



Summer crowds at the Dairy Queen.

Chapter 16

The Dairy Queen

Spring, 1965

Boys, a summer job is a great place to learn how to work: following orders, seeing what needs to be done, and doing it without being asked. If things work out, you may even get to be an assistant manager. But beware, the responsibilities of management can bring challenges you don't see coming. Here's what happened.

It was a warm April evening when I rolled down the driveway on my skateboard headed to the new Dairy Queen with visions of a creamy milk shake on my mind. The Dairy Queen had just opened at the corner of 8th Street and Cheyenne, four blocks from our house and downhill all the way. I stepped on the board at the top of our drive and ten minutes later, I had arrived at my destination without pushing once.

It wasn't one of those skateboards with rubber wheels, independent suspensions, and fancy paint jobs. You couldn't buy a skateboard back then. I had pulled the steel wheels off a pair of old roller skates and bolted them to a 1 X 12 board I shaped with a jigsaw. It wasn't a smooth ride, but at least I could coast the entire way.

Once at the Dairy Queen, I noticed a hand-lettered "Help Wanted" sign in the window. I walked up to the counter, ordered a vanilla shake, and asked the man who was waiting on me about the help wanted ad. He took a look at me and once he determined I was 16, described the job.

"You'll work nights and weekends," he began. "There's a cold side where you'll learn to make shakes, sundaes, and cones with a curl on top. The hot side's where we make Brazier Burgers and fries. You'll learn how to cook 'em all. The pay's eighty five cents an hour, and you get one free cold treat on every shift."

How could I turn down that offer? I needed a summer job, and school was nearly finished. I filled out the application and handed it over. Mr. Vernon, the Dairy Queen franchise holder and the man describing the job to me, read it over and asked when I could start. "How about tomorrow?" I answered.

So at 5:00 p.m. the next evening, wearing a white shirt and white pants as instructed, I rolled up to the Dairy Queen on my skateboard ready to take on shakes, sundaes, cones, burgers and fries. Mrs. Vernon, the Vernon's daughter, Connie, and two other boys, John and Bill, were working that night. I was given a clip-on black bow tie and a white paper hat that resembled the cap I had worn when I was a Boy Scout.

Mrs. Vernon took on cold-side instructions, beginning with making a cone with the curl on top. Seemingly easy, this in reality was no simple task. It took multiple tries and wasted cones, but before long, I could turn out a cone with a curl and even dip it into melted chocolate without making a mistake. My cool-side instruction moved on to sundaes, banana splits, milk shakes, and malts. I was surprised at how the chill from the ice-cream machines kept the cold side relatively cool.

My education then turned to filling the soft serve maker with gallons of cold, but not frozen custard, which was kept in a walk-in cooler. I shivered as I stepped into the cooler; the abrupt change in temperature from the un-air-conditioned customer counter to the walk-in cooler was a shock. Everything in the cooler was covered in frost.

Then it was onto the hot side to learn the fine art of making Brazier Burgers. Mr. Vernon showed me how to cook burgers on the gas-fired grill until they were almost done, then transfer them to a holding container, where they waited until someone ordered a deluxe burger. At that moment the partially cooked burger was taken from the holding container and thrown back onto the grill, which produced a roaring flame two feet high as the grease hit the hot coals beneath the grill.

Fries were kept in the walk-in cooler until needed, then thrown in a deep fryer full of boiling oil, resulting in a small eruption of searing oil. “You gotta do that fast, otherwise that oil will burn you. That’s why we wear long-sleeve shirts and aprons,” he went on.

As I learned the ways of the hot side, I noticed that I was sweating. My paper hat was soon drenched in sweat, requiring a change. Working the hot side was no easy job and was sure to get worse as summer went on and temperatures rose.

Connie, Bill, John, and I settled into a comfortable routine as April turned into May. We took turns working the hot and cold sides while either Mr. or Mrs. Vernon manned the cash register. The four of us liked one another and worked well together. “Brazier Burgers” became “brassier burgers” in our shared language. I thought Connie was cute and asked her for a date.

As summer neared and temperatures rose, the Dairy Queen became a very popular spot. The parking lot was always full of cars, including my cousin Fritz’s

Boys, Here's What Happened

Falcon convertible. Fritz and his friends would order burgers and shakes and then assemble in the parking lot with the hoods of their cars up, looking at the engines and their latest hot-rod modifications. Once the burgers were consumed and the engine inspections complete, Fritz entertained the assembled crowd by revving his engine and dropping the clutch, which produced squealing tires and a cloud of blue smoke as his car roared down 8th Street. "See ya, Chop!" he always yelled from the open convertible.

"Do you know that hoodlum?" Mr. Vernon demanded.

"No sir," I lied with a straight face.

"Well, that better stop or I'm calling the police!" he stated in an agitated voice. "He's going to cause a wreck, or worse!" I made a point to call Fritz with a warning.

