

A Taste of Heaven – Hoosier-Style

Among the fondest memories of my childhood were occasional family visits to Lafayette. Whether it was a family reunion at Colombian Park, a trip to visit a sick relative at Home Hospital or a rare Sunday picnic and swim, these trips could never come soon enough. I and my four siblings spent much of the time wondering if the day would be capped off by a visit to the Frozen Custard. We knew that the family budget didn't allow for such delicacies often, but just maybe when we left the park, Dad would pull the car into the Frozen Custard and park beneath the trees. If he did, he and my brother would go up to the window and return with cones filled with luscious frozen custard. Mine was always chocolate and I can remember nothing more creamy and delicious.

It was as a young adult that I finally got to go to the window and order my own treat. I was surprised to discover that the Frozen Custard had more to offer than cones. (Was that why we always ate in the car?) After a day at the park, my future husband and I would sit on the patio sharing custard and conversation just like the other couples and families around us.

It was years later when I learned that the Frozen Custard was such an institution. Shortly before her death, I took my mother on a one day "memory" trip. After visiting childhood homes and landmarks, we made our way into Lafayette, where of course I intended to get a Frozen Custard. As I parked beneath a shady tree, Mom began to share how she and Dad came to the Frozen Custard when they were dating, how there had once been a smaller building closer to the street, and how she loved their fruit drink. Over protests about having to watch her "sugar", I bought her a dish of chocolate and a fruit drink. We sat together in silence enjoying our treats, but enjoying our memories even more.

So how did the Original Custard come to be such an institution? According to grandson, Kirk Lodde, his grandfather Charles "Charlie" Kirkhoff was the general manager and "mix

master” of the Frankfort Ice Cream Company in the 1920’s. When the company was sold in the early 30’s, Charlie lost his job to the new owner’s son. Following an interview with the Sealtest Company in St. Louis around 1931, he came home determined never to be fired again. He borrowed \$800 from his mother-in-law and opened the Frozen Custard. Lodde conjectures that he may have met up with the famed frozen custard pioneer Ted Drewes who had opened his first St. Louis stand in 1929.

Frozen custard machines were relatively new. The product is quite different than the grocery-store or ice cream store product. By definition it must be 10% butterfat and 1.4% egg yolk. The primary difference is the amount of air, or overrun, that makes up the product. Ice Cream has 100% overrun which allows ice crystals to form. Frozen custard has no more than a 20% overrun giving it the trademark silken texture.

Charlie and his wife Florence opened the Frozen Custard in an igloo-inspired building in 1932, right in the midst of the Great Depression. Vanilla was the only flavor served that first year and because the original lease prohibited carbonated beverages, a Fruit Drink was created for those wanting a beverage. The Kirkhoffs soon purchased the property and became one of the first contractors with the Coca-Cola Company. When cream was rationed during World War II, the Kirkhoffs made sherbet to supplement the menu. Frozen custard was rationed at one quart per family.

In 1949, the current art deco structure was built and the awning-covered patio added in the 50’s. At this time the official name of the business became the Original Frozen Custard, so customers would know that only the building had changed. Through the years the building has been remodeled, and flavors and frozen specialties have been added to the menu. The Frozen Custard has been a family business from the beginning and perhaps ahead of its time with Florence supplying the business sense and Charles being the creative mind developing the

custard treats that are still popular today. When Charles died in 1969, the Kirkhoff's daughter Charlotte and her husband Dick purchased the business. One of their primary contributions was the addition of seasonal flavors (Ever tried a rhubarb sundae?) and the expansion of the restaurant business to other Lafayette locations. With Dick's untimely death in 1986, the Loddes brothers took over the operation of the business. Since 1932, no fewer than 50 members of the Kirkhoff- Lodde family have worked at the Original Frozen Custard making it Indiana's oldest family owned and operated drive-in eatery or as their website boldly states, "the place where Grandpa took Grandma for frozen custard".

An institution within the institution was Elinor Stingley, the "Cone Lady". She retired at the age of 98. She was known for sternly declaring, "We don't mix flavors." and "This is a cone line only." Rocker Axl Rose grew up in the neighborhood. It is reported when he visited with *Guns and Roses*, and ordered a strawberry sundae at the cone window, he responded to "cone line only" with "Do you know who I am?" Not being impressed by fame and fortune, she replied, "Yes, *William (his real name)*. I know who you are. Now get to the other line."

I get to the Original Frozen Custard each spring on my "memory day". As I sit on the patio enjoying each delicious bite of my chocolate confection, I also savor the memories of my family heritage and think it amazing that a young couple would dare to establish a frozen custard business in the depths of the Great Depression and that four generations and almost eighty years later my family can still make memories there.



The 1949 Art Deco Building at night.



Charlie and Florence Kirkhoff at the new building in 1949.