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Lever's company all that and a bag of chips

Posted 8 months ago

Q: I remember Lever's Potato Chips were manufactured on Grote St. many years ago. How long was it in business, why were they produced here (not exactly potato country!)? And why and when did it go out of business? I can remember the cardboard carton they came in which was sealed with a waxy cover and also hearing tales of trick-or-treating at the Lever's house off Linwell Rd. It was THE house to go to for the free chips.

A: It wasn't unusual for the Lever family's front hall at 4 Gordon Pl. to be stacked top to bottom with chip boxes on Halloween.

"You could only fit two people in the foyer," recalls Christine Lever, the daughter of Lever's Potato Chip inventor Norman Lever.

The St. Catharines woman said the bags were so popular with trick-or-treaters, some returned in different costumes for seconds.

Her father started the potato chip company in 1953.

A former General Motors worker, Norman Lever was an entrepreneur who designed the machinery to make the chips and invented his own recipe.

The business started off as a mom-and-pop operation in the garage at the family's home, then on Pelham Rd., with conveyor belts set up around the cars.

Eventually, he and wife Carrie moved their four daughters, Christine, Marolyn, Marsha and Norma, to Gordon Pl. and



the business got its own address on Grote St.

Factory operations were in the building that now houses ServiceMaster.

"If you go downstairs there, you can still smell the oil," Christine Lever said.

Truck loads of potatoes, meanwhile, were stored in the building where Yoga By Sarah is now located.

Women on the factory line looked for white, perfect chips and dark imperfect chips created if the oil consistency wasn't quite right.

Those dark chips would be sent down another conveyor belt, boxed up and placed outside the company's Grote St. door for anyone to pick up free of charge. Lever remembers people pulling up to the building and packing their cars with the complementary chips.

Students who shared school classes with the Lever daughters were also lucky.

"On the last day, they'd always bring cartons of chips and all my friends got chips," Lever said.

Lever's Potato Chips had a majorette as its mascot and the logo "Out In Front."

The chips came in flavours like barbecue and salt and vinegar, and could be found in 10-cent bags or one pound tins. They were distributed as far as Sudbury.

The label on one bag says "Lever's Potato Chips are made fresh daily in St. Catharines employing a modern processing method which extracts more of the starch and are cooked in pure vegetable oil, making them a nutritious and delicious food product. Packed in moisture-proof bags for your protection."

Lever remembers kids breaking those bags open sideways and, after finishing off the chips, wearing the bags as hats.

The company often had promotional items with their chips, like pencils, a moving majorette pen, seafood forks, money clips and rain bonnets.

Lever's was a fixture in the community and had a big float every year in the Grape and Wine Parade complete with majorettes and people throwing foil chip bags to parade goers.

Norman Lever eventually sold the company in 1967 to Granny Goose, a division of Del Monte, when national competition became too tough. The chip company closed in 1969.

But he left a mark on the city that went beyond his chip company. He built Fairview Park Golfland, the golf facility still in existence and now owned by the city.

He also sponsored a senior lacrosse team, even though the players weren't allowed to advertise sponsors on clothing during playoffs, and formed a Junior B hockey team that failed to fill the seats.

He also ran restaurants Three Little Pigs and Midtown Fish and Chips. He died in 1992.

Christine Lever said she was proud to grow up in the potato chip family.

"My father wanted to promote his product to make it the best it could be for the community," she said, adding he would give anyone the shirt off his back.

"He was a very kind, caring, gentle man."

And he was a snacker, of course, trying out different foods on family trips.

"His love for snack foods is how it started."

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