

CHAPTER 1

SKYSCRAPERS AND CHIPPED HAM: REMEMBERING ISALY'S IN BROWNSVILLE

“When I remember Isaly’s in Brownsville, it is ‘white’ that comes to mind. The exterior and the interior sparkled.”

“The white starched peaked caps were an Isaly’s tradition.”

“Who can forget those huge dill pickles that would draw your mouth with the first bite!”

Welcome to Isaly's!

The Isaly's store in Brownsville survived for less than a decade, but there is no shortage of folks who can tell you all about it. Let us travel back to the 1950s to visit Isaly's, talk to its employees and customers, and remember the popular items that made the store a favorite stop for Brownsville residents.

Brownsville's Isaly's store opened in 1949, but the Isaly's Dairy Company was created a century before that. Christian Isaly's original specialty was not ice cream or chipped ham. It was cheese. When Mr. Isaly emigrated from Switzerland to Ohio in 1833, he brought along a copper kettle in which to make his cheese. His business grew from a cheese-making enterprise into a dairy business, and eventually Isaly's Dairy Company was formed to sell dairy products, including ice cream, through retail stores in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

In 1931, an amateur magician named Sam Loy graduated from Pittsburgh's Westinghouse High School. Sam began playing the circuit of Pittsburgh theaters as "Loy, The Boy Magician," but he soon traded his magic wand for an ice cream scoop, taking steady employment as a

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clerk at Isaly's in Pittsburgh. He was employed by Isaly's for several decades, working his way up to supervisor of Mon Valley stores. When he retired from the company, he moved from Mount Lebanon to Brownsville, and in January 1949 he opened an Isaly's franchise store in the Neck.

Sam Loy, Jr., the son of the man who brought Isaly's to Brownsville, now lives in retirement in Mesa, Arizona. He was in his early teens when he, his father, his mother Clara, and his brother George moved to Brownsville.

"We moved into a house on National Pike East," Sam, Jr. told me, "across Route 40 from an auto repair shop that was up the hill from Front Street. The house, owned by Andy Grueser, was still there last summer when I visited Brownsville. Later we moved into a house on High Street next to Judge Cottom's residence. When I visited last year, that house was being torn down."

The downtown building in which Isaly's was located is still standing at 24 Market Street. More recently, Ernie's hardware store was located in the storeroom once occupied by Isaly's. The shiny off-white facade above the store's entrance has changed little from the 1950s when it bore the name Isaly's in stylish script.

According to several longtime residents, the building was



Serving behind the counter were (from left) Urethe Momeyer (1st Assistant Manager), Sam Loy, Sr. (owner), and workers Helen Komacek, Al Komacek, and Bob Huston. Mr. Komacek identified the two girls being served as Helen Joseph (foreground) and Shirley Dando (behind Joseph).

constructed in the thirties or forties after a spectacular fire destroyed its predecessor. In the 1950s, the structure housed three side-by-side businesses, with Isaly's located in the left bay.

To the left of Isaly's was Hopson's wallpaper and paint store, then the Nut Shop; to the right was McKenna's shoe store, then Kroger's grocery store.

Sam Loy, Jr. described the interior appearance of his father's store.

“As one entered the Market Street entrance,” Sam explained, “there was a rack for retail bread sales on the right. Along the right wall were tables and chairs of the fifties-era chrome and formica style.”

“I remember moving those tables and chairs to do the mopping,” added Al Komacek of LaBelle, who worked at Isaly's while he was a student at Brownsville High School.

“I scrubbed the floor, so I distinctly remember that the floor was white tile with an occasional black tile interspersed among the white. The serving counters were on the left.”

On those serving counters were displayed many delectable dishes.

“To the left as you entered,” said Sam Loy, Jr., “was a refrigerated case displaying meats, cheeses, potato salad, cottage cheese, and other items, while underneath were quarts of milk and buttermilk for retail sale. Next was a cash register and non-perishables, including a huge glass jar of dill pickles. Then came the candy and ice cream counter, where the various flavors were displayed in large tubs. At the end of the line was the steam table, where hot lunch and dinner items from the kitchen were sold cafeteria-style.”

One large tub in the ice cream display case did not contain any ice cream.

“Among the huge tubs of ice cream was an equally large tub of Lemon Blend – spelled with two n's,” said Al Komacek. “It came concentrated in quart or half gallon bottles, and we would mix it in an ice cream container.”

Isaly's was a favorite place for hungry shoppers, businessmen, and school students to eat lunch, and cook Betty Mortland (Letrick) was in charge of keeping the steam table well stocked with hot foods.

