



Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society

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THE LATONIA BAKERY EDITION

Latonia Bakery: A 20th Century Icon in Northern Kentucky

Lorna Petty Harrell

People of a certain age who grew up in Northern Kentucky frequently share fond memories of the Latonia Bakery with me. Perhaps their wedding or birthday cake was baked there, or they remember getting a free cookie as a child shopping with a parent. By far, however, the fondest memories are associated with the bake shop, where you could walk in every Sunday through Friday from early evening until the wee hours and buy many kinds of hot donuts, sweet rolls and even coffee cakes – fresh for the next morning's breakfast.

I seem to inadvertently attract such memories whenever people learn I was the fortunate daughter in the family that operated the Latonia Bakery from 1946 through 1971. These decades later, images of the bakery still flood my memory, especially when I smell fresh baked goods. Almost all these images are positive, though I still cringe, recalling my 15 -year-old self-crying and protesting when my parents first made me join the family team as a "store girl".

History

The originally buff and brown brick structure that stands at 3612 Decoursey Avenue in Covington, Kentucky, was purpose-built as a bakery about 1916 by Carl Barfknecht. Located on the northern edge of the historic Ritte's Corner business district, the building has always been a bakery. According to the Covington business directory, Barfknecht owned and operated the bakery for nearly a decade until it was sold to A. Heineman and Sons in 1926. The third owners were my maternal grandparents, Carl and Helen Schlipf, who bought the bakery in 1929. The Schlipfs always called their enterprise the Latonia Bakery and it has been remembered by that name locally ever since.

Carl Schlipf was a German immigrant who arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1909 at the age of 14. Carl learned the baking trade in the Esslinger Bakery, then located in the Corryville neighborhood of Cincinnati, near the present-day University of Cincinnati. To shorten a longer story, Carl married the Esslinger's daughter, Helen, in 1921 and within a few years wanted to establish his own business. When Carl and Helen took over the bakery in 1929, Latonia was a working-class neighborhood. Though it had been annexed as part of Covington in 1908, Latonia continued to retain its distinctive character. Many of the bakery's customers worked for the L & N railroad, whose tracks ran less than a block north of the bakery. Many other regular customers attended Holy Cross Church and School, directly behind the bakery.

My grandfather Carl, who managed the bake shop, and my grandmother Helen, who managed the store front and oversaw the finances, soon felt at home in their new community. In addition to Carl, Helen spoke German fluently and was able to effectively communicate with several Ger-

man-born customers, whose English was limited. Many of the baked goods offered were basic – bread, dinner rolls, assorted pies, plum and apple kuchen, *etc.* Fruit-filled German stollen, Lebkuchen, delicately imprinted Springerle, and anise drops were among special treats featured during the holidays.



CARL AND HELEN SCHLIPF

New Ownership in 1946

The Schlipfs continued to operate the Latonia Bakery until 1946 when they sold their business to their daughter and her husband, my parents. In 1942, the Schlipfs' daughter (also named Helen) had married Charles Petty. Charles was a country boy raised on the family farm near Independence, but he had entrepreneurial ambitions and a personality well suited for business. Charles learned the basics of the baking trade from his father-in-law and took additional classes in Cincinnati to learn the skills of cake decoration. Helen had grown up in the bakery business and had helped with the payroll and other management responsibilities. They also were young. So, in modern parlance, they "hit the ground running" and run they did for the next 25 years!





HELEN SCHLIPF PETTY, 1957



CHARLES PETTY

Changing Times, New Opportunities and Marketing

The heyday of my parents' operation of the Latonia Bakery coincided with America's prosperous decades following World War II. The 1950s and 1960s were decades of more disposable incomes, more leisure time and more family outings and gatherings, when birthdays and other special events were celebrated with decorated bakery cakes and cookies. Women who worked during the war years did not seem to want to return to pre-war times when women baked bread, pies and other baked foods at home, sometimes every day. The trend was for women to become more visible in the everyday workplace and for them to look for convenient ways to feed their families. That meant picking up dinner rolls to go with the main course and pies or small cakes for desserts. The role of the "housewife" across America was rapidly changing.

Among my Latonia Bakery memorabilia is a printed sheet listing all the products the bakery produced – an astounding 123 items, excluding decorated round, square and sheet cakes. And the prices at the time were hard to resist --- 50 cents for a dozen butter bit rolls and only 75 cents for an 8-inch fruit pie! To illustrate how far a few dollars would go then, my parents saved an article from the Sunday *Cincinnati Enquirer* (dated January 11, 1959) about a survey of 31 bakeries in Greater Cincinnati undertaken to assess the marketing skills of bakery clerks. The "customers" participating in the survey were instructed simply to buy a loaf of bread and then pause to see if the bakery clerk made any additional suggestions. The unsuspecting head clerk of the Latonia Bakery, Ethel Combs, convinced the survey "customer" to not only purchase the bread, but also a dozen brownies, a jelly roll, a pumpkin pie, a coffee cake and a dozen donuts. She then rang up a sale of \$2.74!

