

Sundae in the Park with John

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Working definition of an icon: Something delicious with staying power. It could be an image, etched somehow on the public consciousness. Marilyn. Sinatra. The El. Wrigley Field. Mayor Daley. Marshall Fields. Frango Mints.

How broadly does an icon need to be known? Delicious with staying power, but etched on the minds of a more limited public. An icon waiting to be discovered by a broader audience. Not gone, and not forgotten. Just not fully known.

Travel now to the southwest side of Chicago, circa 1933. Two brothers, Paul and Leo arrive from a tiny village in Greece, sponsored by a third brother, Pete, who has opened a small candy store called Joy. The brothers know little of candy making, of American city life, of the English language. They hail from a tiny town with no future for them, from a tiny home shared with 7 brothers and sisters on a mud floor, (possibly an exaggeration, but a nice touch). Yet, they do have joy. They know hard work. They like the candy business. Pete teaches them everything he knows about candy-making. They are good at it.

Okay, maybe all is not perfect. There are squabbles. Family "discussions". Three brothers working together is not so easy. As they say in The Godfather about family strife: "It was between the brothers". But this family squabble doesn't lead to death in a hail of bullets in the driver's seat of a Caddy as in the Corleone Family -- it leads to two new candy stores -- Dove and Cupid. Maybe not a blockbuster movie, but a very sweet story.

Thus, in 1936, a year long ago enough to qualify for icon status, Paul Stephanos opened the doors of what would become Cupid Candies in a storefront at 79th and Ashland Avenue, next door to the Highland Theater, a majestic Renaissance Revival movie house that had a vivid, electrically motivated marquee that could be seen for blocks around. In 1936 the Highland was still featuring vaudeville acts with its movies, and the elegance of the house brought crowds. Paul's savings of \$500 was not sufficient to secure candy-making equipment, but enough to buy a pop-corn machine that sent out fragrant advertisements of his wares as people entered the theater. Popcorn for the show may not have been his invention, but it was his genius, and it allowed him to save enough in a year to buy the candy-making equipment he needed to get started. He wasn't yet a married man, and it was still a big risk, but Paul wanted something of his own. The shop was a storefront, and he made toffee and fudge in the back room. The American dream was dreamed. He owned a candy store.

Paul had the good sense to hire a family friend, the most adorable Pauline, also a native of Greece, to help him out in that back room, and by 1940 (you probably guessed it) they were married. Together they chose the name for the family business -- Cupid Candies. It's not a mystery why the name was chosen. Candy is for romance. Candy is romance. Candy was the start of their romance. Cupid, the

little icon of love and marriage was their icon too. That image shaped the look and feel of the business as it grew and prospered.

And prosper it did. Until the war, when sugar was rationed and candy was not at the top of the list of essential products needed to prosecute a war. Cupid stepped back, and only made those candies that didn't require so much butter and sugar. Not as tasty, maybe, but quality nonetheless. With hard work, even with a family of their own taking shape, Paul and Pauline kept the business going. By the time 1946 finally rolled along, and the post-war boom began, Cupid was positioned to do great business, and do it they did. It was a banner year for the store. That also happened to be the year their youngest son, John, was born, the one destined to join them in the business when times got hard. The one to see it into an uncertain future. But much was to be lived and done before then.

First was a move of the store to the neighborhood where the Stephanos family lived: Marquette Park. The store was on West 63rd Street at Kedzie, another storefront, but bigger and better. Marquette Park was a neighborhood filled with small brick bungalows and two-flats. It was a neighborhood that burgeoned as the soldiers returned from WWII and the GI bill provided money to buy houses just this size. The neighborhood grew and prospered after the war. The baby boom, of which John was a charter member, was learning with every passing year to enjoy treats designed just for them and to demand quality and name-brands, and Cupid Candies was there to greet them all.