“Everything Betty made was very good,” declared Al.

“Was it possible to special-order a hamburger or something in particular?” I asked.



Lunchtime patrons choose their favorites from the hot foods selection at Isaly's. Earl Storey (left), owner of a stationery store in Snowdon Square, was a frequent customer.

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“No,” Al said. “You had to choose from what was there in the cafeteria line, but the selection was rather extensive. Some items were there every day. They always had chipped ham barbecue, beans and wieners, and macaroni and cheese. Other items were specials that changed from day to day. There was also a grill for making hamburgers and hot dogs, and there were pre-made wrapped cold cut sandwiches too.”

Al’s sister Helen worked at Isaly’s in the early 1950s. She recalled a small room in the rear of the store, beyond the serving area.

“There was a back door in Isaly’s,” said Helen Komacek Staruch, who now lives in Butler. “It exited from the left rear of the restaurant to a parking lot that faced Snowdon Square.

Between that back door and the kitchen was a little anteroom. The employee schedule was posted in that anteroom, and next to the schedule was a cabinet in which entire pies were kept after they were delivered by the big Isaly’s truck. The popular ones were coconut cream, chocolate cream, banana cream, and a few fruit pies. They also had an apple pie that had a sugary crust and was a big seller, but I do not remember what they called it.

“We had a large deli with luncheon meats, cheese, eggs, Isaly’s boxed candies, Isaly’s ham, and Isaly’s chipped ham,” Helen continued. “All of the cheeses and luncheon meats were Isaly’s brand as well. They had quite a variety of Isaly’s products.”

“Did you say there was an Isaly’s brand of candy?” I asked.

“Yes,” Helen said. “The candies were manufactured, boxed, and marketed under the Isaly’s name. They were a precious commodity at Christmas time, because they made wonderful gifts. The box was silver with the Isaly’s name in large script letters on it. At Christmas they wrapped the box in cellophane with little snowmen or Christmas trees to make it more festive. Isaly’s candies, such as the chocolate-covered nougats, were exceptional.”

Working in a place where one was surrounded by such tasty temptations certainly had its advantages. Next, join us for more stories and photos as former employees share memories of working at Isaly’s in Brownsville.

BROWNSVILLE ISALY’S EMPLOYEES REMEMBER THE FIFTIES

Sixteen.

That was the magic number at the ice cream counter in the



Sam Loy, Sr. serves up some famous Isaly's skyscraper cones to a group of appreciative youngsters. Among the boys are Sam Gallaher (left), Louis Mangini (2nd from left) and Jerry Elliott (5th from left).

Brownsville Isaly's store. Nothing less was acceptable to the boss.

“When we made those skyscraper ice cream cones,” said Al Komacek, who started working at Isaly's in 1949, “we were expected to get sixteen cones out of each layer of ice cream in the big tub of ice cream. We used an ice cream scoop that was shaped like a narrow garden trowel, and we were taught to get our first

scoops from around the outside edge of the round ice cream container. Then we would move to the untouched surface inside that circle to get our next scoops.

“When we had filled our sixteenth cone, there would be sixteen holes in the ice cream's surface. We would then take a flat spatula, push the remaining ice cream down into the tub, and level it off.”

Al's sister, Helen Komacek Staruch of Butler, worked at Isaly's and learned the art of skyscraper-shaping from an expert.

“I was taught by the boss himself,” Helen said. “Sam Loy, Sr. taught me to push down into the ice cream with the scoop, twist it around, then pull it up and fill the cake cone.”

Sam Loy, Jr., son of the owner, now lives in Mesa, Arizona. “Isaly's patented the skyscraper as a proprietary item in the early 1930s,” Sam revealed. “Eventually others swiped the scoops and sold skyscrapers at competitive stores.”

Whatever happened to those special ice cream scoops that were once used to fashion Isaly's famous skyscraper ice cream cones?

To be honest, I hadn't wondered about that at all until I received a phone call from Don Flowers of Chalk Hill. Don called to discuss the Brownsville Isaly's store, which operated from 1949 until the mid-1950s.

“I am a collector of ice cream memorabilia,” Don told me, “and I have several ice cream scoops with the Isaly's name on the handle.”

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“Would those be some of the original scoops that Isaly’s used to make their skyscraper cones?” I asked.

“No, they are not the originals,” Don said. “In 1929, the ‘Rainbow’ scoop, which was patented by a company by that same name, was sold to Isaly’s. That type of scoop was used to make the skyscraper cones. Then in 1935, a company in Ohio manufactured a nearly identical ice cream scoop and placed the Isaly’s name on the handle. The Ohio company avoided charges of patent infringement by calling it a ‘spoon’ instead of a ‘scoop.’ The patent office granted the company a patent on it.

