



Flying High at the Parachute Inn

By **Doug White**
Photos by Bret Curry



Walnut Ridge is a cozy little town and county seat of Lawrence County in northeast Arkansas.

We dropped in at the Parachute Inn and just about the entire population joined us. Okay, maybe all 4,900 residents weren't there, but it sure seemed like it.

Among the "who's who" at our noon visit were the mayor (Don House, former state legislator and a walking encyclopedia on his hometown); several professors from Williams Baptist College (a four-year Christian, liberal arts college located nearby); the women's basketball team and coaching staff; several members of the Walnut Ridge Police Department; the publisher of the *Walnut Ridge Times Dispatch*, John Bland; and the Walnut Ridge Kiwanis Club, plus dozens of regulars and maybe a few "fly-ins" (more on these later).

The obvious question: Why? Why did all these folks converge at this place, on this date, at noon on a Thursday? The answer: Thursday is catfish day at the famous buffet at the Parachute Inn. Duh!

For us first-timers, the appeal was twofold. Yes, the food was the major draw (the column is called "Let's Eat" for crying out loud), but the opportunity to dine in the fuselage of an actual Southwest Airlines 737 was a no-brainer.

Back in 2004, Donna Roberts purchased the fuselage of a retired Southwest Airlines



The Parachute Inn is located at the Walnut Ridge Regional Airport.

737 and began the process of "merging" the fuselage to an already existing restaurant, which opened in 1968 with owners Harold and Janie Johnson. The remodeled fuselage provides a 92-foot long, 14-foot-wide, 60-seat addition. Rhonda Higginbotham, a proud member of Clay County Electric Cooperative, purchased the Parachute Inn from Roberts in 2008.

"It is truly a labor of love," said Higginbotham. "This community is like an extended family, and we really enjoy feeding folks a good meal at a fair price."

Upon entering the restaurant, you are immediately faced with a choice – either eating in the traditional restaurant (nearer to the buffet line) or taking a left and entering the aircraft. The hallway connecting the two is adorned with vintage Southwest Airlines memorabilia, photos and newspaper articles.

We wanted the full experience, so Higginbotham escorted us to our seats in the plane. As you walk to your seat, the overhead luggage compartments have signatures and dates on them.

"Most of the signatures are from Southwest employees," said Higginbotham. "Many of them fly in just to see our restaurant and eat." There must have been a hundred autographs of current and former employees of the vaunted airline.

Although the buffet is by far the most popular choice among patrons, we also wanted to try some dishes from the menu. The Parachute Inn burgers are tasty and include by-the-book hamburgers, cheeseburgers and

bacon cheeseburgers with all the fixings. The chicken tender meal was a real hit, topped off with some onion rings and tater tots.

We left our cabin and sauntered down to the buffet line. I mimicked the choices of our law enforcement friends and was tickled that I did. Otherwise, I might have missed our clear favorite among the entrée choices – the spicy fried catfish. The Cajun spices mixed perfectly with the batter, and the result was both unique and addictive.

The buffet's entrees change daily. In addition to an array of side dishes and a salad bar, the buffet features meat loaf, chicken and dumplings, fried catfish, chicken fried steak and chicken livers.



The Parachute Inn's retired 737 fuselage makes for a unique dining experience.

A popular seafood buffet is offered on Thursday nights, so a return visit is definitely in the cards. Breakfast is also served Tuesday through Saturday.

Parachute Inn is located at 10 Skywatch on the edge of Walnut Ridge Regional Airport's Swindle Field. The restaurant is open for breakfast (Tuesday – Friday from 7 to 9:30 a.m.), lunch (Tuesday – Friday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.) and dinner (Friday and Saturday from 5 to 8:30 p.m.). Call 870-886-5918 to learn about the daily specials. Want to know more? Find video interviews, photos, recipes and more at Arkansas Living on Facebook at: <http://www.facebook.com/ArkansasLivingMagazine>. Do you have a restaurant to recommend for Doug? Contact him at doug.white@aacc.com.

