CHAPTER 2

A FAMILIAR BROWNSVILLE CRY:
MEET YOU AT FIDDLES!

The story has been told many times.

The Brownsville boy was stationed in the Hawaiian Islands during World War II. The letter he sent back to the States was like thousands of others mailed daily by homesick young men and women. But this wasn't a letter to his family or his sweetheart.

This was a letter to the folks at Fiddle's, a confectionery nestled almost directly under Brownsville's inter-county bridge. The staff and clientele at Fiddle's, so much a part of the young man's life, were like a second family to him. So he wrote them a letter.

Nothing about the letter was unique. It asked how the folks at the confectionery were doing and described the daily routine of military life in Hawaii. But there was something different about the envelope in which it arrived. In the space where the name of the addressee should have been written, there was instead a primitive sketch.

It was a drawing of a fiddle.

The letter was delivered to the confectionery by the Brownsville post office without a problem. There could be no doubt as to the intended recipient. Words were unnecessary. The folks at Fiddle's enjoyed a laugh at the cleverness of the writer but were not particularly surprised that the letter had reached its destination. After all . . .

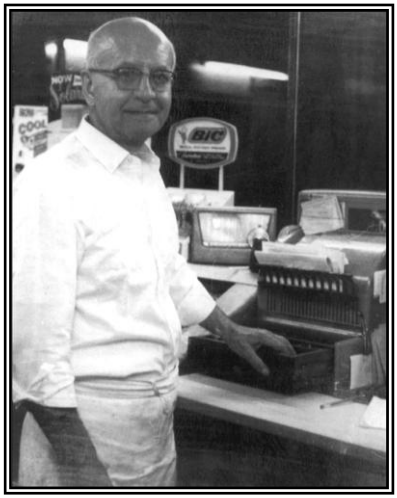
Could there be anybody that hadn't heard of Fiddle's?

The story may be true, or it may be a small town legend. Mention Fiddle's to anyone who grew up in Brownsville, and the likely response will be a smile, followed by a story. Somewhere in the story you will hear the words "hot dog." The story will probably be followed by another one. And then another. Until you wonder just what nerve you've struck.

If nostalgia were a disease, Fiddle's would have to be quarantined. The place overflows with memories. Enter Fiddle's today, sit in an ancient wooden booth, and study the hundreds of initials carved in the wood over the past seventy years. You will soon feel the urge to slide

over in the booth to make room for the ghosts of teenagers past, joining you for a trip down Memory Lane.

Fiddle's Confectionery has been in business since World War I, and it has changed surprisingly little since its heyday in the forties and fifties. A popular Brownsville landmark that has stood the test of time, it is a unique success story that began nearly a century ago with the arrival in America of the original "Fiddle" — Fadell Hallal.



Fadell "Fiddle" Hallal

"My dad, Fadell Hallal, was born in 1896 in an area of northern Syria that is referred to as the Fertile Crescent," began seventy-two-year-old Brownsville attorney George Hallal. George and I were sitting in his Spring Street home on Brownsville's North Side, discussing the origin of his father's confectionery.

"My dad's father," George continued, "was George Hallal, same name as mine, and he was a merchant in the Syrian village of Mashta al-helu."

"You mentioned to me that your father was a Christian," I said, "living in an area in the Middle East that is predominantly Muslim."

"That's right. In fact, my father's uncle, George Ellien, who came to Brownsville from the same region of Syria before my dad did, was one of the founders of St. Ellien's Orthodox Church, directly across Spring Street from this house. My mother's father**,** whose name was George Mitchell, was actually the first permanent priest at St. Ellien's.

"The only other St. Ellien's Orthodox Church is a church in Syria. St. Ellien was a regional saint, a physician in that area of the world, and he was a martyr. There were a lot of Christian martyrs in the Middle East, because Syria was mostly Muslim."

"And the village your father grew up in . . .?"

"Was an Orthodox village. My father's village and my mother's village were both near a castle called Krak des Chevaliers, which was once a Crusader castle and is still there today. Christians lived in nearby

villages for protection and avoided the general population of Syrians."

"Your father came to America at the age of sixteen. Why did he want to leave Syria?"

"My father hoped to come to America to find a better life and to eventually bring his mother and sisters here. He could not come as soon as he had hoped, however, because his father was ill. In fact, Fadell left school as a boy because of his father's illness.

"His father had a dry goods store, and when his father couldn't run it any more, Fadell, even though he was an adolescent, stepped in. But in the old country, when the old man dies or gets sick, everybody cancels out the debts. They don't pay, and they had no rule of law enabling debts to be collected.