“Scoops with the Isaly’s name on them are scarce. According to Brian Butko’s excellent book, *Klondikes, Chipped Ham, & Skyscraper Cones: The Story of Isaly’s*, when Isaly’s closed in Pittsburgh, the family liquidated its holdings in the company. The Isaly’s board of directors held its final meeting in March 1972, and rumor has it that Henry Isaly ordered all of the Isaly’s scoops gathered up and buried! That increased the value of any used Isaly’s scoops that are still around, and today they are very desirable items for collectors.”

My brother-in-law, Kirby Kiefer of Gettysburg (originally of Scottdale), shared an interesting tidbit with me. Kirby spoke with a retired regional manager for Isaly’s, who shared his insider’s perspective of why that patented scoop was so important to Isaly’s.

“The fellow told me that there was more than marketing behind that special scoop,” Kirby said. “Normal ice cream scoops require that you dig ice cream out of the tub. When you do that, it squeezes some of the air out of the mix, so the customer actually gets more weight of ice cream. Moreover, some of the ice cream is stuffed inside the cone.

“The Isaly’s scoops were different. They kept the air entrapped in the ice cream, and they also put the ice cream outside the cone, rather than partly inside it. The customer appeared to be getting more ice cream, when in fact he was getting more air! In this way, Isaly’s got more servings per tub of ice cream.”

Hank Greenberg resides in Woodland Hills, California, but the Brownsville native still remembers the day he yearned for a skyscraper but his pockets were empty.

“One day I forgot my nickel,” Hank said, “and I just had to sit there while my friends enjoyed themselves, eating these cones of ice cream that looked like big ears of corn. I guess I looked mighty sad, because the owner came over to find out what the problem was. When I told him, he said he would charge the ice cream, and I could stop in later and pay him.

“He knew my dad, and when he next saw him, he jokingly told him

to remind me to bring in my nickel. Of course I did stop in later and pay. This was one of the things that could happen in a small town where you almost knew everyone.”

Sam Loy, Sr. believed in placing responsibility in the hands of the young people he employed.

“I was sixteen years old when I began working there,” Helen Komacek Staruch recalled, “and within six months, I was made head clerk. A few months later, I was in charge of the other employees, mostly high school kids. I was ordering all of the food items for the business and closing the store at night.

“At the end of the day, I would take the money out of the till and count the cash. We had one cash register for the dairy and deli, a second one for the soda, soft drinks and ice cream, and a third register near the coffee pot for the hot food, steam table and hot beverages. I was responsible for taking all of the money to the office, which was up a few steps behind the kitchen, and counting and recording it.”

“Was Isaly’s your first job?” I asked Helen.

“No. I had been working weekends selling shoes at the Endicott Johnson shoe store next door when my mother saw an advertisement in the Brownsville *Telegraph*. It told of a new Isaly’s store opening in town. She encouraged me to apply for a job there.

“I got the job and worked after school and every weekend including Sundays. The busiest time was on school days between 11:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., when students came in to eat. Isaly’s was jam-packed. Mr. Loy asked me if I could come down from the high school, just for one hour. I would leave the high school on High Street, go in for forty-five minutes to an hour, then sit down, have my lunch, and go back to school for afternoon classes.”

“How many years did you work at Isaly’s?”

“I graduated from high school in 1951, and during college I worked a five-day week until I was a junior or senior. I worked there at least six years.”

“Did Mr. Loy employ a lot of people?”

“Oh, yes. On busy days there were at least three or four people behind the counter, plus the boss, the cook, and a busboy. Betty Mortland was the cook, and she was usually there as early as six or seven to prepare the luncheon menu for the steam table.”

Betty Mortland Letrick now lives in Sebastian, Florida. Betty told me, “Many business people and shoppers stopped in regularly at Isaly’s to enjoy a hot lunch served cafeteria style. We were always very busy.”

“In Brownsville at that time, the stores were thriving,” Helen agreed, “and the employees of those stores, as well as professional

people such as physicians, attorneys, and storeowners, would come to Isaly's. We had fifteen tables, and Mr. Loy did quite a business."

"The store was open until 9 o'clock on weeknights," added Helen's brother Al, "and my quitting time was 10 o'clock. I worked there after school, helping clean up in the kitchen and scrubbing the floor."

Isaly's was well known for the cleanliness of its stores, and that reputation was partly due to the employees' neat appearance.

