

# Kathryn Winstead & Nelle Winstead Montgomery

Founders, Winstead's

Kathryn (1893-1967); Nelle (circa 1898-1990)

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by Daniel Coleman

When they arrived in Kansas City in 1940, Kathryn and Nelle Winstead assumed they were less important than the figures dominating the local scene. Nelle's husband once commented that the Winstead sisters hesitated to open a restaurant in Kansas City because they feared machine boss Tom Pendergast and that Country Club Plaza developer J.C. Nichols pitied them in the early days of the first Winstead's drive-in. History has shown that they underestimated themselves and the power of the tasty burgers they invented, which several generations of Kansas Citians have considered to be their quintessential hometown cuisine.

Although Kathryn and Nelle Winstead spent many childhood years in Smithton, Missouri, both were born in central Illinois—Kathryn in Jacksonville in 1893 and Nelle in nearby Modesto around 1898. As a young adult, Kathryn found employment in an industry hit hard by the Great Depression; she lost her job at a Jacksonville bank in 1929. Younger sister Nelle, who worked for a confectioner and had been employed by the H. J. Heinz Co. as a condiment demonstrator, helped Kathryn open a root beer stand in Springfield to make ends meet. The cold drinks cleared a \$1,000 profit that first summer, but the sisters realized they needed to expand their menu for the coming winter.

To this end, they devised what gourmet wit and native Kansas Citian Calvin Trillin has called the “monumental purity of the Winstead's hamburger.” Winstead's steakburgers, later trumpeted for their global supremacy by Trillin in *Life Magazine*, at first were known only to patrons of Kathryn Winstead's Springfield root beer stand. Within a few years, Winstead's had opened in Jacksonville, Illinois, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Sedalia, Missouri. When Nelle married Gordon E. Montgomery, a World War I veteran who worked as a bank teller in Sedalia, she persuaded him to join her and her sister's culinary enterprise. The three partners studied possible new markets in the region, and finally chose Kansas City, Missouri, where they opened a restaurant at 101 Brush Creek Drive in 1940.

Winstead's pioneered the "drive-in" concept. Many diners enjoyed car-side service as well as the 10 booths and two counters indoors. Drivers backed into parking spots and flashed their headlights to hail a Winstead's carhop, who was sure to arrive quickly and might be propelled by roller skates.

The restaurateurs initially paid rent to J. C. Nichols, but the venture's success allowed them to purchase the property, and they weathered the challenging World War II years during which beef was rationed and often in short supply—trying circumstances for an eatery offering little else but hamburgers.

Benefiting from the emerging car culture of the 1950s, Winstead's became a gathering place for local high schoolers, which led one commentator to wonder how many Kansas City marriages may have begun as first dates at Winstead's. French fries were added to the menu in 1957, joining the frosty malt "the drink you eat with a spoon" as a popular accompaniment to the single-, double-, or triple-pattied main course. The building's bright, streamlined look epitomized its era, and as the years passed, parents and grandparents who returned to Winstead's with their offspring brought new generations of customers. They were often served by familiar faces, as longtime kitchen and wait staff were common at the restaurant.

Kathryn Winstead retired from the business in 1952 and died at age 73 on June 21, 1967, having transformed a root beer stand into a small fortune. The Montgomerys sold Winstead's to King Louie International in 1969, and the new owners added locations in North Kansas City and Overland Park, Kansas.

Nelle Winstead Montgomery died at 92 on December 1, 1990, and her husband passed about a year later, on January 29, 1992. For a time in the early 1980s, the fate of the restaurant seemed uncertain, but eventually Winstead's found new life under the guiding hand of owner Nabil Haddad. Today its famous hamburgers are available at locations throughout the metro area, and frequently can be found in the nostalgic daydreams of exiled Kansas Citians.

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