

# Lancaster

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## The Best of Lancaster 20th Edition

**Hammond's Pretzels ... One of Seven Companies or  
Individuals with a Perfect 20-for-20 Readers' Survey Record**

Carol Nicklaus, Karen Achtermann, Brian Nicklaus and Tom Nicklaus, owners of Hammond's Pretzels

# Hammond's Pretzels

**In 1931**, at the height of the Great Depression, Bill Lichty decided to start his own business. His plan was relatively simple – he wanted to start a pretzel bakery. For business advice, he turned to his grandfather and next-door neighbor, William Hammond, who had been a pretzel baker in the late 1800s. Hammond provided the recipe – a mix of flour, water, yeast, salt, malt and shortening – that yielded a unique sour-dough taste. (Today, vegetable oil replaces the shortening.) Because of this all-important contribution, they named the business Hammond's Pretzels.

They set up shop in their adjoining garages, where the pretzels were rolled by hand and baked in a brick oven. Eventually, Lichty's father, Joe, who lived on the same block, joined the family enterprise. Other family members contributed manpower, as well.

Now, nearly 80 years later, not much has changed at the bustling pretzel bakery that is still located at 716 South West End Avenue in Lancaster. Legions of fans continue to stop by with their personal pretzel cans in hand to buy fresh-out-of-the-oven pretzels. "We were green long before it became popular," says Karen Achtermann, referring to cans that in some cases have been handed from one generation of pretzel lovers to another. Karen was amazed to discover that the trademark orange-and-green Hammond's cans are being bought and sold on eBay.

The pretzels continue to be rolled by hand; Hammond's bakes 1,500 pounds of the snacks on a daily basis. "Automation just doesn't get the job done right," says Brian Nicklaus, who notes that customers have definite preferences when it comes to pretzels, thus Hammond's strives to satisfy its customers' palates by offering dark, salty, extra-salty, light-salt and no-salt varieties in addition to its regular pretzel. Even with the choices, customers make their opinions known. "For some, our dark isn't dark enough," says Brian. "They want them all but burned!"

Karen and Brian represent a new generation of Hammond/Lichty pretzel bakers. Their mother, Carol Nicklaus, is Bill Lichty's daughter. Through Carol, their father, Tom Nicklaus, obtained an after-school job at the bakery. The high-school sweethearts married and took over the business when Carol's father deemed it was time to retire. They in turn have relinquished their day-to-day duties to Brian and Karen. "You never retire from a family-owned business," Tom says of their willingness to lend a hand or provide advice. Until his death in 1988, Bill Lichty did the same for his daughter and son-in-law. Karen describes her grandfather as a "real entrepreneur and people person," saying he loved taking care of the marketing and sales aspects of the business. "We put our lives into this business," Carol says of her family, past and present. "We're very proud of what we've accomplished."

Brian and Karen grew up working at the bakery. They are familiar with all aspects of the operation and can pinch-hit wherever an extra hand is needed. Brian, who comes in on Sundays to start the sourdough that gives Hammond's pretzels their distinctive taste, recalls that he graduated from Elizabethtown College on a Saturday and started his duties

as Hammond's production manager two days later. Karen reports that yet another generation is primed to join the family business. "My nine-year old loves to come in and walk around with a clipboard," she says of the younger of her two sons.

While many aspects of the business never change, even pretzels, which date back to A.D 600, must eventually join the modern age. Knowing your product is essential, and Karen and Brian share duties when it comes to monitoring the "tastes" of consumers. The two held their collective breaths when the economy began to falter; they surmised that snack foods would surely be cut from a lot of household budgets and prepared for dreary sales reports.

To their surprise, the opposite happened and thus far, sales have held steady – in fact, demand for their products has increased. Brian attributes it to the fact that people have been staying home more, whether it's to gather around the TV to watch a movie as a family or to have friends drop by for a casual get-together. Luckily, snacks are essential for either scenario.

The pretzel has also become the go-to snack for health-conscious consumers due to its low fat content. This was not always the case – Karen shudders at the havoc the Atkins Diet caused the company. Pretzels were a no-no from the low-carb diet's point of view and it seemed as if everyone was doing Atkins.

Twenty years ago, Hammond's introduced a new taste sensation – chocolate-dipped pretzels. The company has used chocolate from a variety of local sources and currently relies on Miesse and Sweets for Sweeties to create its chocolatey/salty treats. Even health-conscious consumers can indulge, as a dark-chocolate option is available! (In an effort to be a good neighbor, Hammond's strives to buy local products whenever possible.)

Hammond's has also joined the cyber world and boasts a website through which orders can be placed. As a result, orders are not only shipped to every state in the union, but around the world, too. "Our pretzels go to a lot of people in the service," Karen reports. Fans who grew up in Lancaster, but now live elsewhere, also take advantage of online ordering.

Still, there's something about walking through the door and being enveloped in that aroma. The heat coming from the oven (installed in 1946 and still going strong) makes the small space where you place your order feel downright cozy. Customers have no problem waiting their turns to place orders – it gives them a chance to catch up on the latest news. It's the sort of place where you feel at home. And, according to Brian and Karen, Hammond's is often a required stop at holiday time for former residents who are home for a visit. "A lot of people who grew up here stop by to say hello and buy pretzels to take home with them," Karen notes. ❖

*Hammond's Pretzels is located at 716 South West End Avenue. For more information, call 392-7532 or visit [www.hammondpretzels.com](http://www.hammondpretzels.com).*



Hammond's has won the "Best Hard Pretzel" category in each of the 20 years that it appeared on the survey. From its start in 1931, Hammond's has been a family affair. Carol Nicklaus (left) and her husband, Tom (right), have handed the day-to-day operations of the business over to their children, Karen Achtermann and Brian Nicklaus. The business was founded by Carol's father, Bill Lichty, who turned to his grandfather, William Hammond, for pretzel-making advice. Hammond, who had once been a baker, provided the recipe, thus the business bore his name.

Hammond's Pretzels had a presence on our first Best of Lancaster cover (November 1990) that saw then-County Commissioners R.H. Brenneman, Brad S. Fischer and James E. Huber "disagreeing" on which pretzel is best.