June arrived and with it, even hotter temperatures, and bigger crowds seeking cool drinks and ice cream treats. The Dairy Queen's location at the mouth of Clear Creek Canyon and Highway 6, the major route through the front range of the Colorado Mountains, served business well. Highway 6 was the primary route to Loveland Pass and destinations west. I-70 and the Eisenhower tunnel were under construction, but would not be finished for several years. The Dairy Queen was the last stop before entering the canyon. The next chance for food was an hour away.

We struggled to keep up with the crowds, so Mr. Vernon decided to take on more staff. He hired another employee and with the addition of Carl, our smooth-working team had a major problem. Carl did not fit in with Connie, Bill, John, and me. He was one of those guys who was always a step out of order. We went right while he went left. We did our best to work with him and teach him the ropes, but he was argumentative and lazy.

At the end of the night shift and with the store closed, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon and Connie would head home, while everyone but Carl worked hard cleaning cooking equipment and mopping the floor. He mostly watched or just leaned on the mop handle. When we challenged him, he would just look away or tell us to mind our business. "Mr. Vernon is in charge, you aren't!" he yelled. No one liked Carl.

A few days later, on an especially hot Saturday afternoon, Mr. Vernon told us that he and Mrs. Vernon had a funeral to attend and that the five of us were to keep the store running in their absence. "Connie, you handle the cash register and Jeff, you're in charge," Mr. Vernon announced as they walked to their car.

Things started off fine with Carl and Bill working the cold side and John and me on the hot. The outdoor temperature rose into the 90s and it was even hotter inside the Dairy Queen. After two hours, it was time to trade sides. John and I were soaked with sweat while Carl and Bill were fresh as daisies from working on the comparably comfortable cool side. Then things started to unravel.

“OK, Carl and Bill, it’s your turn to cook burgers and make fries,” I said mopping sweat from my eyes while throwing my sweat-soaked paper hat in the trash.

Carl looked at me defiantly, then to my amazement stated, “Not gonna do it! I’m not working the hot side. It’s too hot!” He stood with his feet apart glaring at me with his hands to his sides and his fists balled. He looked ready to fight.

“Mr. Vernon put me in charge Carl, and it’s your turn to work the hot side. We all take turns!”

“Not me. I’m not gonna do it!” he yelled again. Then, he marched into the back room toward the walk-in cooler.

“Where are you going?” I demanded, following him. I picked up a long screwdriver from a counter in the back room as I chased after him.

“To get more custard. The machine’s nearly out!” He replied as he entered the walk-in.

I don’t know what got into me, but I was angry. As soon as Carl walked into the cooler, I slammed the door shut with him inside. John, who was right behind me, held the door shut while Carl banged on the other side. I pushed the screwdriver into the lock slots on the door. “You can let go, John. He’s not getting out of there until he agrees to work the hot side.”

John looked at me suspiciously. “Man, I was worried about that screwdriver. I didn’t know what you were going to do with it.”

“Let me out! Let me out!” We could hear Carl’s muffled voice from inside the cooler.

“Ready to work the hot side, Carl?” I asked. Carl maintained his no-hot-side work position. “OK, we’ll see how you feel about it later. Maybe some of that cool air will change your mind.”

Boys, Here's What Happened

“Woe is me!” was his reply. John and I looked at each other quizzically, shrugged, and then went back to work. Carl was odd. Bill handled the hot side with occasional back up from John and me when the demand for burgers was high. Connie looked at me worriedly, but continued to handle the cash. Muffled thumping could be heard coming from the freezer door.

Thirty minutes later, Connie asked me how long I was going to leave Carl locked up in freezer. “Until he agrees to work the hot side,” I replied.

“Well, maybe we better see if he’s ready,” she offered.

Back at the freezer door, I asked Carl if he’d had enough cold. “Ready to work on the hot side, Carl?”

“Woe is me. You win. I’ll work the hot side,” came the feeble voice from the freezer.

I pulled the screwdriver from the door and a frost-covered Carl appeared with little patches of ice on his hair and eyebrows. It looked as if he had been out in a snowstorm. He glared at me for a minute, then marched to the hot side. I’m sure the heat from the grill felt good by that point.

The next day, suspecting I was going to get fired for putting Carl in the freezer, I resigned from the Dairy Queen. I would have stayed and faced the music, but Dude’s mom, who worked for the school district, came up with jobs for Dude, Joe, and me mowing grass at schools around the county. The pay was \$1.25 per hour, a forty-percent increase over the Dairy Queen! And I didn’t have to work nights or weekends; it seemed like a step in the right direction.

A week later, I asked Connie out on another date. Surprisingly, her folks let her go with someone known to lock people in freezers. After a movie and on the drive home, I asked her if her dad was going to fire me before I quit. She gave me a surprised look. “No, he fired Carl after I told him what happened. He was really disappointed when you quit. He was going to make you assistant manager.”