"I remember my dad telling me how he rode a mule from village to village trying to collect, and they wouldn't give him anything. That was when he said to his father, 'Let me go to America. I can make money, and I can send it to you.' But his father said, 'No, you stay here.'

"After Fadell's father died, Fadell said to his mother, Jamilie, 'I'm going to America.'

"She said, 'All right, but you're not going without me.'"

"Fadell said, 'I'll make money and send for you.'

"His mother said, 'You take me, then I know you'll bring your sisters over there too.' So the two of them came to America together in June 1912. Unfortunately, of Fadell's eleven brothers and sisters in Syria, only two survived to adulthood. With little medicine and few doctors over there, you can see why they wanted to leave.

"Later they did send for his two surviving sisters, but one of them died before she could come over. The other, Bolomia, came to Brownsville and lived with them until she married John Asa. John, then later his nephew 'Ki,' ran a bar next to Fiddle's Confectionery.

"My father and his mother came directly from Syria to Brownsville. Here they joined their relatives who had come to Brownsville from Syria around the turn of the century, including my father's three uncles, Mike, Beatty, and George Ellien, and his aunt, Nabeha Asa. Nabeha's husband, Joseph Asa, had emigrated from the village of Uyouni al wadi, near my father's village.

"When Fadell arrived in Brownsville, his uncle George Ellien was already running the Empire Confectionery in South Brownsville, which he had established in 1910. My dad got a job working for George for up to twenty hours per day."

"Was the Empire Confectionery located in the building where Fiddle's is today?"

"I don't think George Ellien's confectionery was originally located

where Fiddle's is now. He had a store somewhere on lower High Street before that. My dad may have started working in that store, or he may have started at Fiddle's present location, of that I am not sure. But he did eventually work in the Empire Confectionery in the same building where Fiddle's is today."

"How did Fadell adapt to life in his new country?"

"He couldn't read or write English. Fred Chalfant had a night school in Brownsville where he taught English to the immigrants. My dad wanted to go to the school, but his uncle George said, 'No, you have to work,' so he couldn't go. Instead, my dad learned to read and write behind the counter at the confectionery. If he was looking at the paper, he would ask people, 'What is this word?' So he learned without going to school.

"Eventually, his uncle Beatty Ellien left Brownsville and moved to New York. Then around 1918, his uncle George also decided to move to New York to open a business there. So George sold the Empire Confectionery to my dad, who was about twenty-two years old."

"And your dad changed the confectionery's name?"

"My dad pronounced his name Fa-DELL," explained George Hallal, "and we think from that came his nickname, Fiddle, which he probably acquired soon after arriving in Brownsville. So yes, he changed the confectionery's name to 'Fiddle's.'"

"Was the Empire Confectionery as large as Fiddle's is today?"

"No. There were three storerooms in the space that is now occupied by Fiddle's. The Empire Confectionery occupied one storeroom, and I am told a second storeroom was occupied by a sub-station of the U. S. Post Office. I don't know what was in the third one.

"My father bought the confectionery business from his uncle in 1918, but he did not buy the building itself until 1923, the year he married my mother, Pearl Mitchell. After he bought the building, he enlarged the confectionery into the other two storerooms. He also made two five-room apartments upstairs, and sometime after 1924 moved into one of those apartments with his wife, his first-born child Regina, and his mother."

"Where did Fadell and Pearl live before they moved into the apartment over Fiddle's?"

"When my parents were first married in 1923, they were living in West Brownsville. It is my understanding that he may have left his uncle's employ at some point, because my dad started a bowling alley in West Brownsville. I believe it was in the Joe Asa building, which is at the end of the inter-county bridge. I think the building is still marked 'Joe Asa Building' on top of it.

"My parents, their four children, and my grandmother later lived in the apartment over Fiddle's until 1941, when we moved into the house where I now live on the corner of Spring Street and Fifth Avenue."

By the 1940s, Fiddle's was an active gathering place for businessmen, students, shoppers, and even the occasional trainman, who would hop off a slow-moving train to grab a sandwich or a package of tobacco. Next we will venture inside the Fiddle's of those years, take a seat in one of the booths, stick our chewing gum under the tabletop, and wait for our friends to arrive!

STEP INSIDE FIDDLE'S AND BE CARRIED BACK IN TIME

The peculiar color photograph arrived via email, sent by a regular reader. I studied the picture on my computer screen for several minutes, unable to make any sense of it. The subject of the photo appeared to be a piece of modern art, some sort of mosaic. On a dark surface, the artist had arranged beige, blue, pink, and green globs of some unidentifiable substance in a seemingly haphazard pattern.