"The girls wore bright yellow starched uniforms," Helen said, "with a headpiece that looked like a crown. The headpiece was attached to an accordion-pleated elastic headband that you put under your hair. We also wore a starched white apron, white shoes and stockings."

Sam Loy, Jr. noted that male employees, not to be outdone by the ladies, were also neatly attired.

"The men's white starched peaked caps were an Isaly's tradition," Sam said, "and we wore white short-sleeved shirts and white cotton pants."

Like Helen, Sam was trained behind the ice cream counter by his father, Sam Loy, Sr. Skyscrapers and shakes were not the only ice cream treats available.

"We served sundaes in a desert-type glass with a stem," Sam said. "Banana splits were served in a 'split' saucer, so the banana could be sliced lengthwise and placed on the bottom, topped by three scoops of ice cream."

Even the boss's son can make a mistake, as Sam did on his first day behind the ice cream counter.

"I am very familiar with the banana split operation," he joked, "because on the first split I made, I forgot to include the banana!"

The Isaly's store in Brownsville closed nearly half a century ago, but Sam still remembers the names of some of the employees with whom he worked.

"Urethe Momeyer was assistant manager," Sam said, "and in addition to Al and Helen Komacek, I also remember Jim Teringo, William Penn, Bob Huston, Steve Rockinson, Doug Concovia, Ron Camino, and two of the Burwell boys from upper Market Street. They were among the many folks who worked for my dad."

Next, our visit to Isaly's concludes as we join some of the regular customers and sample their favorite meals and treats. Bring your appetite!

ISALY'S STAY IN BROWNSVILLE WAS BRIEF BUT MEMORABLE

“At lunch time every day, the place was a mad house!”

Al Komacek was describing Isaly's in Brownsville, where he worked during the early 1950s while a student at Brownsville High School.

“In those years, the high school on High Street had no cafeteria, so students were dismissed for lunch,” said Al, who lived in Luzerne Township. “Many students went home to eat, but township kids like us went downtown or wherever we could find a place to loaf.”

For students who lived too far away to walk home for lunch, brown bag lunches couldn't hold a candle to the delicious options awaiting them downtown. Isaly's, Fiddle's, Hagan's, the Nut Shop, and numerous other lunch counters in town provided a dizzying array of choices. Isaly's ice cream and candies conjured sweet thoughts in the minds of teenagers. As a matter of fact, receiving a folded note with “Isaly's” written on the outside could set a young heart pitter-pattering.

“Girls used to write I.S.A.L.Y.S. on the outside of letters to boys,” Brownsville native Wally Mulligan of Pecos, New Mexico revealed. “Everyone knew that it meant, ‘I Shall Always Love You Sincerely.’”

Sweets lovers often made a beeline to the ice cream counter, where they could buy a skyscraper cone or another of Isaly's trademark items, a chocolate-covered ice cream square called a Klondike. The Klondike, invented by the Isaly family in 1922, was originally sold only at Isaly's dairy stores in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Flavors included vanilla, chocolate, maple, cherry or grape, all covered in a chocolate coating.

“We sold them for ten cents,” remembered Sam Loy, Jr., who worked in his father's Brownsville store.

Carol Jones, a cousin of Sam's late mother, Clara, recalled, “As a young girl, I often visited Brownsville, and of course we stopped in at Isaly's. Klondikes were my favorite, although I think they were a lot creamier than they are today.”

Carol wasn't the only “out-of-towner” whose visits to Brownsville included a visit to Isaly's. Charlotte Crick Horton grew up in Crucible and now lives in Lancaster County. Back in the fifties, her family had a regular weekend routine.

“Every Saturday evening, my uncle drove our family to Brownsville to shop,” Charlotte said. “He would park the Buick in the garage and ask to have it washed while we shopped. My grandmother and aunt would then visit Kart's, Goldstein's, and Storey's card shop, while my uncle and I would take in a movie and go to Isaly's. We always had a Klondike

bar. I would eat the outside chocolate part, then pass the ice cream to my uncle.”

“And sometimes,” declared Lynford Mortland, now of Gainesville, Georgia, “you would get a card in your Klondike that was good for a free one!”

“It’s been said if you grow up in the ice cream industry as I did,” mused Sam Loy, Jr., “you get sick of ice cream. Not so! It is still my greatest pleasure. Don’t ask me, ‘What would you do for a Klondike bar?’”

