

Contra Costa Times

Business soaring at Oakland's Fenton's, thanks to 'Up!'

By Tony Hicks

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OAKLAND — At first glance, Dug stands as the only visible indicator of Fenton's newfound stardom.

The cerebrally challenged talking pooch from "Up!" obediently stays atop a case in a corner of the landmark Piedmont Avenue ice cream parlor. Of course, he's stuffed, which makes it easier to take photos.

But his presence hasn't been missed by fans of Pixar's animated summer hit. Business has been up — so to speak — at Oakland's 115-year-old ice cream parlor and restaurant ever since late May when "Up!" audiences noticed Fenton's, which plays a small, but key, role in the film.

The line was once again out the door Saturday as it has been since late May, with plenty of former Fenton's lovers coming back to join the regulars that often spill onto the patio.

When they take their kids to "Up!" old-timers remember the taste of cold vanilla mixing with hot fudge, while sitting on iron-backed chairs at marble tables. They remember seeing the man in the white hat near the back, pouring gum balls into a humming machine to make bubble gum ice cream.

And as the dig into their Black & Tan, they're talking about "Up!" in which an 8-year-old chubby, overeager Boy Scout named Russell muses about sitting on the curb outside Fenton's, counting red and blue cars with his estranged father. Later, he recreates the moment with grandfatherly Carl Fredrickson (voiced by Ed Asner) and his loyal dog, Dug. As the camera pans up, Fenton's famous facade fills the screen.

It caught at least one longtime Fenton's fan by surprise.

"I had no idea it was in the movie until we spotted it there," says Dave Anderson, who brought wife Cathy and his three grandkids from Clovis to Fenton's after seeing the film. "It's a tradition. I'm 65, and I've been coming here since I was 10."

Owner Scott Whidden doesn't think the store has become a tourist attraction yet. But the past few weeks have brought a lot of faces from years gone by.

"I don't know if out-of-towners connect with it, but for people who know Fenton's, they see the name and there's something magical about the connection," says owner Whidden, whose family has owned Fenton's for decades. He says the store is expanding across the street later this year, with a soda fountain where kids can get involved in the making of their own treats.

The ice cream parlor is the most recent in a long line of local connections integrated into Emeryville-based Pixar's films. "The Incredibles" featured a police chase down San Pablo Avenue, which runs from Oakland to West Contra Costa. Much of "Monsters vs Aliens" took place between San Francisco and Modesto. Even the flying house from "Up!" is based on a Victorian in West Berkeley.

The film's director Pete Docter lives nearby and is a longtime Fenton's customer. Groups of Pixar employees regularly frequent Fenton's for lunch and special events. So it was only natural for Fenton's to be cast when the script called for an ice cream store.

"I've seen a lot of people sitting on the curb, eating their ice cream," says manager Jeffrey Unverserth. "Kids come in and want to see Dug the dog and want to know how many red and blue cars have come by today."

The store is being careful not to exploit its newfound fame; there's nothing inside indicating the movie tie-in. Other than Dug, which was a gift from Pixar, the only other memento is a framed picture of Fenton's appearance in the film hangs in the manager's office.

Fentons does, however, offer a free ice cream scoop to ticket stub-wielding customers, many of whom take pictures in front of the building.

"It was fun," says Joel Gonzales, who sat in a booth with his 3-year-old son Diego. "We were talking to Diego about coming to Fenton's. Then we saw it in the movie and I said 'Hey, that's where we're going.'"

Grant and Garner Hendrick saw the movie and brought their 11-year-old, banana-split-devouring son Graham from San Carlos for a taste of the real thing. "It was a while since I'd been to Fenton's, but I remembered it," Garner said. "That was really cool to see. That's why we came here."

Unverserth says the movie shows how the community feels about Fenton's. "Some of our employees said when they saw the movie and Fenton's came on, the whole movie theater started applauding. This is a global movie, so for people who don't know what Fenton's is, it has that connection."