Before websites and other quick marketing techniques, visual marketing through window displays and in-store displays were extremely important in attracting bakery customers. My mother, Helen Petty, was very creative in visual marketing. She won national awards and gave presentations at national bakers' conventions. At one such presentation, she said: "The test of effective displays is not, 'Is it beautiful?', but 'Does it attract customers and sell the goods?'"

Bakery Operations Day and Night

At its peak, the Latonia Bakery had 27 employees, including 10 bakers, 3 cake decorators, several store clerks, and a couple part-time drivers to deliver wedding cakes and various large orders. The store front was open from 6 AM to 6 PM, excluding Sundays and important holidays. Helen Petty managed the complex scheduling of the all-women store clerks, who at that time were called "store girls", although most were well past "girlhood". The store "girls" were expected to make a neat appearance and wore uniforms and aprons.

Charles Petty felt strongly that one key to success was to keep the store full of merchandise right up until closing time. He genuinely felt we could lose customers if people stopped in late in the afternoon and found the cases empty. Many of the leftover baked goods were given to the

Catholic Orphanage in Fort Mitchell.

Sometime during the 1950s, people started coming to the side door of the bake shop after the store front was closed to purchase a few donuts from the friendly shop foreman, Clarence Boyer. Eventually the word got out and soon Clarence and the other bakers were unable to handle all the evening customers. That's when the Pettys decided to put in a cash register and a display case with a wrapping counter directly into the bake shop. Of course, I knew about the bakery's night business and even worked there one summer while I was in college. However, it wasn't until I recently reviewed an article in *Bakery Production and Marketing* from July 1968, that I realized how extensive and unique the bakery's night trade actually was.

Every Sunday through Friday night, beginning at 6PM and continuing until about 3 AM, as many as 250 to 300 customers per night streamed through the bake shop to watch the bakers cut donuts, make sweet rolls and also to smell bread baking. In the previously cited *Bakery Production* article, my father said the bakery turned out about 420 dozen yeast donuts and about 120 dozen cake donuts, along with about 150 dozen sweet rolls every night! In 1956, the Pettys developed an adjacent lot into a parking lot for 12 vehicles. As a result, sales overall increased 15 percent. Customers often poured out the door in a line that sometimes stretched all the way to De-coursey Avenue. Most customers knew what they wanted and the line moved quickly.

I often wondered how my father made the production of so many baked goods happen. I recall the shop foreman coming in around 4 PM to mix bread and yeast doughs. By 7 PM all the men on the night shift were in and some of the baked items were already coming out of the oven and onto the sales racks. The early morning shift started at 3AM with a few other bakers and a cake decorator coming in. This schedule ensured that most items would be in the cases ready to sell when the storefront opened at 6 PM, as people started coming in to buy baked goods on the way to work.

Although most daytime customers looked around before deciding what to buy, many customers came in to order or pick up decorated cakes. Quoting again from the article in *Bakery Production*, the Latonia Bakery produced about 10,000 decorated cakes per year, including 300 wedding cakes. Easter, Mother's Day and Father's Day were among the major days for decorated cakes. Because of the bakery's proximity to Holy Cross Church and School, scores of cakes were ordered whenever a Holy Communion weekend occurred.



MAKING THE NEXT DAY'S PRODUCT



CHARLES PETTY DECORATES A CAKE WHILE DECORATOR TOM
BIDDLE LOOKS ON

I especially loved the “buzz” at the bakery during the holidays when the place was constantly busy. I was home from graduate school and working in the bakery on Christmas Eve 1970. Because that day was personally special to me, I kept track of the register receipts and was astonished when I realized that from 6 AM to 6PM that day we served over 1200 customers!

My special interest in Christmas 1970 arose from knowing it would be the last Christmas my parents would operate the Latonia Bakery. The couple that “hit the ground running” in 1946 reluctantly walked away from it at the end of 1970 because of my mother’s illness. Mom had suffered a series of debilitating strokes during 1970 and my father felt unable to continue running the bakery without his partner. Although my extroverted father was the “face” of the Latonia Bakery, my mother’s background support, including doing all the bookkeeping and much of the marketing, was essential to continuing the Latonia Bakery as my parents knew it..



FROM LEFT, HELEN PETTY, ETHEL COMBS AND JOHANNA
SIEVERS

Ironically, as their bakery career was ending, my father reached the pinnacle of his career. He was inducted as the President of the Associated Retail Bakers of America at their convention in Atlantic City, N.J. in 1969. When Charles was introduced to speak, it was stated that the Latonia Bakery was the highest grossing single outlet retail bakery in Greater Cincinnati and in all of Kentucky (*Bakery Production and Marketing*. July 24, 1968).



ARBA Report

Charles O. Petty, ARBA President 1969-'70

Charles O. Petty grew up through high school in Independence, Ky. He ran a grocery store and married a baker's daughter. When his father-in-law retired, he bought his Latonia Bakery, Covington, Ky. in 1946 and went into the business.

His father-in-law taught him the trade and he attended the Lambeth Cake Decorating School. In 23 years Charlie and his wife Helen, who does the bookkeeping, window displays and manages the sales girls, have built a very successful retail operation with a thriving "back door" night trade and day cake business.