I concentrated fully, attempting to discover the hidden design in the colorful splash of splotches. Perhaps then I could unlock the deeper meaning of this work of art. I focused closely on just one of the individual spots of color, then on another one. Finally I realized the truth about those hundreds of beige, blue, pink and green globs.

They were wads of chewing gum.

What the reader had sent me was a photograph of the underside of a tabletop in a booth at Fiddle's Confectionery. Some nostalgia-starved photographer had captured the image and preserved for all time the sticky spearmint spoor of the passing generations.

"We couldn't clean it off," laughed George Hallal, whose father, Fadell Hallal, was the longtime proprietor of Fiddle's. "People stuck their gum under there almost as a tradition, like tossing a coin in the fountain. They would carve their initials in the wooden booths too. In fact, I once said to my dad, 'Why don't we get some new booths?'

"Dad told me, 'They'd have them carved up in no time. Besides, they're part of the store!'"

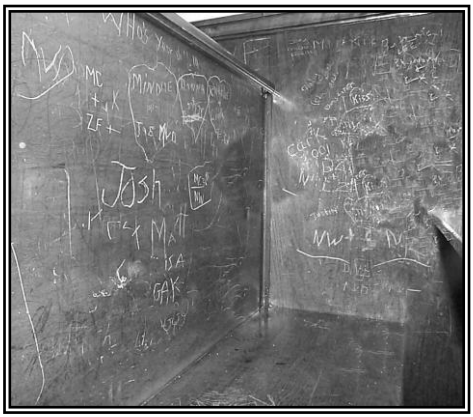
It is easy to spot which visitors to Fiddle's Confectionery are there to recapture a few moments of their youth. They enter the front door, stop short, then slowly look around the confectionery, as if they are seeing more than is actually there. Then they look to the left, smile, and enter the part of the confectionery that contains the old high-backed

walnut booths that have been part of Fiddle's longer than anyone can remember. They are hoping to find the initials they carved in their favorite booth many decades ago.

The late Margaret Johnson, who was director of the Greater Brownsville Area Chamber of Commerce, once told a reporter, "So many people want to come back home, once they move away from town. The first place they go back to is Fiddle's, where they once carved a heart into a booth, and they reminisce about how their lives have changed since they had their first sweetheart."

Just how old are those booths?

"Those booths were there in the thirties when I was a child," George Hallal told me. "I don't know exactly when my dad put them in, but they have never changed. They were quite fancy at the time. They took the place of tables with wire legs and chairs with wire backs, which my dad installed when he bought the place from his uncle George Ellien in 1918."



Fiddle's booths, carved with the names and initials of five generations of sweethearts, have been a fixture since the 1930s.

When Richard Wells of Mt. Morris, Michigan, visits his old home town, he always checks out his favorite booth at Fiddle's.

"On the back of the first booth on the right," Richard revealed, "is inscribed 'Libby + Rich.' I scratched that in there around 1948."

Hundreds of initials are still clearly visible beneath layers of polyurethane. Some of those initials are nestled inside carved hearts, etched by sweethearts who later married and now bring their grandchildren to Fiddle's.

"Fiddle's witnessed plenty of teenage angst," said Jan Rowe, now of Boston, "as we sat in our booth wondering where our boyfriends were. Often we would walk to Fiddle's on cold autumn and winter evenings when there was nothing else to do."

If a girl's boyfriend was late, the juke box could provide some companionship.

"I worked there in 1950 and 1951," reminisced Betty Lou Shabin of Manhattan, "and there were small jukeboxes in each booth with panels of selections. Each song cost a nickel, six for a quarter.

"Background music for teenage tete-a-tetes included 'How High The Moon' by Les Paul and Mary Ford; 'I Apologize' by Billy Eckstein; 'Unforgettable' by Nat King Cole; 'Too Young' by Nat King Cole; 'Cold Cold Heart' by Tony Bennett; 'Because Of You' by Tony Bennett; 'Jezebel' by Frankie Laine; and 'Mule Train' by Frankie Laine."

Mal Crawford of Raleigh, North Carolina, had a different favorite hit.

"I remember hanging out at Fiddle's," Mal said, "and everyone singing along with the juke box and clapping our hands to 'Deep In The Heart Of Texas.'"

Two less famous tunes were also listed on the play list of Fiddle's juke boxes, tunes that professional musician Bob Davison, who grew up on Brownsville's North Side, described to me.

"I recorded two songs that [former Brownsville physician] Dr. Klimoski wrote," Bob explained, "and to which Carl Massini put the music. Dr. Klimoski went by the name of Joe Ballad, and his songs, which were recorded on the Jay-Bee Label, were on several juke boxes in the area, including those at Fiddle's. Every time I would go into Fiddle's, Johnny Mitchell would go to the juke box and play those songs."

