

New star rises with 'Where's the beef?'

The most talked-about actress in America sat silently while her director determined whether the camera angle was right. Even though there was a flurry of activity all around her, she appeared to be so calm she might have been getting ready to go to sleep.

"We'll be set in just a minute," the director said to her.

The actress nodded her assent. This was not Meryl Streep, Debra Winger or Goldie Hawn. Who talks about them?

This was Clara Peller, the woman in her late 70s who has rocketed to fame on the strength of one line of dialogue:

"Where's the beef?"

Peller — a Chicago widow who used to work as a manicurist — is the star of Wendy's Hamburgers



Bob Greene

commercial in which she uttered her now-immortal line. In that commercial, Peller — paired with two other elderly women — stood at a counter that was designed to look like part of one of Wendy's competitors' restaurants. When the tiny hamburger arrived on a huge bun, Peller looked at it and said ... well, you know what she said.

"Where's the beef?" quickly became a national catchphrase. Political cartoonists use it with their drawings. Bar patrons say it to one another as they wait for drinks. Crowds at college basketball games chant it during time-outs. Ministers base their Sunday sermons on it.

And now Wendy's was preparing to shoot a sequel to the commercial. The cast had been reassembled; along with Peller there were Elizabeth Shaw and Mildred Lane, the two women who had appeared with her in the first commercial. All eyes in the room were on Clara Peller, though; she was the one who had said the magic words in all of those living rooms, and she was the new superstar.

Joe Sedelmaier, the director of the "Where's the beef?" commercials, conferred quietly with his assistants and technicians. Off to the side, William Welter, executive vice president of Wendy's, looked at the scene and marveled.

"This is amazing," Welter said. "Our business has increased dramatically as a direct result of these commercials, and there's no doubt that Clara is the big reason why. People just love her. She's not some 32-year-old sexy broad; she's real. She appeals to everyone from 2-year-olds to 90-year-olds. We know, because we see the fan mail."

Wendy's does not like to talk about it, but they almost lost Clara Peller last week. After the success of the first commercial she hired an attorney, and for a few tense days it seemed as if the Wendy's attorneys and Peller's attorney might not be able to reach an agreement on a contract for the new commercial.

But things had been worked out. Now, as she waited for Sedelmaier to start shooting, she sat with her two fellow actresses.

"I heard they were going to make posters of us," Elizabeth Shaw said.

"I thought it was placemats," Mildred Lane said. "Whatever," Elizabeth Shaw said. "I'll just talk to my agent." She turned to Clara Peller. "You're the star," she said. "We're just the background."

Peller stared down at the floor, where a tape mark had been placed to show her where to stand when the shooting started. Behind the three women was a sign that said "HOME OF THE BIG BURGER."

Sedelmaier was ready. Aides carried a Styrofoam cup of icewater to Peller. She took a sip.

"All right," Sedelmaier said. "Let's do it."

The women stood up. The idea was that the three were supposed to be back in the restaurant again — this time trying to complain to the manager. In the commercial they stand at the counter, in front of a huge bun and a tiny burger, and Mildred Lane holds a telephone — ostensibly trying to call the manager.

The camera rolled. Mildred Lane said into the telephone, "We know it's a big, fluffy bun."

Elizabeth Shaw stage-whispered to her, "Talk to the manager."

Down on the floor, hidden from sight, a production assistant named Dwight Irwin sat with his right hand grasping the hem of Clara Peller's dress. Peller is hard of hearing; it is difficult for her to hear her cues. So when it is time for her to speak, Irwin's job is to pull on her dress as a signal.

As soon as Mildred Lane had said, "It is the manager," Irwin pulled on Peller's dress.

And Clara Peller blurted out, like an angry foghorn:

"Where's the beef?"

"Really let 'em have it," Joe Sedelmaier said.