Charlie is a past president of the Greater Cincinnati Retail Bakers, the Kentucky Master Bakers, a member of the Ohio Bakers Association, the local "Baker's Dozen" and a Kentucky Colonel. He is also director, treasurer and real estate appraiser of a local savings and loan. He and his wife Helen have 3 children: Doug 23, a graduate of Transylvania University, Lexington, Ky. and a teacher; Lorna, 21 a recent graduate of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and a Phi Beta Kappa; and Gary 18, a freshmen at the University of Cincinnati.

As ARBA president Charlie plans to meet as many bakers as he can at local meetings to spread this theme of getting acquainted and exchanging ideas.

Epilogue

More than 100 years later after it was built, the building at 3612 Decoursey Avenue in Latonia is still a bakery, now known as Emerson's Bakery - Covington. Emersons operates bakeries at five locations in Northern Kentucky. Their donuts and sweet rolls look and taste very similar to those produced at the Latonia Bakery during my parents' time. One of the Petty's employees may have been the conduit for some of the recipes.

A very direct link with the night business pioneered by the Pettys came to fruition in 2017, when Keith Bales opened Moonrise Donuts, at 3718 Winston Ave., a few blocks from the Latonia Bakery. His theme, "Taste the Memory," is a direct throwback to the decades when people stood in line, often at midnight, to buy fresh baked goods at the Latonia Bakery. "'Moonrise mimics what the old Latonia Bakery did," Bales said, when we talked a few years ago. "We'll be open in the evenings and at night to re-create a piece of history in our neighborhood." Moonrise Donuts became such a success that Mr. Bales opened a second Moonrise location in downtown Covington.

Due to the Covid pandemic and other unforeseen factors, both Moonrise locations were sold in 2020 to the Dawsons, a local business family. The original theme remains: "Taste the Memory"-
- Indeed!!

References

Bakery Industry. May 17, 1969. Cover photo. Charles O. Petty is presented the gavel of the Associated Retail Bakers of America.

Bakery Production and Marketing, July 24, 1968. How Latonia Bakery built a thriving night trade and day cake business.

Cincinnati Enquirer, January 11, 1959. Suggestive Selling Lacking, Bakery Survey Shows – But not in Latonia!

<https://www.emersonsbakeryky.com>

<https://moonrisedoughnuts.com/aboutus>

Petty, Helen, 1961. The Importance of Visual Marketing. Published by the Associated Retail Bakers of America in their September 1961 newsletter.

IN MEMORIAM

LORNA PETTY HARRELL

OCTOBER 17, 1947-APRIL 22, 2022

Lorna Petty Harrell was a retired biologist, who lived on her family farm in Independence, KY with her husband, Dennis, until her recent death. She held degrees from Miami University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Society owes Lorna a debt of gratitude for the preservation of the history of the Latonia Bakery.

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I Bet You Didn't Know

*Tidbits from Kentucky's heritage
for every day of the calendar year*

May 3, 1890 The Legislature called for a Constitutional Convention to rewrite the outdated 1850 Constitution.

May 9, 1933 A tornado ripped through southern Kentucky, killing 33 people.

May 23, 1928 Rosemary Clooney was born in Maysville.

June 1, 1792 Kentucky was admitted as the 15th State of the Union, population less than 100,000.

June 3, 1855 Cassius Clay's anti-slavery newspaper, *The True American*, published in Lexington, made its first appearance.

June 12, 1806 Abraham Lincoln's parents, Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, married.

June 24, 1850 An Historical Marker was placed at the boyhood home of Daniel Beard in Covington.

Programs and Notices

Kenton County Historical Society

Work continues on our engagement with the Highland Cemetery on the subject of installing an appropriate marker honoring Covington Pioneers; our Board approved the draft content and that was submitted to the cemetery Board. We were recently advised that the Highland Board approved the text and the cemetery manager will obtain a proposed layout and submit that to us.

Look for a Zoom link coming soon for Karl Lietzenmayer's Ghost Houses talk.

Behringer Crawford Museum

The BEHRINGER CRAWFORD MUSEUM HISTORY HOUR CONTINUES, although it is now every other Wednesday at 6:30pm.

NORTHERN KENTUCKY HERITAGE MAGAZINE UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Northern Kentucky Heritage, the biannual magazine long published by the Kenton County Historical Society, is now being published by the Local History and Genealogy department of the Kenton County Public Library. The Magazine will keep its focus on all things historical in the Northern Kentucky region and will look for new trends in record gathering and record keeping, and digital collections. *Northern Kentucky Heritage* also has a new editor, Elaine Kuhn, to whom all submissions of Magazine articles should be made. Elaine is the Local History & Genealogy Services Coordinator for the Kenton County Public Library. The former Magazine editor, Karl Lietzenmayer, will stay on as Editor Emeritus.

Subscriptions to the magazine will continue at \$20.00 per year. Renewals of membership in the Kenton County Historical Society that include subscription to the Magazine in 2022 will be fulfilled by the Library. From then on out, subscriptions will be payable to the KCPL Foundation. Look for digital subscriptions to be offered in the coming months. PLEASE SIGN UP FOR A SUBSCRIPTION!