The Klondike bar, still the best-selling ice cream novelty in America, is no longer produced by the original Isaly’s company. In 1977, Isaly’s retail stores and production plants were purchased by Clabir Corporation, which retained the Isaly’s brand name and expanded distribution of Klondike bars. In 1993, the company was purchased by Unilever, which continues to market the ever-popular Klondike bar.

Isaly’s chipped ham was another customer favorite at the Brownsville Isaly’s store. The thinly shaved ham was unique to this part of the country.

“There will never be anything better than an Isaly’s chipped ham sandwich with Swiss cheese, tomato, lettuce and mayonnaise,” declared Carol Jones. “It was a favorite of Sam Loy, Sr. while he was relaxing in the evening after visiting stores as a supervisor.”

Sam Loy, Jr., whose father operated the Brownsville store, told me, “I was talking about Isaly’s with my wife, and I recalled something I had forgotten about until now – Isaly’s buttermilk! I thought Isaly’s had the world’s best buttermilk. It was so thick you could almost eat it with a fork. You could actually see tiny flecks of butter floating in it. Most folks didn’t like it, but the Loy household always had several quarts of buttermilk in the ‘icebox.’”

Readers in other parts of the United States have previously described their quixotic nationwide search for chipped ham, a quest that often ends in disappointment.

“Here in Mesa, Arizona, we have a butcher who will ‘shave’ a canned ham,” said Sam Loy, Jr., “but it isn’t the same as Isaly’s. In those days, Isaly’s purchased its ham from the Rath Packing Company in Pittsburgh.” Like the original Isaly’s company, the Iowa-based Rath meatpacking company is just a memory. It declared bankruptcy in 1985.

The hot foods whipped up by cook Betty Mortland Letrick were a favorite lunchtime attraction at the Brownsville Isaly’s store. “I especially enjoyed the roast pork with dressing,” said Jean Kifer of Brownsville.

For others, hot coffee, a sandwich, and friendly conversation were

the order of the day.

“Marion Klingensmith, a police officer and former boxer, would come in regularly on his coffee break,” recalled former Isaly’s employee Helen Komacek Staruch. “Some of our favorite customers were police officers, which may have discouraged kids from hanging out in there for extended periods of time.”

“It definitely was not a teenage hangout,” Helen’s brother Al concurred. “It was not a place where kids would come and sit over a Coke for an hour or two. People came in, they ate, and left.”

Sam Loy, Sr., owner of the Brownsville Isaly’s store, was a go-getter, and around 1954 Sam took on a new challenge.

“Dad moved up the street to the Monongahela Hotel,” said Sam Loy, Jr., “where he opened a coffee shop.”

“When he opened the restaurant in the Monongahela Hotel,” added Helen Staruch, “he took his assistant manager, Mrs. Momeyer, and a couple of the employees with him. He kept both businesses running for a while, then he let the Isaly’s franchise go.”

Bob Huston of Flatwoods worked at Isaly’s for twenty-two months. Bob told me, “Jack McGovern became the manager after Mr. Loy left Isaly’s.”

“That’s right,” agreed Helen. “Isaly’s took over ownership of the store and sent in Mr. McGovern, who was from Monessen. Jack had been with Isaly’s for a few years, and he was transferred to Brownsville to be our boss.”

Just a few years later, with the economy slumping, the Brownsville Isaly’s store closed for good. As years passed, other businesses occupied the low-slung building where skyscrapers once disappeared.

“After Isaly’s closed, the building was occupied by Circle Sales and Service, a television sales business,” said Ernie Magerio, whose hardware store was the last to occupy that building.

“The original operators of Circle Sales and Service,” added Dolores Randolph of LaBelle, “were John Gresh and my late brother-in-law, Tony Palombo. Eventually that partnership ended, and Mr. Gresh’s brother became John’s new partner.”

In 1998, the brick structure was sold to Manor Investments Ltd.

Isaly’s stay in Brownsville lasted only eight years, but the engaging personality of its owner fixed it permanently in the memories of many Brownsville residents.

“Mr. Loy was a fantastic businessman,” Helen Komacek Staruch said. “He was personable, he had charisma, and people loved him.”

In 1956, Sam, Sr. and his wife Clara moved from Brownsville to Monroeville, where they spent the rest of their lives. Sam passed away

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in 1982, and Clara died in March of last year.

Today Sam, Jr. is retired in Mesa, Arizona. His younger brother, George, is also retired in Mt. Lebanon. Half a century has passed since their father gave up his Isaly's franchise in Brownsville, but like those readers who have so generously shared their stories with us, Sam Loy, Sr.'s sons will always have wonderful memories of the many good people they met at Isaly's.