



Red Arrow Diner celebrates 100th anniversary

🕒 Monday, October 17, 2022 👤 Winter Trabex 📁 Around Town, Business, Community



Carol Lawrence, George Lawrence and Amanda Wihby.

MANCHESTER, NH – A police car parked sideways on Lowell Street on the morning of October 15th blocking traffic while tables with red cloths over them waited for patrons to arrive. Burgers sizzled on a grill outside, sending plumes of smoke into the air. Placards on the sidewalk with oversized proclamations by Governor Chris Sununu, Senator Maggie Hassan, and Senator Jeanne Shaheen recognized an accomplishment few businesses of any kind can match: the Red Arrow Diner had been in business for 100 years.

The public came out in force to be part of history in the making.



Lowell Street was celebration central for Red Arrow's centennial. Photo/Winter Trabex

Humble Beginnings

When David Lamontagne emigrated from Canada to New Hampshire at the age of 12, his only goal was to make something of himself. He began working in the Amoskeag Mills for Manchester Cola and Ice and subsequently, as an adult, as a boxer. He went by the name Kid Davies (not to confused with a UK boxer of the same name). The money he made went towards opening a food cart- an event that went largely unheralded at the time.

Lamontagne had received less than three years of education before arriving in Manchester. Like most immigrants, he had a dream – the American Dream, according to his son Ray Lamontagne, who attended Saturday's celebration as a special guest for the Red Arrow's centennial celebration.

“He believed that coming to this country would provide him an opportunity to build a better life for him and his family,” Ray Lamontagne said.



Ray Lamontagne spoke about his family's strong connection to community through the Red Arrow Diner. Photo/Carol Robidoux

The Manchester newspaper of the day was simply called the Manchester Leader. In October of 1922, when Lamontagne began serving food, stories about a local strike and advertisements for Tanlac tonic filled its pages. The Leader in those days had a local paper and a national newspaper. The local paper had a few different stories at times; nothing had been printed about the initial opening of what would become one of New Hampshire's longest-running, most successful, and most recognized businesses.

The name Red Arrow was taken from a nearby car garage which worked on Cadillacs and General Motors trucks. The Red Arrow Garage was sandwiched in between Simpsons Livery and People's Baptist Church. The vehicles of those days closely resembled the Ford Model T. They pattered around Elm Street while a trolley went back and forth, delivering passengers where they needed to go. A sign outside the first business proclaimed "Red Arrow Quick Lunch." While the garage appeared first, the diner lasted longer, and continues until this day.



By 1929, business had picked up. An advertisement from March 30th of that year proclaimed a location at 1196 Elm Street was “Always Open, Never Closed.” This was the fourth location Lamontagne had opened in a span of seven years.

Weathering Misfortune

The Great Depression, beginning in September of 1929, which saw homes foreclosed on, veterans without work, long lines for food pantries, and overall economic upheaval, did not deter Lamontagne’s business. A photograph provided from the Manchester Historical Association shows a Red Arrow location in May 1933, during the height of Prohibition, still in operation next to a location named Radio Service Lab. Nearby, in the distance, a billboard advertising Hillsboro Furniture Mart can be seen.

The Red Arrow survived the days of rationing and turmoil during World War II. It also survived a fire in 1946, which occurred in such cold weather that extinguishant froze on the building and nearby vehicles alike, with spindly icicles descending towards the ground. By then, the Hillsboro Furniture Mart sign was no longer present.

A photograph of a fire occurring the 1950s reveals the Red Arrow’s various locations at the time: 1199 Elm Street, 61 Lowell Street, 37 Lake Avenue, and what may be 16 W. Merrimack Street. These are only the Manchester locations, and not two others in Nashua.

After the second fire, the restaurant was instead changed into a bakery commissary, a place where food is made off-site and delivered to the restaurant.

Changes in Ownership

Despite having run a successful business for forty-one years, Lamontagne sold the Red Arrow in 1963 to Kennard H. Lang, who would in turn sell it to Levi Letendre, who had been a long-tenured employee at that point. He helped operate a location in Hooksett called "Red Arrow Cafeteria."

By 1965, cars in New Hampshire were no longer uniformly built from the same design. They were as different from one another as could be. There were also only three locations instead of five; two others had closed. Letendre would continue operating the Red Arrow until his retirement in 1978. Following this, his son and co-owner, Mark Letendre took over and ran the business for seven years.

