

The Fabulous Story of the Hoffman Brothers

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In a world filled with evil, and in a society where we can't even agree on what's right and wrong anymore, this is a heartwarming success story.

Fred and Florence Hoffman were folks of modest means. He was in the grocery business, and she raised their children. The daughter they wanted never came along—but nine boys did.

The Hoffman brothers of Madison, Wisconsin, like so many other young men, joined the military as America was abruptly shoved into World War II by the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. But, there was something a little different about the Hoffman brothers....there were eight of them: Charles, Jerome, Francis, Cyril, Sylvester, Frederick, Walter, and Cosmos (Tom, the youngest, was just a boy and too young to go off to war).

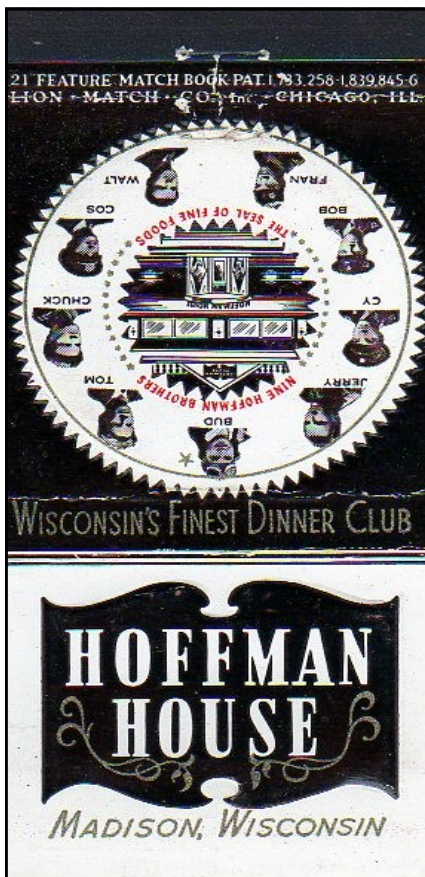
Between them, they served in Russia, England, France, Belgium, Egypt, points in South America, Africa, and the South Pacific. Their service careers included the Merchant Marine, the Army, the Air Corps, the Navy, and the Marines. Eight served; seven came home. Sylvester, a captain in the Air Corps, was killed in New Guinea in the South Pacific, ironically not only on his 24th birthday, but on the same day that his parents were being honored in a public ceremony at the city hall in recognition of their sons in the service.

In 1940, upon learning of their father's ill health, the brothers had already decided to go into a restaurant and cocktail bar business that would "help them see their father through" as well as be profitable to them." Then came the war. They cancelled their application for liquor and restaurant licenses because they knew that they would all one day be in military service. As the war ended, the seven brothers returned home, and in December, 1945, the brothers opened the "Hoffman House," in Madison.

This, their first restaurant, showed the brothers' flare for innovation that was eventually to lead the Hoffmans to a culinary empire! The restaurant featured a waterfall, a mini-trout pond, a Gay '90s buggy, and a bar with a bowery jailhouse where patrons could be photographed for posterity.

Still, the restaurant did well enough, but the brothers searched long and hard for a dressing that would give their salads a distinctive flavor. "We tried every kind of dressing we could get," recalled Francis, "but it wasn't any use. We couldn't get a sauce that satisfied our needs." Finally, Francis remembered a unique sauce he had run across during the war. He had tasted it for the first time during a stay with a Bavarian family during the closing days of the war. He hadn't brought the recipe back, but he had watched it being made by the woman of the house, and he was sure that he could duplicate it.

Although it didn't turn out quite as simple as he had hoped—it took Fran and the restaurant's chef six months of experimentation—eventually, they hit on just the right combination of ingredients. Fran was certain that what they had produced had the same flavor that he had sampled in Germany.



The brothers started serving the dressing at the restaurant and, in their own words, “It started booming before our very eyes.” It was an instant success with patrons, many of whom began asking for some for home use. The brothers started mixing it in larger quantities in the basement of the restaurant. Soon, the Hoffman House Sauce Co. was in operation, but the “boom” had only just begun.

As word spread and more and more customers used the dressing, the orders started coming in from all over the country, and then people from coast to coast who used the sauce began sending in letters telling of new uses for the salad dressing. These ranged from using it as a meat and fish sauce to putting it on cucumbers, in chili, on baked beans, and in soup. One woman wrote, “It even makes scrambled eggs taste wonderful.”

By 1953, the sauce was being produced in a modern Madison plant, distributed in 30 states. Then distribution went international after a woman in Fond du Lac tasted the dressing and sent a sample to a Hong Kong restaurateur who then promptly ordered 30 gallons. Soon, it was also being exported to Canada. The company had 2,500 employees by the time of its sale in 1971. But, the product was still marketed under the Hoffman House label by Dean Foods.

The brothers had several other successful innovations, as well:

- They opened the first salad bar in Madison (a development that forced other restaurants to follow suit).
- They actually invented the first treasure chest of surprises for children (McDonald’s and others caught on years later)
- They initiated a statewide waitress contest through the Wisconsin Restaurants Association (Hoffman-trained personnel took the top spots).

By the time the eight brothers (Tom, the youngest, who was still a boy during the war, had by now joined the family business) finally sold the entire restaurant business in 1976, it consisted of 19 sites in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan. Green Giant bought the enterprise, which in turn sold it to Pilsbury.

Since then, the Hoffmans have hosted several employee reunions. The latest was in 1998. Some 160 people showed up—former employees, past customers, friends and family—gathered to honor the men who made a name for themselves with their Hoffman House restaurants.

A former waitress recalled how Charles had the waitresses stand in line for inspection. Shoes had to be polished white, hair net and head piece properly on. The apron had to be starched and ironed and the bow neatly tied. “At the hour of restaurant opening, each waitress stood at attention in her station with a service towel resting on her arm, ready for her first customer,” she said. “From the first course to the last, they were given royal service.”

Today, three of the nine brothers remain: Frederick, Charles, and Cosmos, who was named Restaurateur of the Year in 1975. [<https://www.hoffmanhouserockford.com/our-story>]

