Behind the Counter at

By David Rotthoff

Amazingly, no interior photos exist of the Boulevard salesroom. The Isaly's on Wood Street in downtown Pittsburgh, seen here, featured trendy ALCOA aluminum chairs, albeit covered with padded backs.
Western Pennsylvanians think of Isaly's as a local company, a cultural icon rooted in the tri-state area. Every milltown and community had a white-front Isaly's store. Literally millions of people ate Isaly's ice cream and chipped ham on a regular basis. Thousands worked for the company while in high school or college. Social lives revolved around the stores; we dated, and in many cases married, people we met behind the counter of an Isaly's store.

Brian Butko's book, *Klondikes, Chipped Ham, & Skyscraper Cones*, gives a perceptive corporate history of Isaly's, explaining how the company was geographically larger than we knew, and why the stores we loved are mostly gone. My recollections are intended to supplement Mr. Butko's book: for those who never worked for the company, this was what it was like; for those who did, I suspect you'll recognize a lot.

Honesty forces me to confess that my experience of working for the company was perhaps not typical. From 1958 – 1963, I worked at the store in the ground floor of the Pittsburgh dairy plant at 3380 Boulevard of the Allies, and except for a three-day stint three years after my regular employment ended, I never worked at one of the neighborhood stores. Walter Weyman, my store manager, said the parking lot had 97 spaces, but there were times that there were so many people in the store, some of us thought there must have been at least two cars simultaneously parked in each space.

Every day of the year, a small crew opened the store at 8 a.m. Typically this included one member of management plus three or four clerks, one or two of whom would start work about 7:45 setting up, and all of whom would work until either 4 or 4:30 p.m. Setting the store up included making coffee in the double-sided urn. The usual first batch of coffee was a pound of ground coffee in one side of the machine, with an appropriate amount of water added, but if a big crowd was anticipated on a given morning, two batches would be brewed. The store did not do an exceptionally large breakfast business, but coffee was a big morning seller, either consumed in the store or taken out in cardboard cups. Other breakfast items were sweet rolls and delicious hard rolls, served with Isaly's butter, of course. There was no grill in the store, so traditional breakfast items such as bacon and eggs were not served, possibly because doing so would have been fairly labor-intensive. Other things that had to be taken care of were setting up the deli case for the day and taking the covers off the ice cream freezer at the milkshake and sundae counter so the contents could soften a bit to ease scooping.

By 9 or 9:30, one or two people would take care of sales while at least one other began preparing for lunch. This meant cutting meat and cheese at the deli counter, then going back to the kitchen and making at least two trays of sandwiches, the number depending on how much business was anticipated. On a cold, snowy day, the number of sandwiches prepared would be fewer; on a weekday with no weather-related problems or on a spring Saturday, the number would be increased. The big sellers were baked ham, baked ham and Swiss cheese, and chipped ham, but others, such as American cheese and ham salad, were made as well. At about 10 to 10:30, at least one tray of sandwiches was taken out of the bottom of the walk-in cooler behind the counter. The sandwich tray was placed on the counter so that lunch customers could view the selection.

There were at least two other chores to prepare for the lunch rush. One was to make sure that there was enough potato salad and egg salad. The evening crew usually made it up the night before, or at least cooked the potatoes and hard-boiled the eggs. If a fresh batch was needed, the person working in the kitchen usually made it, but if that person was too busy
On Saturdays and Sundays, we had 30 clerks working, if not more. And on a really hot Sunday night, it took that many people working just as hard and fast as they could to take care of the people who just wanted ice cream.

with porter chores, one of the sales clerks doing lunch prep would mix whatever was needed. The other chore was to get the steam table heated and make sure the soup (or soups, if two were on the menu) and baked beans were put on to warm. The soup and beans were not homemade; they came from gallon cans of Campbell's soup and Heinz beans. If the soup and baked bean consumption the day before was light, the leftovers would be warmed up a second time ... or perhaps a third. Three days on the steam table left a lot to be desired. A pot of baked beans warmed over a third day would contain more than a few crunchy ones.

By 11 a.m., the second group of sales clerks, those working 11 to 5, would be on the floor and ready for business. By then the lunch rush was beginning. Many of the weekday luncheon customers were regulars, and many ended up being on friendly terms with some of the sales clerks. This could work to a clerk's advantage: I waited on one man quite often during the almost five years I worked at the plant store. When he heard I was graduating college and going into the Air Force, he let me use his two box seat tickets to a Pirates game at Forbes Field as a graduation and going-away present.

