



Pickens: The Delta's Best-Kept Lunch Secret

By **Doug White**
Photos by Bret Curry

Since the beginning of this column, which is now a year old, we have received dozens of suggestions to try the food at Pickens Restaurant in Pickens in Desha County.

So, off we went down to the richly historic Delta region of southeast Arkansas, just south of Dumas on U.S. 65. We wanted to see what the fuss was about.

Pickens is home to the R.A. Pickens Farm, established in 1881. It is also the home of the historic Pickens Home, a beautiful 100-year-old white two-story spread. The structure is in need of repair, but if you close your eyes you can imagine this "Tara-esque" magnificent place in all its glory. Pickens is also home to the Pickens U.S. Post Office, the Pickens Cotton Gin, the Pickens Store, the Pickens water tower, and most important for our purposes, the Pickens Restaurant.

R.A. Pickens was one of the state's largest landowners at the turn of the century, and at one time the Pickens family farmed about 14,000 acres of Delta land, mostly cotton.

The family was also one of the area's largest employers, providing jobs for more than 500 workers at its peak. The operation was big enough to support a mercantile store and bank where the farmhands would come each day to eat and purchase supplies. The store began to sell sandwiches and meals, and, despite the fact that mechanization reduced the number of employees down to 40, a restaurant opened five years ago to provide hot meals, not only for the help, but for the community as well.

What began as a small experiment has evolved into one of the most popular plate lunches in the state, with folks coming as far away as Paris, France, to eat some down-home country cooking. (More on the Paris connection in a moment, *sil vous plait!*) First, let's talk food.

Pickens Restaurant has sandwiches and they are quite good. They also have burgers, salads, chicken strips and a very sweet, but very tasty, chicken salad. Suffice to say the non-blue-plate-special eater has choices (you know who you are). However, if you come to Pickens to eat, you might as well do as the locals do and order yourself a "special" or, in other words, an entrée, two or three sides, a roll or cornbread and some sweet tea. In so doing, you will pay \$6.95 to \$7.95 and you will thank me.

The daily specials are as follows:

Monday – fried salmon patty, fried chicken, baked chicken

Tuesday – meat loaf, chicken fried steak, baked chicken

Wednesday – fried pork chop, fried chicken livers, baked chicken



Pickens serves up delicious, hot meals.

Thursday – hamburger steak, smoked chicken

Friday – fried fish, smoked pork loin, BBQ sandwich

For your sides, Pickens has an impressive list to choose from: rice and gravy, mashed potatoes, turnip greens, sweet potatoes, macaroni and cheese, baked beans, coleslaw, glazed carrots, green beans, northern beans, hash brown casserole, fried okra, potato salad, corn nuggets, broccoli and cheese, pinto beans, stewed squash, squash dressing, stewed cabbage, black-eyed peas, deviled eggs, french fries and lima beans. They usually offer a fresh seasonal veggie as well.

On our initial visit, we tried a bit of everything. The food was outstanding, as was the service. The friendly staff takes your order at the counter, you grab your drink and once your order is ready, a worker hollers out your name. The place was packed with regulars (including the county sheriff, who can be found there most days) and out-of-towners. In fact, there was a tour bus of women from Little Rock. One of the women in the group had a special guest on the visit – a food critic from Paris. I don't know what she will write about her visit to Pickens, but I can attest that she had a huge smile on her face and a near-empty plate.

Although the food is definitely the highlight, the ambience of the country

