

The Browns sell Brownie Bakery



Flora Belle Brown today and Hobart and Flora Belle "a few years ago." She remembers their first customers on opening day, January 1, 1947. "Guy T. Swindell bought the first pie, a pecan, and Frances Roberson bought the first cake, a devils food," she said. "I remember it like it was yesterday."

by Claud Hodges
Staff Writer

Fifty years of baking for Flora Belle Brown at Brownie Bakery in Washington has been her life, and that of her late husband Hobart. "He was the heart and soul of this place," she said while icing a cake at the bakery. "He's still here in spirit. Hobart is very strongly here in spirit."

many young couples after the war, they were at a loss for what to do to earn a living. She remembered that Hobart told her he could sell anything that she cooked.

"I don't like to cook, but I like to bake," she said she told him.

And so Brownie Bakery began.

"I've always liked to bake," she reminisced. When she was 8 years old, she said she won a biscuit-making contest.

Instead of Brown's Bakery, she said they chose Brownie for two reasons. One of the Brown's best friends was Brownie Kugler and the Browns had three young sons, Hobie, Hewett and Allen, "three little brownie elves, who slept during the night above the kitchen where the bakery was working."

In the early days, the Browns lived upstairs in the building that housed the bakery on the ground floor. In 1974, they leveled the initial building and rebuilt in the same spot.

The front room of the bakery is the sales floor. Glass cabinets hold all the goodies the bakery makes including cakes, pies, donuts, cream puffs, jelly rolls, cinnamon buns, brownies, cookies, lady fingers, biscuits, rolls and cheese twists.

Flora Belle said she and her husband would often reflect on their decision to open the business and would invariably come to the same conclusion.

"Do you feel guilty about our business?" she said her husband would ask her every now and then.

"No. It's our life," she said she always would answer. "It's a good, hard-working, honest life."

And it was hard work. They always opened the bakery at 6:30 a.m. Monday through Saturday and closed at 6 p.m. each day. She said they didn't open on Sunday.

"As you go through life let this be your goal, keep your eye on the donut and not the hole," Flora Belle said her husband was always saying. She said this often struck people as a joke but began to sink in once people thought about it.

The bakery's kitchen is full of machines with which the Browns made all their goodies.

In one corner is a set of dough bowls, one holding 30 quarts, another holding 60 quarts and the two largest holding 80 and 120 quarts each.

Flora Belle said "a real old-timey" is a proofing box which is designed to dry yeast. It looks like a foot locker with double doors and several shelves on the inside.

"Yeast dough is like human nature — it is very temperamental," she said, quoting

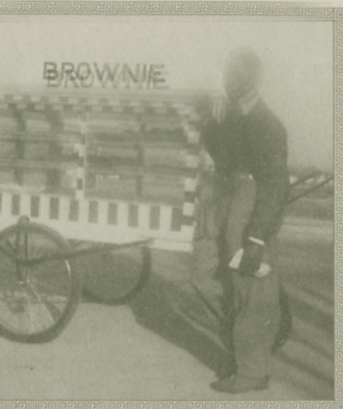
Brown died in 1995 and Flora Belle had the business leased to Becky Harris whom the Browns trained to keep the business running.

Early this year, Ms. Harris pulled out and Flora Belle had to close.

"When Becky closed the door, I cried," said Flora Belle.

In a way, she said she missed her husband more with the closing of the business.

"I closed it temporarily and put a sign in the door at the first of the year," she said. "I just couldn't let it close. Somehow, I couldn't let it go."



If you lived in Washington in the 50's, you remember this

Many customers were like Rodney Godley who told her he was disappointed because this would be the first year he did not have a Brownie Bakery cake for his birthday. He's 53.

"It worked for 50 years and I couldn't see how it could close," said Flora Belle. "People came to us because they were looking for quality and they knew they'd get the best recipes out of the best kitchens in town."

The bakery opened Jan. 1, 1947, when Hobart and Flora Belle established it at 913 John Small Avenue. The property was owned by her father. Her sister, Lib, and husband Raymond Latham, also started a short-order shop that evolved into the famous Rendezvous next to the bakery. "We thought the two businesses would compliment each other," Flora Belle explained. At that time the location was almost outside of town. "It was kind of in the woods," she said. "Kind of in the country."

Hobart had received a medical discharge from the Armed Services at the end of World War II. Flora Belle said that like



New owners
Wynn and Greg Cecci will see to it that Brownie Bakery moves on with the times.

Where once there were two, then one, now many...

Brownie and Ammons bakeries were the main acts in town for years after WWII. Others came and went and finally, so did Ammons. Progress, how sweet it is. Today there are many.

Trained by the pros

Flora Belle always wanted to improve her cake decorating techniques so she attended Wilton's of Chicago, the country's leading school. She learned a lot, including who Hugh Hefner was. As she remembers, the famous founder of "Playboy" sent his baker to Wilton's at the same time Flora Belle attended. When they met and he explained who he was, she said she ask who Hefner was. "He wondered where in the world I was from that I didn't know Hugh Hefner," she said with a twinkle. The cake above was her first effort at the end of the school. She had some help from the other students. In later years, she specialized in decorating.

Photos by Elmo Carawan
and R. Walker

Hobart.

"Brownie Bakery has stayed hand-operated," she said. "It is a from-scratch bakery."

Other interesting machines sit on the counters, including three fillers: one for cream for puffs, one for jelly for rolls and one for custard for rolls.

In addition to the Browns and Ms. Harris, others instrumental in the operation of Brownie Bakery through its history include Elizabeth Alligood, Dot Woolard, Helen Woolard, Ethel Chesson and Matthew Bailey.

"I didn't know how many people in Washington appreciated this bakery until we closed it," said Flora Belle. In response to an inquirer who continued calling her after the bakery was temporarily closed at the first of 1999, she finally called him back.

She said the man asked her when the bakery would reopen. After she told him she did not know, she said he told her he would entertain thoughts of purchasing it. After some dialogue between the two, a deal was sealed for the sale. On March 1, it was official.

"It's like I sold my child," she said. "I feel it down deep."

"We want to bring the Brownie Bakery back," said Wynn and Cecci, who bought the business with her family.

She said she and her husband, Greg, and their son, Evan, want to continue it as a family business. They want to continue good, home-cooking, she said.

"Everybody who stops in gives it a good reputation," said Ms. Cecci. "Everybody knows it by name."

