



Lovie Yancey

The founder of Fatburger

(Sunrise: January 3 1912 – Sunset: January 26 2008)

She was the founder of the Fatburger restaurant chain, which began with a popular post-World War II hamburger stand in South Los Angeles.

Yancey had already operated a restaurant in Tucson and was living in Los Angeles in the late 1940s when she began thinking about launching a new food business.

“I settled on hamburgers because they were the fastest-selling sandwich in America,” she told the Wave newspaper in 1985.

Yancey launched her foray into fast food by partnering with Charles Simpson, who worked for a construction company and reportedly used scrap materials to build a three-stool hamburger stand on Western Avenue near Jefferson Boulevard.

Opened in 1947, the business was called Mr. Fatburger. “The name of the store was my idea,” Yancey said. “I wanted to get across the idea of a big burger with everything on it ... a meal in itself.”

In 1952, Yancey shed both her business partner and the “Mr.” in the hamburger stand’s name, and Fatburger was officially born.

From the beginning, Yancey was a fixture at the original Fatburger, where customers, who included entertainers such as Redd Foxx and Ray Charles, could custom-order their burgers.

“I worked 16, 17 and 18 hours a day behind the counter, seven days a week,” Yancey recalled in the 1985 interview. “I’d come home, catch a few hours of sleep and start all over again.”

Yancey didn’t start out operating an open-all-night hamburger stand, she said in the interview, “but as word got out how good the food was, we started getting requests from night shift and early morning workers – bus drivers, mailmen, street sweepers – to stay open longer.”

In 1973, Yancey opened a Fatburger on La Cienega Boulevard in Beverly Hills, and it became a favorite destination for celebrity burger buffs.

Fatburger even once made David Letterman’s Top 10 list for things he’d miss most about leaving Los Angeles.

In 1981, Yancey began offering franchises in what was billed as “The Last Great Hamburger Stand.”

By 1985, in addition to four company locations, there were 15 Fatburger franchise sites. “I don’t worry about McDonald’s, Burger King or Wendy’s,” Yancey told the Wave. “They may be more popular, but a good hamburger sells itself, and I don’t think anybody makes as good a hamburger as we do.”

For three consecutive years, beginning in 1985, Fatburger was named in Entrepreneur magazine’s annual Franchise 500 list.

Yancey sold her Fatburger company to an investment group in 1990 but retained control of the original property on Western Avenue. The stand was never designated as a Los Angeles historical-cultural monument.

Yancey, established a \$1.7-million endowment at City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte in 1986 for research into sickle-cell anemia. This was in fulfillment of a promise to her 22-year-old grandson, Duran Farrell, who had died of the disease three years earlier.

She died at the ripe old age of 96. In addition to a daughter, she is survived by three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.