Some customers even figured out how to make money off the juke boxes.

"Kids would jam the juke box with slugs," revealed Don Laughery of Catonsville, Maryland, "so the juke box wouldn't work. Later they would come back to the booth and bang on the coin return to get the slug and any nickels that had been inserted afterward."

The old booths are not the only reminders of years gone by. On the wall above the left-hand row of booths are light fixtures with very unusual shades. Mary Kolbash Rakas of Cardale, who worked at Fiddle's from 1948 until 1957, remembers the day they were installed.

"We went next door to Berky Electric," Mary told me, "found some shades, brought them back to Fiddle's, and cut them to fit those light fixtures above the booths."

That was half a century ago.

"They're still there!" exclaimed Mary. "Can you believe that?"

Believe it. Because so much of its past has been preserved, Fiddle's still has a magical way of reviving pleasant memories for current residents and expatriates alike. The fact that the confectionery was family run also helped make Fiddle's special.

"The thing that impressed me," Mary Rakas commented, "was how the entire family would help during the busy times. Regina, George, John Mitchell's brother George, and many other family members helped

out."

"The people who have talked to me over the years," George Hallal said, "have all told me what a hard working man my father was. He hit the shore running. He opened the store at six in the morning, stayed all day, had his meals behind the counter, and then he'd close up in the evening.

"We all lived above the store until we moved to Spring Street in 1941. My family lived in one of the two apartments, and my uncle John Mitchell, who was my mother's brother, lived in the other apartment with his mother, Susan Mitchell, and his younger brother, George Mitchell, who graduated in 1946. Many members of the extended family, including the Mitchells, worked in the store."

"When did you begin working there?"

"During the Second World War, it was hard for my dad to get help," George said. "Most of the men, including my uncle John Mitchell, were in the military. So even though I was only about eleven years old, I started working there. I would work every day at lunchtime, and I would work in the evenings.

"One day, I said to my father, 'Dad, I need a day off.'

"He said, 'What are you going to do with a day off?'

"I said, 'I don't know. I just want a day off.'

"He told me I could have a day off in the middle of the week, when it wasn't too busy. So what did I do on my night off? I went down to the store and sat at the counter, talking to the customers."

George laughed. "That was the last day off I ever had. In fact, I didn't know what it was like to have a Saturday night off until I went to college at Penn State.

"Yet I didn't feel overworked or abused. That was just normal. We lived upstairs and just went downstairs to work. During the week, I only worked at lunchtime, because we had to do our school work."

"How could you work at lunchtime if you were a school student?" I asked.

"When I attended high school on High Street, they would let my uncle George Mitchell and me out five minutes early," George said. "We would always beat the crowd down the hill. We'd work until about twenty 'til one, have something to eat, and go back to school.

"I never saw the end of a Brownsville High School home football game, because I always had to leave at the beginning of the fourth quarter. The football field was where Brownsville Area High School is now, and I'd have to run down the hill to beat the crowd."

"You mentioned that your dad's mother, Jamilie, lived with you. Did she help too?"

"She lived over the store with us, and yes, she helped with the store too. Before the Second World War, Fiddle's used to serve full lunches, not just hamburgers and hot dogs. We offered such things as whipped potatoes, chicken croquettes, and meat loaf, and most of it was prepared upstairs in the apartment. My grandmother would even roll ground beef into patties upstairs so that we could make them into hamburgers downstairs."

The familiar booths and friendly atmosphere attracted many loyal customers to Fiddle's. They were also attracted by the quick service and good food. The popularity of one menu item in particular has become almost legendary. Next we will leave our booth, walk over to the counter, have a seat on a stool, and order "Two With!"

Then we will watch as Fadel Hallal or brother-in-law John Mitchell work some griddle magic. Who knows? Perhaps we will finally learn the secret of those famous Fiddle's hot dogs!

IN SEARCH OF THE SECRET OF FIDDLE'S HOT DOGS

The delicious aroma wafting down Water Street set mouths watering in generations of Brownsville residents.

"One thing I loved about Fiddle's," says Phyllis Barreca Grossi of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, "was the smell of the hot dogs as you rounded the corner toward Water Street. Of course you had to stop, even if you weren't hungry. No one made hot dogs like Fiddle's!"

Geraldine Beaver Howe of San Diego heartily agrees.

"When I was one of ten kids growing up in Brownsville," she told me, "our dad was a coal miner, barely making a living to support all of us. But once in a while we were treated to some of the 'fixins' from Fiddle's. Oh my! As I close my eyes and let my memory take me back, I can still smell the hot dogs and hamburgers with mustard and fresh onions."

