

Wandering memory lane with a soda jerk

Marv Garriott conjures up a simpler time in his Rockwellesque shop



VALERIE FORTNEY

BLACK DIAMOND

It's not yet 10 on a weekday morning, and already Marv Garriott is behaving like the star attraction at a Saturday dance in the country.

Sitting on a naugahyde counter stool, his fingers strumming his brand-new guitar, the 58-year-old is singing That's Alright Mama to an appreciative audience of one: a coffee-sipping customer on his way to a day of fly fishing in the Crowsnest Pass.

"We have time for another song, don't we?" he asks rhetorically before breaking into a pretty darn good cover rendition of the classic Elvis tune.

Wearing black trousers and bow tie, a white apron, shirt and server's hat, his delicate handlebar moustache meticulously greased and groomed to symmetrical perfection, he looks like a 1950s soda jerk straight off the pages of a vintage issue of Life Magazine.

Mind you, Garriott more than fits into his surroundings.

When you walk into Marv's Classic Soda Shop, situated a half-hour south of Calgary on Black Diamond's main street, you step back a good half-century, to the days when hula hoops ruled and Gumby was a star of stage and screen.

One half of the shop is dedicated to curios and antiques of that bygone area: The shelves are crammed with everything from vintage gas pumps and plaster Elvis busts, to Coca-Cola posters and model cars. A collection of penny candy, along with vintage treats purchased from a special U.S. web-

site, beckons. And of course, there are his homegrown confections, such as the Marv's Bars, chocolate-covered hard ice cream on a stick.

But it's the other half of his cherished shop, the one that serves up old-style sodas concocted from syrups, along with milkshakes, malts, hot dogs and hamburgers, of which he's most proud.

It's also the realization of a long-held dream that Garriott has been pursuing for the better part of two decades, one that brings together his lifelong passions for music, entertaining and antiques.

"Much of what you see in here today, I've been collecting for decades," he says, pointing to a circa 1910 Nickelodeon, retrofitted to take loonies and programmed to play a selection of classics. "I knew I'd find a use for all this stuff one way or another."

Garriott, a native of nearby High River, is a musician by trade, having played across the country for the better part of 35 years. In 1981, he and his one-time singing partner, Valinda Lee, were nominated for Duet of the Year at the Canadian Country Music Awards.

Over the years, he's also indulged his love of antiques, owning shops in Okotoks and High River; his first shop was purchased for \$35,000, along with a swap of his 1956 Cadillac with the store's then-owner.

And not surprisingly, the man who supplied antiques to such film sets as the Academy Award-winning *Unforgiven*, also managed to get his appealing mug on screen: he appeared as a bank manager in *Unforgiven* and also had a bit part in the TV movie *Black Fox*, which starred Christopher Reeve.

It was during his tenure as an antiques owner, he says, that he came up with the idea for a soda shop. "I started collecting little green ice cream dishes," he says, "and then I collected green and white plates, one at a time."

Over the next few years, he'd

add to the collection slowly but surely: an ice cream freezer, bought from a High River antiques contact; 1950s waitress uniforms, found on a website; a soda fountain and carbonator, which he acquired by trading some old theatre seats; and vintage diner chairs, found at a garage sale and stored in his own garage "for eons."

Friends helped out, too, building him countertops and stainless steel cabinets. "I didn't have much in start-up funds, so I had to be creative," he says.

The final result, opened five years ago and ran with his partner, Launa Blain, is a slice out of time that excites both young and old.

"The children don't even realize there is another way to make sodas," says Garriott. "They think it all just comes out of a can or bottle."

On this day, Nancy and Dave Klinger of Calgary stop in for a coffee and chat with their favourite soda jerk. OK, maybe the only real soda jerk they know.

"This is the best place, I have to stop here every time I come through Black Diamond," says Nancy, who's just met up with Garriott's first customer of the day and his wife for a day of fishing.