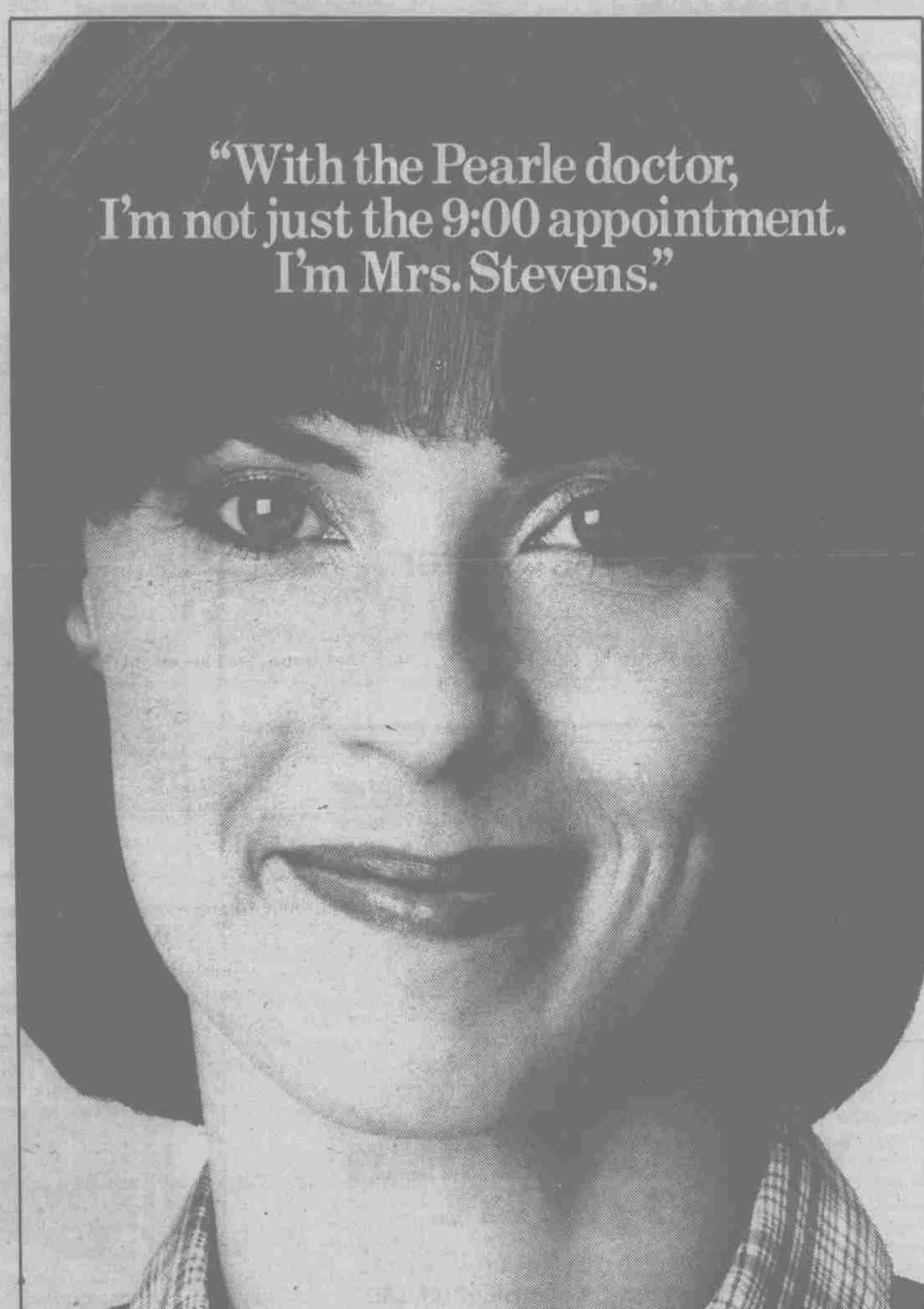
"Where's the beef?"

"Where's the beef?" Clara Peller bellowed again.

"Wait until he tugs on your dress," Sedelmaier said.

Wendy's is spending \$11 million on the "Where's the beef?" campaign. Clara Peller, the most valuable part of the \$11 million expenditure, readied herself for another take. America, America.

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