Fiddle's hot dogs were literally the stuff of dreams.

"Kunky Stenson and I were serving in the Merchant Marine during World War II," Brownsville native Bob Davison told me. "We were in Italy, which was ravaged by war, and there wasn't much good food to eat. We would often say to each other, 'When we get back home, we're going to Fiddle's.'

"After the war ended," Bob continued, "I played in a band, and we often played at Nemacolin Country Club and other nice places. The people who hired us were gracious and would invite us to eat with them. Toby Lyons and I would always tell them we had eaten already. Then

when the job was over, we'd go to Fiddle's for hot dogs!"

The fame of Fiddle's hot dogs seems to know no boundaries.

"I had relatives," remarked Burte John of Pittsburgh, "who drove from Canton, Ohio, quite often just to have Fiddle's hot dogs. We have never tasted any like them again."

Determined to learn the secret of Fiddle's hot dogs, I grilled George Hallal, son of Fiddle's founder Fadell Hallal, hoping to find out the truth about those wonderful wieners. George wouldn't crack.

"I don't know what that secret was," said George. "My dad and my uncle John Mitchell would go to different provision companies until they got the hot dog they wanted. Before the war, we used to get them out of Pittsburgh from Freed and Rhineman, a German packing company on the North Side that may still be there. Those hot dogs had the sheep casings, and those were my favorites. They'd get hard and crack open.

"Even in later years, if John Mitchell got a batch of hot dogs that he didn't think was right, he'd call Kahn's – we were getting them at Kahn's then – or send Kahn's a letter saying there was too much of this or that in the hot dog."

Interesting information! But I was not satisfied that I had found the complete answer to why Fiddle's hot dogs are renowned throughout the civilized world. I pressed George for more clues.

"Was the secret of the hot dogs in the way they were cooked?" I suggested.

"They cooked them on the grill," George replied. "They had two grills. They made the hamburgers on one, and the hot dogs on the other. One end of the grill didn't have high heat; it was a low heat. Then as you moved to the right, you got more heat, so that you could slowly move the hot dogs over. By the time they moved all the way over, they were pretty well done. The effect was that they were slow cooked. If you cooked them too fast, they'd get hard and burnt right away."

Well, maybe that grill technique was the secret of Fiddle's delicious hot dogs, but I was not giving up so easily. In the 1940s, Fadell Hallal made his brother-in-law, John Mitchell, a partner in the business, and they worked together for years. I called on John Mitchell's widow, Katherine, at her Pearl Street home. After several moments of conversation about Fiddle's, I felt the moment was right, and I slipped The Question into the conversation.

"Do you know," I asked Katherine innocently, "the secret of Fiddle's hot dogs?"

Katherine digested the question. After some consideration, she spoke.

"I think you have to cook them slowly on the griddle," she replied, "steam the buns, and use only the best quality of hand-chopped Spanish onions. The gas griddle is hottest over the burner, and you'd move it away from the burners to cook them slowly."

Hmm. No great "secret" there either. Perhaps George Hallal was right when he offered yet another explanation for the popularity of Fiddle's hot dogs.

"When people ask me, 'What was the secret to the hot dogs?'" said George, "I say I think it was the good atmosphere, the friendly people, and the quick service. You didn't get a cold hot dog or a cold cup of coffee at Fiddle's.

"My dad would say, 'When they come in, you wait on them right away. You can't stop and talk to somebody.' Service was very important. We had competition from Hagan's, Isaly's, Mary McCann's, Mitchell's Restaurant (no relation), the Nut Shop, and others. But my dad always said competition is healthy, because it brings people to town.

"One year, the Chamber of Commerce was having a promotion, and we were giving away a savings bond if you could guess the number of hot dogs that were sold at Fiddle's up until that year. I asked my dad, 'How do you know how many hot dogs you sold?'

"He kept very meticulous records. He knew how many pounds of hot dogs he had bought, and how many hot dogs were in a pound, so he said it wasn't very hard to figure out.

"The winner of the contest was Bob Delaney. He ate there every day, so he probably ate quite a few of them himself!" George laughed. "I've long forgotten the winning number, but it was in the millions of hot dogs."

Fiddle's did a booming business, selling hot dogs and plenty of other menu items. The staff was kept busy taking orders and delivering food to the booths.

"But you know," said George, "in the forties when I worked there, we never wrote down an order, and you never forgot anything. The girls would just call the orders out; they didn't give you slips. 'Two With' meant 'two hot dogs with mustard and onions.' I could almost sit down at the end of the evening and remember every customer and what they ordered."