Sixty-third Street was a booming neighborhood metropolis. It was a major shopping street for a large swath of the southwest side. It was a time when local businessmen owned local stores, and their neighbors were their loyal customers. These businessmen were pillars of the community. Chicago Lawn, as 63rd and Kedzie was known, was a little village within the greater City of Chicago, and grounded everything that happened there. Paul, a jovial, old-world kind of guy was one of these men. He ran his business with great pride and attention to detail. As a result, the shop was considered the height of quality and good taste. A gift of Cupid Candies was a sign of the quality and prosperity of the giver. This was a valued Chicago product, south side all the way.

There were other prosperous businesses along 63rd Street as well. There was The Club El Bianco, itself an icon of fine dining. Italian in every way, the Club was an elegant place to dine for people in the neighborhood celebrating major milestones and for connoisseurs from around the city. It was the south side's only real Club, (not counting the Baby Doll Club on 73rd Street, but that's a very different kind of story). Stars of Hollywood and Broadway, coming to Chicago's Midway Airport in the 40's and 50's for a performance or a layover would escape the airport for an improbable trip down 63rd Street to the Club El Bianco where the special Fiesta Dinner would take three hours to consume. Bogie, Rosie Clooney, Ozzie and Harriett, Dino and Jerry Lewis were just a few of the famous to touch down in the neighborhood. And if they were smart, and they must have been, they'd make a stop at Cupid Candies, since neither LA nor NYC could match the chocolates available there. It was an era of individual tastes and talents, another definition of an icon.

Cupid Candies expanded through the 50's and new stores were opened as the city's prosperity roamed south and west. The first new store was at 79th and Western Avenue where Paul had to hire Andy Frain

ushers to control the traffic at the drive-up window, an unlikely innovation of his that worked like gangbusters. He thought if banks could do it, why not a candy store. The soda fountain was popular and the ice creams and whip cream were homemade and fresh. The 79th Street store became the factory for candy-making and the rest was history in the making. There was a move, a sprint really, out to 95th Street and beyond, into the burgeoning burbs. In all, there were 9 stores in its heyday. But the heyday had limits that could only be seen in hindsight, as limits are wont to be. The ending is written in the beginning, and can be as sad as the beginning is happy. But again, the story is not yet told.

By 1962 John was a son of privilege in his world. Sure, he was expected to work in the store, "helping out", as it was described. Sweeping floors from age 11, waiting tables of an afternoon, always with a grin and ready joke. Flirting with the girls, with reciprocity. But it was all with the knowledge that he really didn't have to work. In the eyes of the other kids in the hood, John was rich. He lived in a big house on a prominent corner in the nicest part of the that part of town. As the baby of the family he was spoiled, but in a nice way that made him generous, popular. Nobody didn't like John.

Improbably he was a key member of the Harper High School basketball team. John was not tall, but then neither were most of his teammates who all hailed from Italian, Jewish and Lithuanian backgrounds. No giants here. And the won-loss record reflected the height deficit. But what the team gave up in height and accomplishments on the floor they made up for in spirit. Well, not during practices, maybe. They could be discouraging and hard. Nothing like being on the floor with the coach nagging and drilling, knowing, (because most of them were smart as well), that it was effort that would not be rewarded on game day. Harper had to field a team after all. Cheerleaders had to cheer somebody. That was the social compact of the day.

So it was that after these practices, after the humiliation of a game against the supremely talented Dunbar, when the team was at a low and the point differential was at a high, and the uniforms and cheers were a mockery, John would invite them all to Cupid's for sodas and sundaes and malts. In they'd shuffle, sure nothing was going to make them feel better, determined to be miserable forever, since they were teenagers and every hurt and loss was forever. And ever.