The luncheon business on Saturdays in spring and fall could get hectic. We almost never knew when a busload (or several busloads) of school kids would swarm into the store. The clerks really had to scurry: more sandwiches might have to be made, whoever was working the milkshake and sundae counter began putting scoops of milkshake mix in mixer cans in anticipation of a surge in demand for milkshakes, and God forbid that a bus rush caught the crew with the lids still on the ice cream freezer in the cone department. Having to make cones with rock-hard ice cream was neither easy nor pleasant. After a couple of unpleasant experiences, I made it a point, spring and fall, to pull the lids between 10:30 and 11 so the ice cream could soften a bit. In the summer, I'd take care of the chore at least a half hour earlier, as the cone business picked up that much earlier in hot weather. In winter, taking the lids off early was not really necessary, as the demand for cones occurred later in the day.

By about 2 p.m., the lunch crowd had pretty well disappeared. Typically, the clerks would have a quiet period to clean up behind the counter and restock milkshake cups and sundae dishes for the afternoon and evening. The lull did not mean we had time to goof off: there were still things to take care of, mostly selling ice cream cones, sundaes, and milkshakes. This quiet period usually lasted until about 4:30 p.m., when the shifts were changing.
On weekdays, the first evening shift workers usually went on the clock at 4 p.m., with more arriving at 7. On a weeknight in warm weather, the evening shift would number at least 20 people, with about a dozen starting at 4 and the rest coming on duty at 7. On Saturdays, and especially on Sundays, 30 clerks or more were needed. On a really busy, hot Sunday night, it took that many people working as hard and fast as they could just to take care of the people who wanted, in most cases, ice cream.

The change of shifts happened at the same time the office workers from the fourth floor left for the day. Many of them had earlier brought down written orders for deli items to take home, orders they expected to be ready for them when they came off the elevator to leave. Additional deli business came from walk-in or drive-in customers picking up deli items on their way home from work. This meant that from about 4 to 5:30, the clerk working the deli counter had to handle a lot of orders. On most days, this fell on the shoulders of a single clerk, with perhaps one more from the milkshake and sundae counter assisting. This was one of the times when the power-operated meat slicer was a real blessing. The deli clerk could turn the chipper on and let it run itself while working the cheese slicer or packing a quart of potato salad.

One product I absolutely refused to eat, and advised my friends not to eat under any circumstances, was ham salad. Ham salad was the way Isaly’s stores got rid of the ends of loaves of lunch meat. Yes, there was ham in it, baked, boiled, and pressed; but it also contained meatloaf, pickle and pimento loaf, bologna — all the leftovers that had been sitting in the cooler for three or four days (everything except liverwurst and corned beef). On more than one occasion, I saw a ham end that had been sitting around for a week or more going through the grinder. I would make ham salad, and I would sell it (caveat emptor!), but I damn well wouldn’t eat it!

On a typical evening, at least during warm weather, probably two-thirds of business was at the ice cream counter, at least in numbers of people served. The milkshake and sundae section, including the sandwich counter, would take care of around 25 percent, and the balance was at the deli counter. Duty assignments for sales clerks basically followed this pattern, the ice cream department using more than half the available clerks on any given night during warm weather, especially after 7 p.m.

T he store sold a fantastic amount of ice cream, especially on a hot Sunday night. Business on an average summer Sunday was so brisk that one clerk was usually assigned the full-time job of keeping the ice cream freezers stocked. That was my Sunday assignment for almost five full summers. It started at about 6 p.m., roughly the time I came back on duty from my dinner break, and required a lot more physical effort than just waiting on customers.

Flavored ice cream was packed in stainless steel five-gallon cans, filled all the way to the top for most flavors (though slower-selling flavors such as orange sherbet were only filled to four gallons). Milkshake freeze, which was simply unflavored ice cream, was packed in five-gallon cardboard cans. The reason for this difference in con-
tainers was probably to keep people from confusing freeze with vanilla ice cream — the two were visually identical. Those loaded cans were heavy, and the metal ones had to be lifted with metal grab handles that hooked over a lip which ran around the cans about two inches down from the top. An empty, or nearly empty, can had to be horded out of the freezer and then a full can was put in the space thus vacated. Once the full can was in place, whatever ice cream (still solid) that remained in the can that had been removed from the freezer was scooped out with a packing scoop and either placed atop the new can or in another partly empty can of the same flavor. Then the empty can was taken out back to be returned upstairs to the ice cream department for cleaning and refilling.