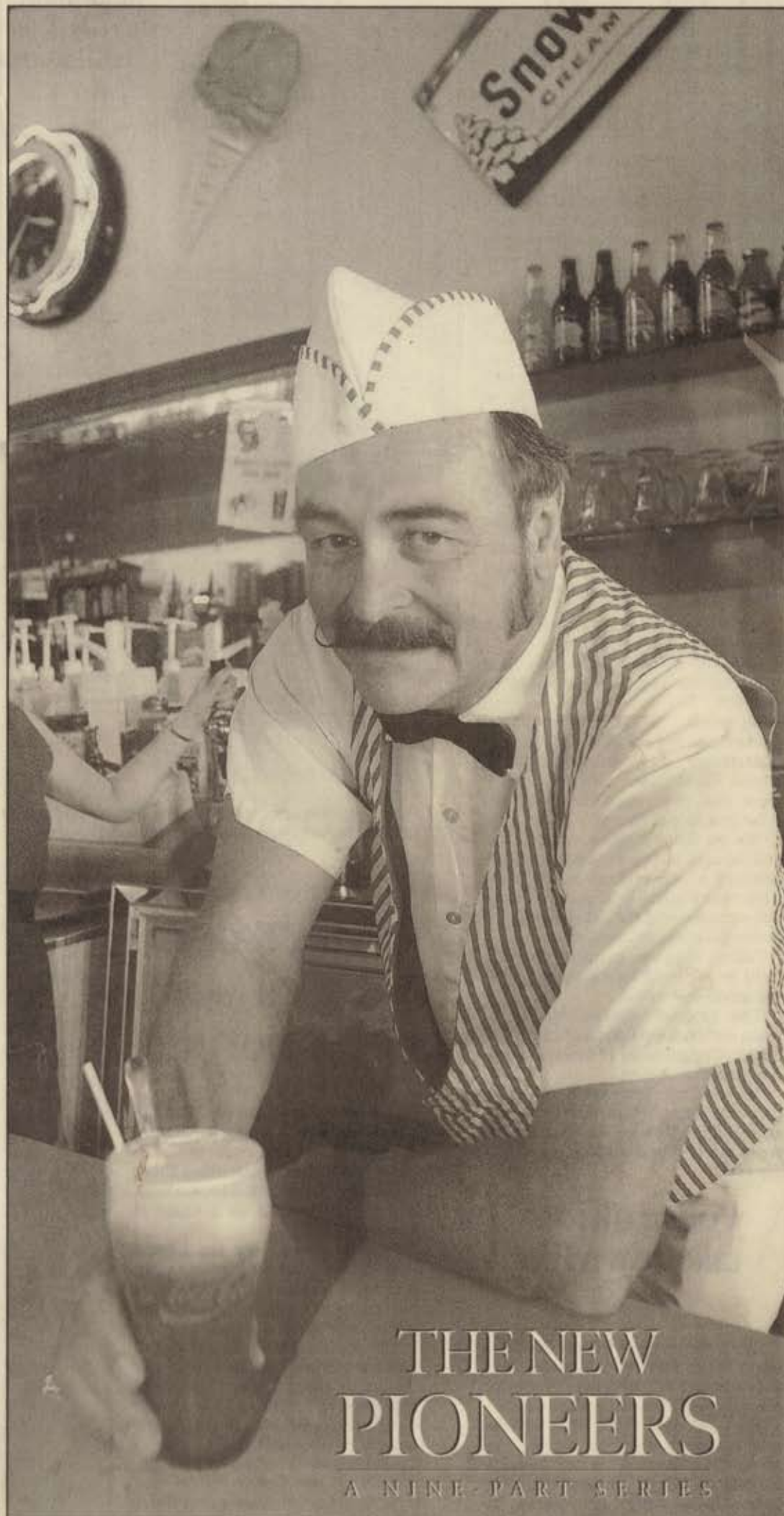
She remembers one visit, when she saw three small children, a girl and two boys about five years old, belly up to the counter with \$10. They wanted three hot dogs, which cost \$10.50.

"Marv said to them, 'I think we can work something out,'" recalls Nancy with a smile.

"With him all dressed up, and these adorable little kids gazing up at him, it looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting," she says.

A rare sight, perhaps, in today's world.

But not an uncommon one when you step into the time warp Garriott has lovingly created in the heart of the Southern Alberta Foothills.



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Marv's Classic Soda Shop owner Marv Garriott serves up classic treats such as root beer floats and banana splits at his Black Diamond store.

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