By 1985, the Red Arrow was closed and no longer in operation- a situation that would continue until the company's current president, Carol Lawrence, took over two years later. She was twenty-three years old at the time and a bit taken aback at the prospect of running a business.

Popular Diner Doing It Again

Revived Levi's Has Lowell St. Cookin'

MAY 29 1987 By JOHN CLAYTONER CITY LIBRARY
Union leader Stags Pine Street
Manchester, N.H. 03104-6199

Levi's lives!
Levi's Red Arrow, the downtown eatery that had achieved cult status with generations of discriminating diners in the Queen City, has reopened its doors under new management. After nearly a year of inactivity at the Lowell Street site, the famished and fatigued can again take comfort at the formica countertop that has weathered the weight of thousands upon thousands of elbows.

"It's been very busy," said owner, manager and Red Arrow neophyte Carol Lawrence, "and everyone who walks in says the same thing — 'Oh my, it's so clean.'"

"I had never been in here before we bought the place, but all of the people who come in have a story to tell me about the old Red Arrow," she added.

Lawrence purchased the diner along with her father, George Lawrence, and Roger Bouchard, and their gastronomical goals are reflected in daily specials such as franks and beans for \$2.50 or macaroni and cheese for \$2.99.

"We're approaching the business as if we're reviving an

"We're approaching the business as if we're reviving an old landmark."
Manager Carol Lawrence

old landmark," said the 23-year-old manager. "We're going to serve good food with consistent quality, and we're going to try and stick to the same type of menu that was so popular here before."

In its salad days in the 40s, 50s and 60s, the Red Arrow gained fame for its all-night operation, but at least for the time being, the new owners are opting for daylight hours.

"We'll be open early, at 5 a.m. Monday through Friday, 6 a.m. on Saturdays and 7 a.m. on Sundays, but we're focusing on breakfast and lunch business right away," said Lawrence. "Friday nights we'll be open until 7 p.m., but that's the latest."

Its abbreviated schedule notwithstanding, old time fans are cheering the resurrection of the diner that first opened its doors in 1922.

David Lamontagne was the original owner of the establishment, and after 41 years, he passed the business on to Levi Letendre, who preserved the traditions that Lawrence is now trying to emulate.

"The menu isn't the only thing that's the same," said Lawrence. "Although we did about a month's worth of cleaning before we opened, we didn't do too much remodeling. We didn't want people to look in the window and think we were an expensive restaurant."

RED ARROW manager Carol Lawrence is trying to give an institution by reopening Levi's, the Lowell Street beanery that has catered to generations of Queen City diners.
(Staff Photo by John Claytoner)

“When I took it over in 1987, I didn’t know anything about the Red Arrow,” Lawrence said. “The name you always heard was Levi. I think he’s the one really, who put it on the map back in the day.”

Despite her inexperience, Lawrence has since gone on to run the Red Arrow for thirty-five years with the help of her father, George. It was during this period that the restaurant began garnering national attention of a kind it had not seen before. The Red Arrow was designated as a city landmark in the year 2000, two years after the restaurant became smoke free. This was only the beginning of its rise to fame.

From Strength to Strength

The key to Red Arrow’s success today is its commitment to quality.

“It used to be, we would sit down and we would have what we call cuttings,” said Amanda Wihby, co-owner and chief operating officer “Different vendors would come and show us their food, and we would choose which one we got of a product. Now, plants have shut down for this reason or that reason, so this is all I can get for you. And you don’t know for how long.”



From left, Amanda Wihby, Carol Lawrence, George Lawrence and Brian Lawrence. Photo/Winter Trabex

Despite a lack of availability with ingredients, the Red Arrow as a whole remains committed to finding the best, freshest food possible. All of its bakery items are made at a commissary- a location in Londonderry- in order to maintain flavor profile across all stores- meaning, customers get the same quality of baked goods no matter which store they visit.

The restaurant's quality has been recognized by Guy Fieri in 2007, in a USA Today article which ranked the Red Arrow among the top ten diners in the nation, among celebrities who have patronized the business, among them Adam Sandler, Kevin Costner, Martha Stewart, Paul Newman, RuPaul, and Diane Sawyer. The walls inside the restaurant are decorated with award after award from all kinds of sources over the years, declaring Red Arrow the best restaurant surveyed.