"What did a hot dog cost?" I asked.

"Hot dogs in the thirties were a nickel, hamburgers were a nickel, and coffee was a nickel. My dad used to say, 'Do you know how many hot dogs I have to sell to put a dollar in that register? That's why you have to work hard!'

"When my father came to this country, he couldn't read or write English. He had to learn figures fast. He could add a column of twenty figures in his head, and he never made a mistake. When they'd deliver the cakes and the buns in the morning, he'd check over the bill and correct them if he found an error. He was always right, because he trained himself that way."

After evening ball games at the high school, Fiddle's was always hopping. Mary Kolbash Rakas, a waitress in the early 50s, recalled,

"After football games, the team would come into Fiddle's, and you had to have dozens of milkshakes and hamburgers ready."

Willard Peet of Poland, Ohio, played basketball for the Brownsville Brownies from 1953 to 1955.

"What I remember about Fiddle's," Willard told me, "is that after every basketball game, win or lose, Coach Ed Addis and Coach Kreuter would take the team there for hamburgers and milkshakes."

Coach Addis's daughter Leslie now lives in Seattle. When she and her father revisited Fiddle's a few years ago, they got a nice surprise.

"My father had often told my husband and me how he would take his team to Fiddle's after every home game. In later years, when we would visit Fiddle's with him, he would look around the restaurant like he could still see his younger self with his team, enjoying their meal at Fiddle's, talking over their latest game.

"One day in the mid-1990s, we took dad back to Fiddle's. One of the waitresses came up to my dad, called him by name, and told him she remembered him as teacher and coach, bringing in his team. It was amazing! Talk about a restaurant remembering the old-time regulars!"

Those players chose from the menu posted on the wall. Betty Lou Shabin of Manhattan still remembers that menu from when she was a waitress at Fiddle's in 1950 and 1951. By then, the hot dogs weren't a nickel any more.

"They were fifteen cents," said Betty, "with the most popular condiments being mustard and onions. A hamburger was twenty cents, and Coke or coffee was a nickel. As for ice cream, a soda or shake was fifteen cents, a sundae twenty cents, and a banana split cost a quarter."

Even Fiddle's coffee got its share of compliments.

"We never bought ground coffee," George Hallal said. "We would buy fresh bean coffee and grind it, so we always had fresh-ground coffee. The last supplier was Fortune Coffee Company in Pittsburgh, and he would deliver every week.

"Bob Petriello, who worked next door at the *Telegraph*, came in every night to get the *Post-Gazette*, which came out around ten o'clock at night. Bob's doctor once asked him to what he attributed his good health. Bob told him, 'Fiddle's coffee!'"

Some folks remember Fiddle's food, while others remember the old-fashioned booths, but everyone remembers Fadell Hallal, who founded Fiddle's, or his brother-in-law Johnny Mitchell, who ran the confectionery for years. Next we'll meet Fadell Hallal and Johnny Mitchell, partners in one of Brownsville's most renowned businesses.

FADEL HALLAL TREATED HIS EMPLOYEES LIKE FAMILY

In our series about Fiddle's Confectionery in Brownsville, readers have reminisced about the antique wooden booths, the delicious hot dogs covered with mustard and onions, and the family atmosphere that permeated Fiddle's. No ode to Fiddle's would be complete without a closer look at the two men whose names are synonymous with Fiddle's – founder Fadel Hallal and his brother-in-law and successor, Johnny Mitchell.

Fadel Hallal, who emigrated from Syria to the United States in 1912 at the age of sixteen, purchased his uncle George Ellien's Empire Confectionery in 1918 and renamed it Fiddle's Confectionery. According to Fadel's son, George Hallal, he purchased the building housing the confectionery in 1923. I spoke with George about that building.

"What was in the part of the building behind the confectionery?" I asked him.

"Directly behind Fiddle's, in the same building that housed the confectionery, was a Packard automobile showroom," George replied. "The dealership was owned by J. Slaughterback. They could only fit a few cars in there to display. There was also a parking lot and a little garage where they could service cars back there."

"Is that the part of the building where Fiddle's bar was later located?"

"Yes. My dad converted that auto showroom into a bar when prohibition ended sometime after 1933 to have a business for John Asa, who was married to my father's sister, Belomia. That's when he got the liquor license. When John passed away before World War II, John's nephew, 'Ki' Asa, took it over and ran the bar until he had a heart attack, after which he started selling cars."

"Was there a connecting door between the confectionery and the bar?"

"There was for a while, but then the liquor control board said we couldn't have that unless we licensed the store too. My dad didn't want a liquor license for the confectionery, so that doorway was closed up. I think Mike Novotny [current owner of Fiddle's] has re-opened it, since the bar is closed."

