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IN THE WORLD OF BBQ, IT'S THE PEOPLE YOU MEET

Photos Courtesy of **Marge Plummer**

Yes, it is cold outside (-33 degrees in fact) as I sit down to write this month. It is one of those numbers that start to lose their meaning after a while. Afterall, can you really tell the difference between -15 and -33? However, there are numbers that do matter. How about judging or volunteering at over 400 KCBS contests, not to mention actively judging or volunteering at Steak Cookoff Association (SCA) contests, World Food contests or numerous other contests? I am beginning a periodic series of articles on, what I am calling, the "Icons and Legends" of barbecue. And, who better to kick-off the series with none other than Marge Plummer, Ph. B.?

I'm going to start by telling a story that I believe is classic Marge. Once I decided to start this article series, I needed to reach out to Marge and gauge her interest in participating. I started with my editor, Kell Phelps, who provide me with Marge's email address. I drafted an introductory email and fired it off and then waited for Marge to respond. Digital silence. I talked to Kell and he thought maybe Ardie Davis could help. I emailed him and he confirmed I had the right email address and suggested that I should try again. Digital silence. Knowing some friends were heading to The Shed SCA event and that Marge was likely to be there, I asked them to contact Marge if they saw her. Bingo! I received an email from Marge and the connection was made. Little did I know, Marge was not ignoring me, but was having trouble receiving her email and I'm happy to report the problem has been fixed. Up to this point, I had only briefly talked with Marge at a World Food event she was volunteering at in Orange Beach, a second time when we had a short conversation in a hotel breakfast area and, lastly, when passing her turn in boxes to be numbered at the SCA World Championships. While few people likely forget their first encounter with Marge, I'm much less memorable. That is one of the definitions of being an "Icon or Legend" in my mind. I relayed this story to Marge, who laughed with her rye laugh and then, in the kindest, nicest Southern voice, reminded me that she is the

judge coordinator for over 10 contests this year and her contact information is all over the KCBS website. I was politely and memorably schooled by an "Icon and Legend".

While having an accomplished 23 ½ year professional career in information technology at Federal Express, there were hints of her BBQ future. She earned the nickname "The Flying Pig" from her good friend Ardie Davis because she helped get Memphis BBQ delivered all over the world while at Fed Ex. She developed the

Training Management System used for Fed Ex's training programs worldwide earning her first place in Human Resource System Performance (HRSP). Marge also earned the Star Award from Fed Ex which is the highest award given to non-management level employees.

BBQ folks come from all walks of life and contribute their skills and knowledge in many ways. One common thread is that competitive spirit. She joined a group of BBQ friends who did some catering and backyard competitions under the name "The Mesquitos" due to their use of mesquite wood. She recalled winning second place at a contest and jumping – yes, jumping – up on stage only to realize that the trophy they won was taller than she was.

One of her director's at Fed Ex encouraged her to start judging BBQ. She started by observing the judging process and that just increased her passion for BBQ. First came the judging class at Memphis in May in 1993, followed by a KCBS judging class in 1995. You know you are in the presence of an "Icon or Legend" in the world of BBQ when their KCBS number is only three digits (mine is five digits). Marge is particularly proud of celebrating her KCBS Master Judge achievement at The Jack in 1999. The Jack remains one of her favorite contests, although she loves all the contests she goes to. The Memphis in May contest does whole hog judging (in addition to pork shoulder and ribs) and that judging is done at the cook site where the cook presents and explains their entry directly to the judges. Very different from a KCBS contest. Whole hogs have three distinct sections and each section



Marge wearing one of her many trademark tiny hats ... or is she subtly telling me to use my head?



Marge and another of her many and ever-present smiles

has a different taste. Judging whole hog is one of Marge's favorite things to do – that is if the hog is presented belly down since “that’s the way pigs walk.”