Additionally, patrons often come from other states or other countries to see everything for themselves. The Red Arrow's appeal is universal regardless of affiliation, ethnicity, race, or creed.

"We are also grateful to be an important place where politicians can interact with voters during every election season," Carol Lawrence said. "We enjoy the flurry as statewide and national candidates alike make the Red Arrow Diner a stop on their campaign trails."

Challenges with COVID-19

When speaking of the last two or three years of business, Carol Lawrence remarked, "Challenging. We have a total of four locations, so we had to pivot a lot. But we did it, right? It's tough, it's always something, because it's still hard to find employees."

George Lawrence added, "It's very challenging right now because of labor. Labor is a very crucial part of our business. So that's the challenge."

The shift has required adjustments along the way, said Wihby.



Mayor Joyce Craig was among several local dignitaries who attended the 100th Anniversary celebration. Photo/Winter Trabex

“So in 2020, we had no customers but lots of employees. We were all fully staffed on the other locations for twenty-four hours and all of employees but no customers. We were paying these employees, waiting for our doors to re-open. Then as things got better with the virus, people started coming back but employees were sick of waiting around. In 2021, we had lines out the door but we had no employees to serve them.”

Jayne McKenzie, a manager of the Red Arrow Manchester location, has been working for the company for ten years. She is one of many examples of people who have been promoted within.

“You can see most of our staff here,” McKenzie gestured about the restaurant. “We’ve got seventeen years here, this one’s at seven. In the back, I got one at fifteen, twelve and four. So we have a really good core group here that has been around for a long time.”

When speaking about her experiences on the job, she said, “I don’t have the same day, ever. It’s not monotonous, it’s not boring. We have a great time. We all get along very well. We have a really good daily connection here.”

McKenzie concluded, “My job is to make people happy in the diner every day.”

“Thank God we have good employees,” George Lawrence said. “The ones we have, they’re good employees.”

“Hard work and determination are always rewarded here,” Carol Lawrence added.

“We were looking forward to 2022,” Wihby said. “And now we’re looking forward to 2023. Each year will get better. We’re very grateful for just being here.”



Tyler Isabelle, son of Carol Lawrence, talked about the diner's past - and future. Photo/Carol Robidoux

The Celebration and the Future

When the day of the celebration came, it appeared the Red Arrow had pulled out all the stops to make it as special as they could. Clowns made balloon animals for children. Mascots of the diner and the Fisher Cats roamed around, posing for pictures. Local celebrities such as John Clayton and Mike Morin and politicians of all kinds joined in the festivities, including Congressman Chris Pappas, Don Bolduc, Mayor Joyce Craig, State Senators Donna Soucy and Kevin Cavanaugh, as well as Aldermen Pat Long and Will Stewart.

“We really wanted to serve diner food, so we’re serving American Chop Suey,” Carol Lawrence said. “Our hand-formed burgers. It’s the Number One sandwich that’s been on the menu, and has been on the menu since day one. We also have chicken tenders.”

Along with that, the celebratory menu included mashed potatoes, gravy, mac and cheese, chicken tenders and coleslaw plus a choice of cakes or coffee jello for dessert. The food was served by the staff of Belmont Hall and Restaurant owned and operated by Lawrence’s sister, Cathy Kaliga.



The Lamontagne family received VIP seating in front, nearest the restaurant, seventeen people in total. Among them was David’s son, Ray. He came forward as a guest speaker, wind brushing through his white hair. He moved with a stately, composed grace, and spoke with a lucidity and clarity that belied his age.

Once on stage, he said, “When I looked at some of the menu items, I began to wonder whether

my father might have played a part in the cholesterol crisis in the United States,” evoking laughter from the crowd.

“I grew up here in Manchester, and the Red Arrow was a central focus in my life.

“We were identified by our ethnic origins and the attributes assigned to those origins. But we all had one thing in common: we ate at the Red Arrow. Today I believe Manchester is more diverse and integrated, and I hope ethnic origins are no longer the way we use to characterize people.”

“Fortunately,” Lamontagne concluded, “We still have one thing all in common: we eat at the Red Arrow.”

Source: [Red Arrow Diner celebrates 100th anniversary | Manchester Ink Link](#)