"Your dad seems to have been popular with his customers."

"Everyone became friends with my dad and my uncle John Mitchell," said George, "because people often came to the store selling things, and my dad and uncle made friends with everyone, salesmen and

customers alike. Fiddle's wasn't just a place to work. It was a social gathering place.

"However, my dad didn't allow loafing in there. If we weren't busy, folks would come in and talk and socialize, but if we got busy, the customers knew they had better move on. After a movie let out at eleven p.m., we would fill that place up. You had to wait in line to get in. Then after that crowd thinned out, every Saturday night the Moose or the Elks would have a dance, and that crowd would come in at around one a.m."

"Sounds like your dad worked some long hours."

"My dad would go to work at eleven a.m., work until five, take two hours off for dinner, then work until two or three in the morning."

"On Labor Day back in 1936," George continued, "which they called John Mitchell Day then, I was only six years old. I remember that the town was so crowded they allowed no vehicular traffic that day. They had the parade in Brownsville, and it was wall-to-wall people. I was sitting upstairs in our apartment above Fiddle's, looking out the window, and all I could see were people.

"We had four-foot-high candy cases in Fiddle's at that time, and they were glass all the way to the floor. There were so many people jammed into Fiddle's that day that we had to roll those out and put them in the storeroom, because the crowds got so big they could have easily broken through the glass.

"For additional counter space, we set up pickle barrels with boards across the tops. In those days, when you bought pickles, you didn't buy a jar, you bought a whole barrel. It was amazing how many people were in town that day."

"How has the physical layout of Fiddle's changed since your dad ran it?"

"Until 1967, the counter with the stools faced the front window on Bridge Street, with the cooking area between the counter and the window. You could walk up to the outside of the front window and watch them making hot dogs and hamburgers inside. The soda fountain was along the back wall, and the candy and tobacco cases were over toward the right side of the store. The front right-hand corner of the building had a doorway before that was changed after a minor fire in 1967."

"What about the booths?"

"The booths were in the same place, and there were also three booths along the right side [nearest the river], along that short wall next to the corner doorway. At lunchtime, those were sort of reserved for the bus students, because the bus students didn't have anywhere to eat lunch since the high school didn't have a cafeteria. They would pack six or

seven kids into one booth.

"After the 1967 fire, the configuration of the business was changed. The doorway on the corner of Water and Bridge Street was closed off, and the griddle area was moved to the inside wall."

George chuckled. "Closing up that corner door changed at least one routine. Back in the late thirties and forties, there were many trains going through Brownsville every day on the tracks across Water Street, and sometimes a train would slow down to a crawl. When we saw that happen, we would get ready, because we knew the brakeman or the conductor was going to run in the corner door and get tobacco, snacks, maybe even a hot dog. He'd jump off the train, hurry in, and jump back on the train."

Many of Fadel Hallal's employees have emphasized how much they admired him, both as an employer and as a man.

"Our employees were like family," George said.

One of those employees was Mary Rakas, who was fourteen years old when she began working at Fiddle's in 1948.

"Mr. Hallal was not only your employer," Mary told me, "he respected you as a person. He considered you family once you were employed by him, and he was always concerned with the welfare of his employees. One time when my mother was to have surgery, Mr. Hallal even drove me to Pittsburgh to be with her.

"I met many successful people when I was working in Fiddle's as a young girl, and working there helped me to set my value system and my goals in life. The Hallal and Mitchell families had great values and taught me a lot. I aspired to succeed as they had done.

"I am who I am from what I learned at Fiddle's," declared Mary. "All of them helped a young girl grow up. They taught me responsibility and the virtue of working hard, and they were wonderful to me."

"There are families in Pittsburgh that I would visit," said George Hallal, "and I would come home and tell my mother how they treated me like royalty! My mother would say, 'Oh, your dad helped them out when so-and-so was sick.'

"There was a little lunch counter on a corner of the Boulevard of the Allies, not far from the *Post-Gazette*. There weren't more than eight stools in there. It was called Dave Lunch – not Dave's Lunch, just Dave Lunch.

"I went in there one day and had a cup of coffee, and it was really good. I came home and said, 'Dad, today I got great coffee and a hot dog that was almost as good as yours.'

"He said, 'Where?'

"I said, 'On the Boulevard of the Allies.'

"He said, 'Oh, Dave Lunch?'

"I was surprised. I said, 'Yeah, how did you know?'

"Dad said, "Ah, I gave Dave his first job. You tell him that you are my son.'

"So I went in there next time and I told Dave who I was.

