

Candy-maker keeps old traditions alive

By BILL AKERS

How does an old-fashioned business survive in the modern-day business world with all its perils?

By dint of a lot of hard work and total dedication to quality of product would be the answer given by Bob Clark, operator of a business that's still going strong after over 70 years and being run in virtually the same way its founders ran it.

Clark is the owner and operator of Buckhart's Confections, 2-1231 East Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz. It is a candy store, and like the ice cream parlor, milliner's shop and buggy whip store, candy stores have faded from the modern scene. Buckhart's remains as a kind of anachronism.

There are other candy stores around — stores that sell candy, but they are outlets for candy made somewhere else.

Buckhart's is what it was when it was established in Watsonville in 1902 — a store that makes and sells its own candy. Clark says that stores of that kind are such a rarity that "you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of them in California."

Clark bought the business three years ago from Tom Regan, a nephew of the founders, Dick and Harry Buckhart. Regan had acquired the business sometime after World War II — the dates are hazy in the minds of most people contacted. Clark, then a resident of Boulder Creek, had been a production engineer for Hewlett-Packard, a space-age industry located in the Santa Clara Valley, for many years. He was looking for a way out of that kind of industrial pressure cooker. "The pace in industry is too much. I wanted out, wanted to be on my own," he recalled. "One day I looked at the paper and saw this property for sale — it was this business. It needed a hell of a lot of work, but I saw it had a lot of potential," Clark said. "I wanted to work it into being a family operation." (Clark and his wife, Carol, have seven children, the two youngest of whom now help out in the shop.)

So, Clark bought the business, making arrangements for the previous owner to stay on for awhile to teach him the craft. That is how he became a candy maker. Looking back on his former career, he says of his new way of life, "I'm not saying it's

any easier, but I wouldn't go back to the other."

He took to candy-making with ease, he said. "I came from a family associated with bakeries, so the recipes were no problem. He (Regan) gave me the basics. It came naturally to me."

He explains: "Candy-making is all technique. It is not an exact science." Because of varying conditions — moisture in the air, for instance — or variations in the ingredients used — a candy-maker has to learn to "cook to sight, smell and consistency. Timing is more important in candy-making than precise measurements," he said. "Candy-makers achieve the best results by doing things their own way."

Now, as a candy-maker, Clark and his wife put in seven 10-hour days a week making the candies they sell, packaging them, taking care of a large mail order business, making improvements to the store and coping with constantly rising sugar prices. But he likes it. By doing this he is keeping alive a business with a long history in Santa Cruz County.

Buckhart's letterhead says "Since 1902." That's when Dick and Harry Buckhart started it, but it had an even earlier origin.

In 1888, Claus Spreckels laid the cornerstone on a new sugar processing plant in the Pajaro Valley. In writing of this event in "Scattered Leaves in Pajaro Valley History," Edward Pfingst tells of some of the people who came to the valley to work in the plant.

One of those was John McCallum second in command under shift boss Frank Lyman. McCallum later quit the plant to open a candy store which was located on Peck St., according to Pfingst. A young man went to work for him and McCallum taught him the candy-making trade. This was Harry Buckhart.

Sometime around the turn of the century the candy store was moved to 350 Main St., across from the present Wells Fargo Bank. In 1902 Harry and Dick Buckhart took over the business.

Some time between 1920 and 1923 Harry opened a store in Santa Cruz at Walnut and Pacific Aves. This was a combination candy store, ice cream fountain and sandwich shop.

The store in Watsonville was

run by Dick Buckhart and his sister Ann. In 1923 Joe Leonard, now 87 years old, went to work for Dick Buckhart and learned the candy-making trade. "I was the main candy-maker till the place closed in 1940," he said. He remembers the job as being "an awful lot of work."

This store was also part restaurant, and later, a bar. In the back room was "The Dog House," a place open to men only, where they gathered for lunch.

"It became a tradition," Leonard recalls. "There would always be 25 or 30 men there for lunch, from all walks of life. There was something going on all the time."

Reflecting on those days, he says, "they were a great bunch of men — a great bunch of men — I'll never forget them." Joe Leonard's brother Charles, went to work for Buckhart's in 1929 and also stayed with it till it closed. After the Watsonville store closed, the two of them operated the bar at the Resetar Hotel until 1968. The actual bar from the old Buckhart's store is still in use in the Sky Room at the Resetar.

Sometime during the Depression of the 1930s, Harry Buckhart moved from downtown Santa Cruz to the present location on East Cliff Drive. The building was originally a tulip wholesale house, hence its rustic design and the two wooden Dutch maids that still grace the roof.

