

How The Iceman Cometh to Sea Isle

For those of us who live in Sea Isle, and in fact anywhere in the Delaware Valley, there are two fairly common sites, Wawa Markets and Sea Isle Ice Trucks. I'm a lucky guy for a lot of reasons, but how about growing up a half mile from the first Wawa store in Folsom, Pa. and having my grandparents live a block away from Sea Isle Ice? Full disclosure: my son worked for Sea Isle Ice and it was an important experience in his development into a pretty decent adult. Interestingly enough, the paths of Wawa and Sea Isle Ice have been intertwined since the early days of their retail history.

I recently had an opportunity to speak with Joe Romano Jr. whose family started Sea Isle Ice. It was amazing to hear the similarities between the two companies, and the values they made

them both successful. And in the case of Sea Isle Ice how success was an almost unintended consequence of embracing hard work and love of family.

Our story begins in the middle of the last century. At that time Sea Isle was still a quiet fishing town. Not coincidently, when Italian Americans moved here from the New York City area they found that their welcome to Sea Isle was somewhat limited to what is today the Fish Alley neighborhood. So, when the Romano family came here, they established what is now Marie's Seafood store at the corner of 43rd and Park Road. Joe's great grandparents ran Marie's as a family business from the start, but Joe's father, Joe Sr., did not share the love of working with fish so in 1955 he began what would be a 30-year career with Acme markets. The original Acme location was "The American Store" on Landis Avenue on what would later b Creighton's Trading Post and is now a business and commercial building housing among other entities, Duck Donuts. At the Sea Isle Museum, you can see letters from Acme corporate management congratulating the staff of the local store for overachieving sales records throughout the 1950's, it's interesting to see how business was conducted then.

Working at Acme did not get Joe Sr. completely away from the fish business, however. Back then, pound boats caught most of the fish. Pound boats were roughly 33-feet long skiffs that dropped nets not far off the coast. Back then they could fill their nets multiple times a day and supply seafood to the fisheries that dotted the South Jersey Coast (we'll talk about that in an upcoming story). Another personal note, when my grandfather retired from Sun Shipyard in the mid '60's, he joined local legend Sam Annuziata on his boat, The Santa Lucia. Their catch was brought into Jack Gordon's Fishery on 43rd Place across the street from where Sam lived and rented an apartment to my grandparents.

Fisheries like Jack Gordon's would buy large blocks of ice to maintain their fish. The Romanos would buy ice that was ground down from these large blocks, and carry it back down the street to the store. Eventually, although Joe Sr. still worked at Acme, he suggested his parents purchase a commercial ice maker that could be installed in front of the store - and relieve him of trips to Jack Gordon's. With a $5,000 price tag, it seemed like a large expense given how little ice was needed for their purposes, but when Joe Sr. pointed out the opportunity to sell bagged ice, the idea clicked and off they went.

From the start and through the present day, Sea Isle Ice was and is a family business. Sue Romano, Joe Sr.'s wife, was an integral part of the operation and remained a vital partner throughout the company's journey.

Over time, the Romano's met with the management at the local Acme as well as gas stations and smaller supermarkets to expand their ice sales. As business grew, they bought additional space

next to Marie's. Keep in mind, while all of this expansion was going on, Joe Sr. was still plugging away full time at Acme and the family was still running Marie's. Without Sue Romano's contributions, it would have been difficult, if not impossible for the business to thrive. This went beyond bagging and selling ice, which she did every day. Seeing this successful relationship grow with the business and the family no doubt had a major impact on Joe Jr.

Around this time, Joe Jr. came of age (if you call 8 years old coming of age) and, was happy to become part of the operation; bagging ice before and after school. To Joe Jr. the business was an extension of his family. He brought added energy and a vision for even greater success, going to school to learn refrigeration technology and exploring ways to expand. He and his dad had a friend who built an insulated truck for deliveries. It's hard to imagine something like that being done today. I can picture the DMV and FDA opening a branch office in Ocean View just to write up all the reasons that wouldn't work. But it did. The next step was to add capacity, which they did by buying the property you may now be familiar with as the Sea Isle Ice building on Fish Alley. At that time, it was a four bay car wash. Not to waste an opportunity, they used half of the building for the ice business and continued operating the car wash with the other two bays. The growth had its bonuses as they extended down to Avalon and counted Ed McMahon, of the Johnny Carson show, as a customer. There's a joke in here somewhere, but let's move on…

With his knowledge of the business and the Romano's commitment to good customer service, the Joes were ready for what amounted to their biggest move ever, the relationship with Wawa Markets.

Having retired from Acme in 1985 after thirty years (so he could draw a pension, that's how our parents operated), Joe was now full-time in the business. They had been plotting how to get a relationship with Wawa and caught a break. One day, Wawa's supplier for their store in Marmora couldn't deliver and the Romano's came through. This got them a meeting with the CEO of Wawa, Richard Wood. Starting with a 20 store trial, the two businesses, a literally Mom and Pop shop in Sea Isle and a third generation success story out of Delaware County, Pennsylvania, became partners supporting hundreds of locations and serving millions of people in multiple states.

In 1989 the Romano's purchased a factory in Woodbine, where all of the ice making was moved. Their continued success led to contracts with 7/11 and other businesses. And that success was based on one fundamental value, customer service. In fact, for years the company's business number was their home number. I get an automated service when I call a bakery, so I have a hard time with the home phone/business phone idea. It remained a family business with Joe's wife Jackie and their kids eventually coming on board with the same commitment to hard work

and satisfied customers that they saw from their parents and grandparents (and uncle who continued running Marie's well into the 2020's).

For over twenty years Sea Isle Ice won Wawa's Vendor of the Year award and here's an example of why. One year, Wawa's trucks were sidelined by a major snowstorm, they contacted Joe and for the next two days Sea Isle Ice trucks delivered Wawa milk throughout the impacted area, no big deal. Wawa eventually discontinued the award because other vendors realized they had no shot. Think about that. How many times have you gone to a store and seen customers complaining about the littlest inconsequential thing? I worked in a bar one day, *one day*, and quit because the customers were, well, this is a family column so I can't say…but these guys made satisfying the public their life.

Joe's dad passed away in 2010, his mom still lives next to Marie's. While business was still growing, the challenges of a post-Covid world coupled with increased regulation and the pressures of a business that now extended into Southeastern Pennsylvania convinced Joe Jr. it was a good time to move on and he sold the ice business to a national firm. But that's not the end of the story.

In 2022, four entrepreneurs, knowing the reputation Sea Isle Ice enjoys, approached Joe with the idea of introducing a new product, Sea Isle Iced Tea. Now Joe and his daughter help run that operation from the Sea Isle Ice building, oh and they still sell ice from there. While it's less stressful, Joe still shows up for work every day. The pride he takes in delivering for his customers hasn't diminished. One last story kind of sums it up. Joe and his dad never took time to relax in the sun. For years they were asked why they didn't just take a break and go to the beach. So, one day they left the office, walked down to the beach and ran into the ocean, then immediately went back to work. It was nice, but they didn't need the beach to appreciate each other and the life they shared.

Peter Greco, a volunteer with the Sea Isle City Historical Society, wrote this story.

To learn more about Sea Isle City's rich history, visit the Sea Isle City Historical Museum, located on the first floor of the Sea Isle City Branch of the Cape May County Library at 4800 Central Avenue – or phone the museum at 609-263-2992.