

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Wilmette Bakeries: A Light, Fluffy History

by Patrick Leary

The opening of the St. Rogers Abbey French Patisserie on Central Avenue downtown got us to thinking about the history of bakeries in Wilmette. Bakeries here go back a long way, and they tend to stick around for a long time.

The first local bakery that we know anything about was begun in 1894 by brothers John and



Frank Ortegel, who started Ortegel Brothers Bakery at 715 Ridge Road. The bakery boasted two delivery wagons and made deliveries for miles around. John sold out in 1897 to Frank. One of the Frank Ortegel delivery wagons is shown above in about 1910; notice the basket of loaves perched on a shelf above the side door. Frank Sr. retired in 1913, and Frank Jr. and his wife, Rose, took over. Shortages of flour and other ingredients made for rough times during World War I. After the war, he and Rose kept the business going until 1921, making the lifespan of that bakery 27 years in all.



*Wilmette Girl Scouts Joan Sullivan and Suzanne Sutherland on the front page of the Chicago Herald-Examiner, April 19, 1936, getting ready for the annual cookie sale.*

Everybody knows Bennison's Bakery in Evanston. Begun in 1938 by Larry Bennison. It has been owned and run by the Downer family since 1967. But Wilmette boasted its own Bennison's at 1183 Wilmette Avenue for sixty-one years, from 1938 to 1999. The Museum's longtime costume curator, Jane Textor, worked the counter there as a teenager, and recalls that Vivian Maier, who later achieved posthumous fame for her street photography, was a frequent customer.

Many Wilmette natives retain very fond memories of Ann's Bakery, which served up delicious pastries downtown for years. Oatmeal raisin cookies, sweet rolls, and chocolate donuts were just a few of their most highly prized treats. Ann's premises already had a long history as a bakery, and were probably built with baking in mind; the ovens were originally fired by coal. Frank Wilson, who had started a bakery business

on Central in about 1906, moved it over to 1162 Wilmette Ave. in about 1917 shortly after the building was built. Wilson's Bakery was a fixture in that spot for thirty years.

In fact it was at that shop, in 1935, that the Girl Scout cookie was born. The finance chairman of the Wilmette Girl Scouts, Elizabeth Sutherland, approached Mr. Wilson about making cookies in the shape of the Girl Scout trefoil. Sweet's Tin Shop (still going strong at 736 12th St.) supplied the trefoil cookie cutters, the "Girl Scout cookies"—sold in paper bags for 25 cents a dozen—proved so popular that they made the Chicago papers, and the rest is history.

Mr. Wilson died in 1937, but his one-time employee, World War I veteran Joseph Engels,



*Irene and Joe Pechtl of Ann's Bakery, 1985*

ran the business under that name until 1947, when he sold it to George Pechtl, who renamed it after his wife, Ann, as "Ann's Pastry Shoppe." George's nephew, Joe, and his wife, Irene, took over Ann's in 1962 and employed Wilmette teenagers as helpers year after year. When Joe and Irene closed the place in September of 1995 there was general mourning for the loss of a truly wonderful family bakery.

That same sense of loss attended owner Mike Liston's closing of Heavenly Hearth at 1101 Central (the grand old Boulevard Building) this year after 21 years in business. But with the good sisters of St. Rogers Abbey keeping up the heavenly connection in that same spot, and Larry and Vicki Blanas serving up tasty delicacies at Lawrence Dean's Gourmet Bakery at Green Bay Road and Central Avenue, Wilmette folks should be able to look forward to many more years of fine baked goods.

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