

Walter Anderson – White Castle

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What was the first fast food hamburger chain in the world, and where did it begin? You are correct if you answered White Castle in Wichita. This innovative company was begun by a man from rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Walter Anderson was born in 1880. He became a short order cook. In 1916, he opened his first diner in a converted streetcar in downtown Wichita.

Walt Anderson liked to experiment in the kitchen. According to legend, one day he became so frustrated with how his meatballs were sticking to the griddle that he smashed one with a spatula. With that, the flat patty was born.

Anderson found that starting with a mound of fresh beef, pressing it into a flat square and poking five well-placed holes in the meat meant that he could cook the burger thoroughly without having to flip it. He also found that cooking the patty on a bed of chopped onions on the grill with the bun on top permitted all of the flavors to permeate the bun.

His hamburgers were so popular that he wanted to expand to additional locations. He enlisted the help of a real estate agent named Billy Ingram. As the men got acquainted, they decided to go into business together on a hamburger restaurant.

But, there was a problem. In 1906, Upton Sinclair had published a book called *The Jungle* which exposed the unsanitary meat processing methods of the time. This book caused consumers to worry about the safety of hamburger.

Anderson and Ingram decided on an approach to food safety which was ahead of its time. They insisted on absolute cleanliness and transparency. They wanted to make their restaurant sparkling clean and white. They equipped their restaurant with white porcelain enamel on steel exteriors, stainless steel interiors, and employees outfitted with spotless uniforms. The kitchen was also viewable by the public so it would be clear that the food was prepared under highly sanitary conditions.

For a name, they combined two words that suggested purity and solidity: White Castle. For the shape of their building, the two men were inspired by the castle-like look of the water tower in downtown Chicago so they used similar design features for their restaurant.

In 1921, they built their first building on the northwest corner of First and Main in Wichita. They used Walt Anderson's cooking style and sold the hamburgers for five cents each. The hamburgers were small and went down so easy that they would later be called "sliders."

The restaurant was so successful that it expanded to a second location in El Dorado and then beyond. In 1923 they expanded to Omaha. Before 1930, White Castle had branched into twelve major cities in the Midwest as well as New York and New Jersey.

Of course, at that time there was no such thing as a fast food chain. The company had to establish centralized bakeries, meat supply plants, and warehouses to supply itself.

The company's business design of multiple locations and standardized products and menus make White Castle credited as the first fast food hamburger chain in the world.

In 1933, the company made a transition in ownership. Billy Ingram bought out Walt Anderson's interest. Ingram then moved the company's headquarters to Columbus, Ohio so as to be more centrally located near the new restaurants that were being built in the east.

White Castle continued to expand and innovate. It was the first fast food chain to reach the landmark of one billion hamburgers sold, which it did in 1961. Eventually, however, other fast food chains would outgrow White Castle.

Today, White Castle has more than 400 restaurants, although none of those are in Kansas. Billy Ingram's descendants still control the company.

It all began with a small town short order cook named Walt Anderson. He was born in the rural community of St. Mary's, Kansas, population 2,221 people. Now, that's rural.

What was the first fast food hamburger chain in the world? It was White Castle, created by an entrepreneur who made a difference with innovation in the food industry. Now, would you like fries with that?

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.