The 12-foot-long neon and steel sign, right, on the roof of a former Isaly's in Manchester that the Historical Society plans to remove and preserve this month.

Below, the day crew of the Homewood Isaly's, c. 1932. From left: Helen Hartley, Jim Wilson, George Krohe, and Sue Phieffer. The Skyscraper cone, opposite page, long the company's specialty, was discontinued in the 1960s. By then, said George Krohe (who rose to become a company vice president), ice cream was not kept as cold, making it too difficult to build a cone that would keep standing.
Sign of the Times

An Isaly's sign is being saved by the Historical Society for potential use in exhibits once the Pittsburgh Regional History Center opens in 1994-95. The dairy and deli chain once had hundreds of stores in the tri-state area, but only about a dozen remain. The sign (opposite page) was atop a store in the Chateau Plaza Shopping Center in the Manchester section of Pittsburgh's Northside.

The company's roots go back to William Isaly, who founded the Mansfield Pure Milk Company in Mansfield, Ohio in 1902. After opening stores in northeastern Ohio for 30 years, the company expanded to Pittsburgh. Its headquarters and manufacturing plant (and a large retail store) opened in 1931 on the Boulevard of the Allies near Bates Street in Oakland. The stores became fixtures in area commercial districts. Similar facades, interiors, and menus at each location created a reassuring sense of dependable quality, and the chain's stores invariably became neighborhood gathering spots. Many people fondly remember Isaly's specialties, the Skyscraper cone and the Klondike bar.

Business began declining as consumers came to prefer speed and convenience over delicatessen-type specialty stores. Beginning in the 1970s, the chain was sold numerous times to various investment groups and conglomerates, including one that also made artillery shells. Today the stores and the Klondike manufacturer are separate businesses.

The Manchester store was located in a strip mall built in 1965. As part of the then-popular urban redevelopment rage, two blocks were leveled to make room for the mall. Among the casualties were a half dozen deli/grocery stores and an Isaly's that had been there since 1934. A new Isaly's went in, but in a telling indictment of the new-is-better philosophy, the mall lasted only a decade.

Text by Brian Busko, with help from Bill Keyes. Period photo and cone courtesy George Krohe, Pittsburgh. Current photo by Charles Biddle.