pandora to his Prometheus.

Look closely: you can see it in those deep lines on his face, the dark circles under his eyes. One minute he'll laugh, eyes flashing like a kid with a fistful of quarters in a candy store. Other times he'll sigh and slump in a chair, betraying the yoke of filial obligation that he bears on his shoulders.

But for eight decades that cruel mistress has been the provider for three generations of the Chamberlain clan: his late father and mother, Chick and Jessie; his son, Chaz, 27, and daughter Kaila, 13.

Welcome to the Tomahawk Restaurant, where history isn't just a strong pull — it's an absolute undertow.

Since 1926, the Norgate eatery has been a staple on the Lower Mainland dining menu, famous as much for its Yukon Breakfasts, mammoth burger creations and to-die-for, fresh-baked pies as it is for the collection of native art, tools and artifacts which hang from the walls and peaked cedar ceiling, and the colourful totem-pole pillars that bookend the entrance.

"It's a long story," says Chuck. "I should write a book someday. I'd call it *Between The Totem Poles*."

The eatery's original location was opened by Chamberlain family patriarch Chick 80 years ago, only a tomahawk's toss from the current site on Philip Avenue in North Van.

Chick and his brother had already set up a coffee shop in Heywood Park before he de-

cid to establish the original Tomahawk, on the site now occupied by Norgate Plaza. It was Vancouver's first drive-in restaurant — an ad-hoc town hall where locals gathered to talk shop and eat up, seated on the 14 stools that surrounded the grill, horseshoe-style.

Chuck used to work for his father at the restaurant in the 1950s, clearing carhop trays, stoking the fires and sweeping floors. He also spelled off his mother Jessie — who was as wrapped up in the restaurant's fortunes as Chick — by making lunches for his younger siblings and getting them off to school every day.

"Being the firstborn, you didn't really have an option at that time," says Chuck. "It was just what you did, regardless of what you really wanted to do. Seeing how hard my mom worked, running a household as well as making all the pies for the restaurant and trying to raise a family, I guess that's where I got my foundation."

He toiled for Chick at the restaurant until he was in his teens, when he went to work in the shoe department at the old Woodward's store across the inlet.

It was in 1960 that the Tomahawk switched addresses. It wasn't a smooth transition by any means — in fact, it was the first of a few close calls that nearly carved the tombstone for the North Shore institution.

Depending on their belief system, die-hard devotees who consider the venerable eatery sacred ground should take note: at the time, the building Chick had his eye on as the new site of the Tomahawk was a kingdom hall for Jehovah's Witnesses.

However, a mucky-muck with the Norgate Ratepayers' Association balked at the relocation and threatened court action, saying there was no room for a "hot dog stand" in



NEWS photo Mike Wakefield

THE Tomahawk Restaurant has been in the Chamberlain family for its entire 80 years. Chick Chamberlain first opened the eatery — famous for its Yukon Breakfasts, mammoth burgers and fresh-baked pies — in 1926, and today, his son Chuck (right) and grandson Chaz carry the Tomahawk torch.



what the association was trying to establish as an affluent community on the Shore.

It's clear that the slur still irks Chuck to this day.

"Hot dog stand," he sniffs, wrinkling his nose.

However, after a 14-month battle with the local politicians, Chick and Jessie had their new location — and a new mortgage — on their hands. At the time, money was tight, so the younger Chamberlains worked paper routes, Jessie took sewing jobs on the side and Chuck contributed what he could from his full-time job at Woodward's.

"It was tough," remembers Chuck, who was less than thrilled with the prospect of one day taking over the reins from his father, despite it being his birthright.

"I was quite happy working at Woodward's because I had seen what (the restaurant) was from age nine up to age 16 or

17 and it just was not my cup of tea, and when we moved from the old place over here it was very traumatic."

In the 1960s, Chuck left the Lower Mainland for sunnier climes, and a job managing a restaurant in Maui. But he hadn't even had a year of sand and surf when Chick and Jessie called him home.

He flew back, and son, father and mother drove directly to the Tomahawk's accountant, where Chuck learned the restaurant was again about to meet its fate.

"We were 60,000 dollars in the hole," he says. "I gave it maybe three more months."

Chuck won't go into detail, only saying that some bad business decisions were made by the people who stepped in to work in the restaurant in his absence.

The Chamberlain family then fractured — Chuck and his parents on one side, and

Chuck's brothers and sister on the other. Court battles ensued, and much ill will was sown that likely will never be pruned.

Chuck then stepped in and took over the restaurant, determined to turn it around. It was at this point that his life and the success of the Tomahawk Barbecue became inextricably linked.

The rescue wasn't an immediate one: Chuck still had to juggle payroll deposits and rely on the kindness of suppliers for a long, lean time, but within four years the restaurant was removed from life support.

Today, it's flourishing.

And much like the Chick-Chuck saga of survival, the Tomahawk has since drawn in Chuck's son, Chaz.

Raised by a single father in the restaurant's dining room and kitchen, Chaz has been a busser, a prep and line cook and a server, but now he balances both an acting career and helping his father manage the Tomahawk.

"My dad and my grandfather had the same arguments that me and dad have, so he sits back and laughs and tells me 'I was yelling at grandpa for just the same reason. You don't get it yet, but you will. And when you have kids, they'll be yelling at you about the same things.'"

"I feel a little uncomfortable being the son," says Chaz. "I know I've got some big shoes to fill. I feel like I have to prove myself, so that I'm not riding on his coattails."

It's clear that Chaz hasn't fallen far from the tree — despite the fact that he has been

able to take the time to "find himself" in Europe and attend acting school in the Big Apple while Chuck kept the ship on a steady course back at home.

These days, Chaz works in the restaurant five days a week, while Chuck has a hard time recalling the last time he was able to enjoy a day off that didn't fall on the Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays when the restaurant is closed anyway.

"I live vicariously through my son," says Chuck, giving one of those wide smiles.

The restaurant's longevity and widespread appeal often baffles Chuck.

"It's the most bizarre place," he says. "It's so much a part of North Vancouver and it means so many different things to so many people. I really can't put it into words."

The Tomahawk's popularity is something that Chaz takes great pride in. He tells the story of a married couple on Vancouver Island who had their first date at the Tomahawk 70 years ago. The husband recently marked their anniversary by taking his bride back to the 'Hawk, where Chuck, Chaz and the staff were waiting with champagne and balloons.

"We get some people who say 'Why would you want to eat there? It's dark, it's full of knick-knacks,' and you just have to let them be," says Chaz. "But it means a lot to people. I run into people all the time and they tell me 'I would never think of not taking a visitor to the Tomahawk.'"

Granted, Chuck certainly casts a long shadow for his son,