In 2002, she was invited to be considered for the prestigious, Doctorate in BBQ Philosophy (Ph. B.) issued by Greasehouse University (KCBS). This designation is awarded to those who have distinguished themselves in the word of BBQ. She wrote her dissertation based on her “The Flying Pigs” nickname and interviewed the restaurants in Memphis that were shipping their products to their customers all over the world via Fed Ex. That was followed by a written exam and an in-person interview before the selection committee. She can now proudly use the earned Ph. B. designation. It wasn’t until 2004 that she became a table captain. A duty she still performs today with a little help welding the large, heavy trays to the table. This is a great example of how well the BBQ family helps each other. She commented that her table is always ready to help as necessary. That is something we can all be proud of.

Marge is truly an amazing person. She has an incredible, but understated sense of humor. Marge told me how she, along with others, delivered goody bags into the hotel rooms of the judges at The Jack. The next day, the talk among the judges was all about how the goody bags “magically” showed up in their rooms. Marge just smiled. With her ever present “Marge’s Mafia” or “Memphis Mafia” as I have also heard it called, she is actively involved in judging, volunteering or participating in BBQ events around the US. As part her wide variety of judging, she recently judged over 250 sauces and rubs. And, yes, she drives herself or carpools with friends to the many events she participates in each year. When asked about her endless energy, she responded, “it just comes natural.” You can understand why you don’t find her home just sitting around.

Marge is an accomplished BBQ cook in her own right and currently has three grills – a Primo, a Big Green Egg and her newly acquired C4 portable grill. She originally won a large Primo but couldn’t easily lift the lid of the ceramic cooker. Her friend and owner of Primo Ceramic Grills at the time, George Samaras, promptly swapped it out for the junior. Talk about great customer service. Her favorite food to put on the grill is a pork roast and sharing it with her family. Hamburgers and hot dogs are welcomed by the family as well.

As a fan of rubs, she serves sauces on the side. She prefers to add just the right amount of sauce to compliment the meat versus having the meat covered in sauce. She does have a favorite sauce



(L to R) – 3 Generations – Grandson Bradley Grooms, Marge Plummer and daughter Pamela Grooms.



Good friend Carolyn Wells (right) presenting Marge with the Carolyn Wells Ambassador Award from KCBS and KCBS board member Myron Berry in the middle.



Marge’s “priceless” collection of pins from The Jack. Oh, if only the pins could talk!

and that is Big Bob Gibson’s. Of course, there is a story behind that as well. In the early days of BBQ competitions, Don McLamore (grandson of Big Bob Gibson), asked Marge to try his sauce. She suggested he add more garlic or rub to it to give it some “umph”. He did and won grand champion at Memphis in May with that sauce and another lifelong friendship was formed. It is interesting how small and interconnected the BBQ world really is.

The BBQ world truly appreciates all that Marge has shared with us.

She has been inducted into the Magic Order of the Mop with the immortal words “In the name of the steer, the hog and the holy smoke, you are hereby inducted into the Order of the Magic Mop.” Members are salt-of-the-earth everyday people who are great at what they do and often pay it forward with a random act of kindness. In October of 2019, Marge was recognized for achieving her 400th contest by KCBS.

A short few months later, at the KCBS Annual Banquet held in January of 2020, Marge was awarded the Carolyn Wells Ambassador Award which is awarded to one loyal KCBS member who exhibits the exceptional qualities of a great ambassador for KCBS. According to KCBS, “the recipient has a high level of good character as well as promoting KCBS as an organization to the public.” A well-deserved and earned recognition for over a remarkable 30 years in the BBQ world. Congratulations Marge!

Marge has one of the largest collections of pins from The Jack – including one of the coveted undated pins. Her years of service and participation at The Jack are legendary.

There is another collection that you may be wondering about, and that is her many trademark hats. She first spotted the little hats about 10 years ago at a gift show in Memphis and was attracted to their unique style. So much so, she bought ten of them that day. As you can imagine, the collection has grown over the years. She even has a special “Old #7” hat she wears only at The Jack. Her hats are a source of pride and certainly can be an ice breaker when you first meet Marge.

I’ll leave you with a very memorable comment Marge made about the camaraderie in the BBQ world. It is so true.

“We don’t shake hands, we hug” ... Marge Plummer, 2020

In the world of BBQ ... it’s the people you meet ... and the friends you make.