

The RIDGE

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*I've been everywhere man
I've been everywhere man
I've breathed the mountain air, man
Of travel, I've had my share, man
I've been everywhere...*

Johnny Cash's version of the popular trucker's tune is one that travelers can relate to at "The Ridge," Garrett County's most popular family operated truck stop. Truckers and the traveling public from everywhere in the United States have been seeking refuge at The Ridge since the days when the truck stop was little more than a small service station located at the crossroads of US Route 40 and MD Route 219. In fact, The Ridge location had been serving weary travelers even before the days of motorized travel.

Keyser's Ridge became a favorable commercial location following the opening of the National Road that carved a path through the rugged Maryland mountains in the early 19th century.

With the completion of a smaller north-south dirt road at Keyser's Ridge, the intersection became a logical choice for entrepreneurs to accommodate travelers. Early lodging facilities reportedly hosted Abraham Lincoln and other famous Americans as they traveled the primary east-west corridor.

As the internal combustion engine surpassed horses, buggies, and wagons, the National Road enjoyed a resurgence in traffic. Designation as United States Route 40 in 1925 meant the road would grow in popularity, especially during the prosperous 1950's when Americans increasingly fell in love with their automobiles. While automobile traffic increased, the trucking industry also boomed as it became the common carrier delivering goods to regional

markets; truck stops and service stations became part of the American landscape.

By the 1920's, a single bay cinder block building in Garrett County, known as Keyser's Ridge Garage, was part of that landscape. The business advertised tires, tubes, gasoline and sodas.

A small tavern at the intersection, operated by John Stoddard, accommodated travelers and residents.

An updated and enlarged facility constructed before World War II featured two bays for service and repairs, a small lunch counter, and a Greyhound bus stop. The two-story residence built adjacent to the lounge offered rooms for rent.



Keyser's Ridge Garage, circa 1920.

Garrett County resident Franklin Peters later considered the location for a truck stop, which meant that diesel fuel would be dispensed. Acting on the advice of those established in the business, it was decided that prepared food facilities would be necessary to augment the diesel fuel segment of the enterprise. Mr. Peters purchased the property and named it Keyser's Ridge Automobile and Truck Stop, but the title was quickly shortened by residents to "The Ridge."

Ownership transferred from Mr. Peters to his daughter, Louise, and her husband, Hugh Friend, in the 1970's. Improvements were made to accommodate truckers and rigs including expanding the lunch counter to become a restaurant, relocating fuel pumps, and painting the building a lighter color.

The Friends carried out a total rebuild in 1999 that removed the old facilities near the intersection. Hugh Friend commented, "We upgraded tanks to meet environmental regulations and replaced the old building. The old building became inefficient and had the wrong layout for truckers. We now have safer parking lots for trucks and cars, a larger restaurant, and 24 hour service. When people drove up to our corner for the first time after the rebuild, they thought it was the wrong exit." Due to the possibility of inclement wintertime weather, standby generators were installed to keep The Ridge operating for 10 days without electrical service.

Louise Friend notes that a truck stop, by definition, "is a facility that sells diesel fuel, provides adequate space for parking, and has services, typically a restaurant and convenience store." But she also emphasizes The Ridge has become more than just another truck stop. "We have repeat customers that we know by name; they become very loyal. Our oldest truckers have been visiting since they were in their twenties, and we even know the days they will be coming through. Our cook considers which drivers will be stopping on a certain day when the menu is set."

The Ridge also maintains its popularity with other customers. According to Mrs. Friend, "About one third of our customer base is residents, while the traveling public also makes up a significant part of our business."

Sometimes the traveling public can be noteworthy. In recent years Willie Nelson, Mr. Rogers, the Budweiser



Top: Aerial of The Ridge, 1964.
Bottom: Aerial of The Ridge, 2008 photo by Lance Bell.

Horse Team, Vince Gill, the Kentucky Headhunters, the Kendalls, Alabama, Jessica Lynch, professional wrestler Super Fly, the Chippendale dancers, the Geico Racing Team, and the Oscar Mayer Wiener truck have all been guests. And sometimes the unexpected happens at The Ridge, like the time Frank Peter's new Cadillac was used to pull out a tractor-trailer driver that was stuck on a ramp during a snow storm, much to the amusement of visitors.

Louise Friend stresses that customer loyalty is valued by The Ridge owners and employees. "Truck drivers are an appreciative clientele; they are so grateful and understanding. Our success has occurred because The Ridge has been a consistent refuge for travelers. And because The Ridge has that history, people have come to depend on our service."

The Ridge is located in Garrett County, Maryland, at Exit 14B off Interstate 68 at Keyser's Ridge.