

Man Has Left Sweet Legacy

By Sheila Stroup

George Joseph Ortolano died Sunday at 86, but he will always be part of New Orleans. We have him to thank for the SnoWizard, that whirring contraption that can transform ice into snow with a flick of a switch.

"He's known as the father of the snowball here in the city," said his nephew Ronnie Sciortino, who took over SnoWizard Inc. in 1981.

"He's the one who's responsible for it all."

Who hasn't stood in line at a favorite snowball stand, reading through the flavors, anticipating that first cold taste of summer sweetness? Who doesn't know the sound of the machine that shaves ice into delicate flakes of snow?

"He named it the SnoWizard because he thought it was magic," Ronnie said.

Sharing a treat

Mr. Ortolano dreamed up his magic machine in a shed behind his grocery store at 3436 Magazine St.

His wife, Josie, used to tell him, "Let's go out," but he'd say, "We're young, honey. We got plenty of time for that." Then he'd go out to the shed to work on his invention.

He started selling snowballs in 1937, and people never seemed to mind standing in line to get the perfect summer treat.

It was Mrs. Ortolano who came up with the cream flavors. The first was chocolate, made with Hershey's syrup and evaporated milk. From there she went on to wedding cake and nectar cream.

"We used to charge 2 cents extra for them," she said. Regular flavors cost a penny.

By 1947, Mr. Ortolano had perfected the motorized SnoWizard, and he began to manufacture it.

He'd show off his magic machine at church fairs in New Orleans and nearby towns, giving free snowballs to all the children. And he'd sell a SnoWizard to anyone who wanted to buy one, whether they could afford it or not.

"He was more interested in showing people what his machine could do than in getting rich," Mrs. Ortolano said. "Someone would say, 'Mr. O., I want to start a snowball business, but I don't have any money.' He'd say, 'Take the machine, take everything you need. Whenever you have the money you come pay me.'"

Fun-filled life

When Mr. Ortolano asked her to marry him in 1931, he said, "I've waited a lifetime for you." They celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary last June.

It was a good life they had together, doling out snowballs and running the SnoWizard business.

Mr. Ortolano had been sick with Parkinson's disease in recent years, but they still had fun. On their last anniversary, Mrs. Ortolano jumped into bed with him and had the sitter take pictures of her and her husband clowning around.

"He put his hand up to his face like he was blushing," she said. "It was real cute."

She wishes she'd had a camera Sunday, when their 1-year-old great-granddaughter was visiting. Briana wanted to see her great-grandfather, so Mrs. Ortolano lifted her up and placed her in his outstretched arms.

"She kissed him, and he kissed her, and it was beautiful," she said.

"Everybody loved my husband. I'm going to miss him after 65 years."