Working at full speed, the person in charge of the ice cream supply was usually replacing two cans at a time. The clerks selling ice cream, when the store was absolutely packed with customers, could sell 10 gallons of ice cream in the time it took to bring out two full cans, remove the empties, put the full ones in the freezer, and then scrape the cans. If it was exceptionally busy, clerks waiting on customers would sell ice cream faster than it could be replaced. If this went on for an hour or so, a second clerk would have to work on restocking the freezer.

On a busy summer Sunday, from the time I began stocking ice cream, I could expect to make three trips upstairs to the gigantic walk-in freezer in the ice cream production area to bring down more product. The first order of business was to make up a list of what flavors were needed, which required more knowledge of what was in the freezers in the kitchen and back room than knowing what was in the freezer on the sales floor. Once the list was made, I got an ice cream cart or two and headed for the elevator. The first stop was in the shipping office on the second floor to let the night shipping clerk know I was making an ice cream run (and a stop on the way back down to turn in the list of what had been removed from the freezer).

By early Sunday evening, that freezer had been closed for the better part of a day. No warm air had been allowed inside in many hours, so the temperature was around minus 30 degrees — about a 110-degree difference from the temperature outside the freezer. Putting on warm clothing was an absolute necessity, else one ran the risk of frostbite. Before entering the freezer, I put on one of the heavy coats kept at the door. I would also take an extra apron upstairs with me and tie it over my head babushka-style to protect my ears. Then, pulling on a set of heavy insulated gloves, I pushed the cart into the freezer and began loading it with ice cream and milkshake freeze. When I first began stocking ice cream, this would take a while, as I had to search for each flavor, and the freezer had three rooms, each of which had several shelves for ice cream storage. Until I learned what was kept where, I might spend a half hour in the freezer, with a couple of trips outside to warm up. The coat, apron and gloves helped, but they sure didn’t keep a guy warm!

A cart would hold three rows of six cans of ice cream with two extra cans at the very end of the cart and three or four more on their sides on top of the load. Add to this a container or two of ready-packed pints, quarts, or half gallons and the cart would be full. To be conservative, let us assume a cartload was 22 cans (of four or five gallons each). Thus one cart would hold a minimum of 100 gallons of ice cream, and
on a typical freezer run, I would fill two carts. Three trips meant six carts, or 600 gallons, on a busy Sunday. The sales floor and back room freezers held about another 600 gallons, for a total of approximately 1,200 gallons — one whopping lot of ice cream on a summer Sunday night. Even at just 10 and 15 cents per Skyscraper cone, it certainly added up.

When the store was busy, as it was on any warm night, customers would line up three and four deep at the ice cream counter, all of them clamoring for attention. The sales clerks were taking and filling orders as fast as possible, and computing the bill for each sale in their heads. Speed and accuracy were required. Any clerk who could not keep pace was "demoted" to the milkshake and sundae department, a degrading circumstance. The cone makers considered themselves the elite of the sales force; they were, too.

While I worked at Isaly's, the amount of ice cream that went into a Skyscraper cone was measured only by the length of the scoop handle (short vs. long) and the sales clerk's eyeball. There was no such thing as a quality control system. But a colleague who continued at the Boulevard after I left in 1963 said that within a couple years' time, each cone had to be weighed first. He said the company brought in efficiency experts who believed they could cut losses incurred by making the cones too heavy. The policy, however, likewise reduced the number of customers a clerk could wait on in any given hour, which decreased overall efficiency. I submit that the "weigh the ice cream" policy was one more factor in the company's decline.

Making a cone with a Skyscraper scoop was not terribly difficult, but it was a task that had to be learned. It took two stabs with the scoop to make the cone, starting at about the 10 o'clock position on a full can and working up and down the left side, and then across the can. There were several clerks, myself included, who taught cone-making to new clerks. We'd start them making a single cone, and when that skill was mastered, we'd increase the number by one until he (or she, though girls were usually not stationed at the cone counter when I started at Isaly's in 1958), could make and hold four cones at a time without breaking any. It was quite possible to make more than four at a time, but the risk of breaking them seemed to increase as each extra cone over four was added. Strictly as a demonstration, I made and held a dozen at once several times (in the back room, while teaching a new clerk), and once succeeded in making 13. However, this was a stunt that was not to be pulled on the sales floor. In addition to teaching how to make cones, I also taught how not to make cones. Each of my pupils got a demonstration of why one did not put a finger between cones when making more than one; doing so guaranteed at least one broken cone.