Okay, maybe it was good to see the cutest girls at school stuffed into a booth, their ice skates hanging on the hooks, coats and hats and mittens covered with snow melting onto the checkered floor. Maybe it was cool for the girls to notice the team, make comments, tease about their prospects. Maybe one of those girls was special to a player and it looked like that was mutual. And the ice cream was really good. And all that b-ball exercise allowed for extra whipped cream and hot fudge. And the song on the juke box was new. The words were dopey, but the bass was strong. And it was a great night, and supper was waiting at home. And maybe, if they were lucky, nothing would ever change. Just stay like this forever. At Cupids that felt possible.

But the winds of change were already gusting. It was the 60's after all. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a perilous visit to Marquette Park and all hell broke loose. As in all things, the Baby Boomers were the seeds of their own destruction and rebirth.

In college, John studied engineering like his brother, Chris. The brothers even married sisters. They were close. They had dreams of their own. Engineering dreams. Maybe a firm they could start and own together. Chris went on to realize those dreams with his own engineering company and major construction projects in Chicago. But when Paul grew ill, had a heart that had worked a little too hard and was clinically tired, John answered the call from home. He provided the "family" required for the family business. He stepped in. Helped out. But this time in a big way.

And over time, John both grew and shrank the business. It grew in the way modern businesses do: he took candy-making commissions from other concerns. Big ones. Lucrative ones. Ones with big names of their own. Ones that would keep the business vital, even as it shrank in the neighborhood where it was born. Even when the Cupid's brand took a back seat to the big brands it manufactured.

The neighborhood, that once new and vital post-war creature, went away from Cupid Candies. It changed, mutated, and Cupid's didn't. There was a sharp economic and ethnic u-turn in Marquette Park, and the economic anchors, the thriving individual businesses, so wedded to their founders and families, were no longer relevant. No longer able to remain solvent in any sense. Tastes, times, traditions, the neighbors and kids who love and leave, all become visible only when life provides a rear-view mirror. And soon, those tastes, times, traditions are all in the past, and the future is a new road, piloted by new people, and the old road map is too worn in too many places. And so Cupids had to adapt. And John was the engineer of that reconstruction.

John, still anchored at the kitchens at 79th and Western Avenues, brought the Frango Mint back to Chicago after the city's heartbreak of losing both Field's and Frangos to the interloping, aggressive New York Macy's. He was struggling after the loss of Cupid's anchor store. He was struggling after the sea change in the old neighborhood. He was struggling after his father had to step way back, even though Paul stayed at John's side until the age of 98. John was struggling when he saw the chance to get the Frango contract and bring the mint production back to Chicago. It was a big effing deal. And he was determined to get it. He invested in equipment even before he had the job. He studied recipes to wow the Macy's powers that be. He wanted that contract. He needed that contract. And he got it, to much fanfare in the city. And Cupid's was grounded once more. It could still provide the ice cream and sundaes and candies in cases, but it was underpinned now by the corporate contract that restored Frango's legitimacy in Chicago. A big win all around. A great day. A sad day. A day when icons were merged, and something wonderful was lost.

And the final chapter is not yet written, though it may be close. John has no kids to "help out". He has no one in the wings. He is growing tired too. The heart is weary. The road was long. And so, a sale is in the works. Not a South Side sale either. A sale that will likely preserve the name, but not the heart. Yet, in truth, the whole story may never be finished, no matter what is written next.

Because the whole story is not just in the creation of a brand, or in the hard work of mom and pop or in the vision thing. The whole story is in the people who come. The story is in the generosity of a once poor man who now has something to give. The story is in the legacy of a son who now has something to lose. The story is in the way something wonderful stays in the blood and bone of the people it was built

to serve. It's a piece of the main. A little dollop of quality candy, chocolate covered almonds, sitting in a glistening white pleated cup, in a lighted case, in a warm and welcoming storefront with red leather stools around a soda fountain, and booths of kids leaning into each other, behind a frosty glass window, lighted by a neon sign, that reflects on a wet and snowy 63rd Street, growing dark, street lights lit, early rush hour of blue collar workers starting to move haltingly toward home. It's an icon of life and meaning. A moment chiseled in time.