"The planning department keeps trying to tell me those are signs," Clark declared, "but I keep telling them they're part of the building."

The building once had a windmill on top of it which Clark said he plans to restore one day. He has already paved a large parking area and put in a pleasant little patio, but other than a few modernizing touches in the production end, the business is exactly as when it was started. In fact, he still works from some of Harry Buckhart's recipes, written in his own handwriting and kept in Buckhart's original ledger. Each recipe has Buckhart's "OK" written alongside it. "If it didn't have his OK on it, he wouldn't use it," Clark explains.

Some of the recipes are written on stationery of the Hotel Virginian in Santa Barbara, and another, dated 1923, is on the

stationery of the Hotel Luhrs in Phoenix. Recipes came from everywhere, Clark explains — from travelling salesmen and from other people who would pass them along. Buckhart would try them and if they earned his OK, they were put into the recipe book.

Clark says he pores over the old recipe book from time to time, looking for some of the old favorites that deserve revival. "But some of them would be too expensive to make now," he said, regretfully. Such as the maple sugar praline. "A small patty would cost 50 cents to make, and that's just too expensive."

All together, Clark figures he makes almost 100 varieties of candy. There are 15 different kind of creams, as well as fudges of various kinds, nut rolls, brittles, toffees — "the top of the line" — taffies, hard candies and various seasonal specialties.

One of the old aristocratic candies he still makes using Buckhart's own recipe is the Victoria — "a rum and brandy-flavored butter cream with walnuts. . . very rich with all the cream and butter. . ."

The Victoria, he said, is a European-type confection which he thinks got to this country by way of Canada. Buckhart's Victorias were known as "Buc's Vics". They were also known as "Frazier Lewis's" he says, because a Santa Cruz firm by that name also made Victorias. Frazier Lewis was located in what is now a tin shack standing behind the Cupola Gallery on East Cliff Drive, Clark said.

"I still have a lot of old-timers come in and ask for Frazier Lewis's," Clark said.

And they — the old-timers — also talk about the taffy pulls Buckhart had in the back room of store. "I've had a thousand people come in and talk about those old taffy-pulls."

In addition to the recipe book, Clark is still working with much of the equipment Buckhart used. Hanging from the racks are the big, beautiful old copper kettles, as well as the stirring paddles, circular knives, the big creaming machine, the marble-topped working tables and the heavy bars used as "sides" to contain the candy poured out on the tables.

Clark's one concession to modernity is a machine used in

dipping the chocolates. Other machines are Buckhart originals, including one used to form hard candy and which imprints "California" on one side and "Fruit" on the other; and a "Knacker," a machine which cuts long ropes of soft candies into "Pillows."

The candy-weighing scale was original equipment, as is one of the showcases in the retail sales area.

A large portion of Clark's business is by mail order. These are people who have lived here at one time or vacationed here and remember Buckhart's candy.

He still has one wholesale account — one which was started by Harry Buckhart himself. Each week Clark delivers a few boxes of candy to Jack Novcich, who runs Jack's Cigar Store in Watsonville.

"I've been selling Buckhart's candy for over 60 years," said Novcich, "and I never had a complaint. Novcich said that at Christmas time he usually sells around 400 boxes and that candy sales are still "very nice."

The sign that Harry Buckhart gave him is still there, posted at the front of the store.

The business has not been without its problems, Clark said. He feels that the building of the yacht harbor in 1968 diverted tourist traffic from East Cliff Drive, and sent much of it downtown. As a result, the tourist-generated part of the business fell off.

And a lot of new people moved into the area and are not familiar with the name, as old as it is, and the location of the store.

More recently there was the construction of condominiums next door "which kept the place torn up" for several months; and the recent gasoline shortage, which further diluted the traffic.

And then there is the matter of rising prices.

"Chocolate has tripled in price," he said. "Sugar has gone up from 12 cents a pound to 62 cents a pound — and I've increased my prices only 20 per cent hoping things will come down sometime."

"I'm selling more candy, but making less money. But I'm not cutting quality — I'll never do that."

Summing up his first three

years as a candy-maker, he says:

"I think Buckhart's has a future. I would like to build it up to where I can make more profit for the amount of time I'm putting in, but I like it. . . I'm going to stay in it. I like the business and the customers are pleasant."

When he was thinking of buying

the business, Clark said the thing which impressed him most was that it was a business "that was based on quality. . . it had survived 70 years on quality, so they must have been doing something right."

It's a tradition he said he is carrying on.

It looks now if Buckhart's will once again be back in the town in which it was founded.

Clark said he and Ford's Department store in Watsonville have agreed tentatively for him to open a store in Ford's. He said his wife will run that, while he runs the Santa Cruz store.



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