You could teach a clerk not to put a finger between cones, but convincing a customer not to do this was not as easy. The usual result was one or more cones that needed to be cleaned up from the floor, which meant calling the porter. Customers would sometimes squeeze a handful of cones, with the same messy result. As a general rule, we did not give free
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replacements; if a customer dropped a cone, he paid for the replacement.

Only once can I remember feeling badly enough about dropped cones that I would have been willing to replace them free, and I was not the clerk that made that particular sale. One busy evening, a man bought six or seven cones and was holding them correctly, but instead of walking to one of the doors, he walked into the plate glass to the left of the door, crushing all of the cones against his body. Of course, everybody who saw the whopping mess laughed, though it certainly wasn’t funny.

By about 11 p.m. on most nights, business would slack off. When things slowed, some of the clerks were assigned to clean up and restock. At least once a week, the ice cream freezer had to be scraped. This meant taking the cans out of one section, scraping the frost off the sides of the freezer, and then lifting the frost, along with any ice cream or other object that had fallen down between the cans, out of the freezer for disposal. When one section was done, the cans were replaced, and then another section was done, and so on until the whole freezer had been scraped. Then the can of gunk that had been removed from the freezer was taken to the back room and hosed down at a drain in the floor. The person who got the job of scraping the freezer could count on usually finding several coins once the frost and ice cream had been melted away. Scraping a freezer was not a fun job; nobody liked doing it. For this reason, most clerks felt that any money found was an addition to their paycheck.

Just before midnight, the deli case would be cleaned out and things put in the walk-in cooler. The ice cream freezers would be covered, and the counters cleaned. Used metal milkshake containers would be taken back to the kitchen for washing and use the next day, and the coffee urn would be emptied and cleaned. The final task was to pull the rubber floor mats so the night crew could clean the floor behind the sales counter. Then we went home. Another day at Isaly’s was over, except for the night clean-up person.

Henry Isaly, the head of the company, was a kind and friendly person. Most corporate presidents wouldn’t take the time to talk to people at the bottom of the corporate food chain, but he would. I am proud to say that, in 1960, he offered me a job as a store manager, an offer I turned down so I could finish college. It was a sad day when he had a heart attack and died on his way home from the Boulevard store, where he’d stopped for ice cream after a baseball game. When I waited on him that night, I never dreamed it would be the last time I would see him.

George Krohe, the general manager of the company, was another favorite. He always had a smile and a kind word. When I graduated from college and left the company to go into the Air Force, Mr. Krohe told me he wanted to see me whenever I was home on leave. So I made it a point to go up to the office suite on the top floor of the plant whenever I was in town to say hello. I visited him in the summer of 1966 while on leave en route to a year’s duty in Alaska, and he conned me into spending three days at the East Liberty store as “unofficial assistant manager” so the manager could supervise moving from the old location to the new one next door. To this day, I joke that those three days resulted in me being, as a first lieutenant, the only commissioned officer in the U.S. military ever to draw a government paycheck and an Isaly’s paycheck at the same time.

Walter Weyman, the store manager (and fellow Wilkinsburg resident), was a wonderful person for whom to work. I was especially proud of being one of the very few clerks he trusted enough to serve as acting head clerk when either he or the assistant manager was sick or on vacation and someone was needed to supervise the store in the morning.
Tony Zamule, the assistant manager, seemed a very stiff and formal person, but once you gained his trust and were allowed to see beyond his stern exterior, you realized that he was quite a nice person and that the stiffness and formality stemmed from his shyness. Looking back, I would have to say that virtually every single individual I met from the Isaly's plant staff, from top management down to the store porters, was a super person.

People drove for miles to buy ice cream or deli items at the Boulevard. We came to expect to see at least a few familiar people on any given night. World champion wrestler Bruno Sammartino was a regular when he was in town: he stopped in almost nightly to buy his breakfast for the next day, at least a dozen eggs and a pound of bacon. Roberto Clemente stopped in frequently after Pirates home games; he'd wait for me to take his order because I would make an attempt to speak Spanish with him. Everybody went to Isaly's; it was the place to get good ice cream in those days.

You never know when or where you're going to find someone with a connection to the company, but it still happens regularly. Before I retired from teaching at Wells High School in Maine, we were having a teachers' in-service day on substance abuse. The woman who was presenting the program was named Janice Isaly. At the first coffee break, I went up to her and asked, “Does the address 3380 Boulevard of the Allies mean anything to you?” Her reply: “My God! Even in Maine!”

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