"'Oh my God!' Dave said, 'your dad taught me everything I knew! I didn't know anything, and I wouldn't have my business today if it weren't for him!'

"Dave Lunch wasn't very big, but they did such a great business in that place that he eventually opened up a bigger place next door."

"When did your dad start to cut back on working those long hours at Fiddle's?" I asked.

"My dad was born in 1896, so when World War II was ending, he was nearly fifty. When my uncle John Mitchell, who worked with him at the confectionary, had left for the service at the beginning of the war, my dad had told him, 'When you come back, you'll be a partner.' Uncle John came back in 1944 and became my dad's partner.

"Uncle John gradually took over the managerial tasks, the hiring, the keeping of the books, the payroll, things like that. I'd say up to the 1950s, it was my dad who ran it, and after that, it was my uncle who ran it, even though my dad still worked there.

"My dad did retire for a short period, because he had worked hard and wanted to take a little time off, but then he went back to work. In the 1970s, he would still work in the evenings because he liked to go down and talk to all of the customers.

"He didn't work the last three years of his life when he was sick. Dad died of cancer in August of 1979 and is buried at Lafayette Cemetery."

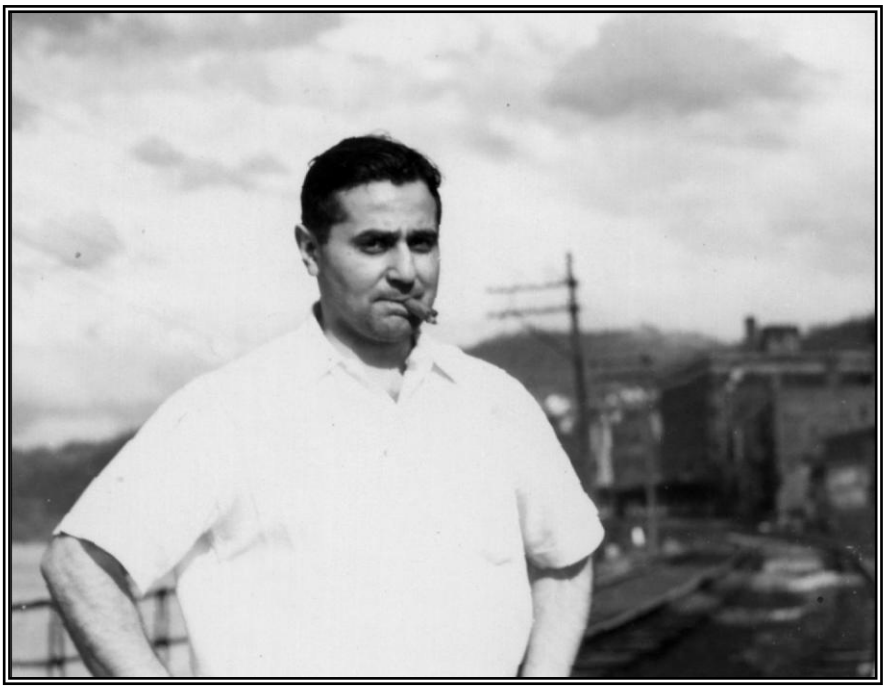
The torch had been gradually passed to Fadel's brother-in-law, Johnny Mitchell, who continued to operate the confectionery until he sold it in 1990. Next as we conclude our look back at Fiddle's Confectionery, readers share their fond memories of the late Johnny Mitchell's years behind the counter at Fiddle's.

JOHNNY MITCHELL CARRIED ON THE FIDDLE'S TRADITION

Folks who were customers at Fiddle's Confectionery during the early and mid-twentieth century remember Fiddle's founder, Fadell Hallal. Another man whose name became synonymous with Fiddle's was Johnny Mitchell, who worked there from 1935 through 1990.

"Could you explain to me," I asked Fadell Hallal's son, George, "how Johnny Mitchell came to be associated with Fiddle's?"

"John and my father were related by marriage," George said. "The connection goes back to my mother's father, George Mitchell, who was the first permanent priest at St. Ellien's Orthodox Church in Brownsville. John Mitchell was one of George Mitchell's seven children."



Johnny Mitchell

"And your mother, Pearl Mitchell, was John's oldest sister?"

"That's right. When Pearl Mitchell married Fadell Hallal in 1923, her brother John was only three years old. The year before, George Mitchell had moved his family from Brownsville to Niagara Falls, then later to Wilkes-Barre, where he served as priest in a church there. John grew up in Wilkes-Barre."

In 1935, when John was fifteen and in high school in Wilkes-Barre, he began spending his summers in Brownsville working at his brother-in-law's confectionery, Fiddle's, for a dollar a day.

"How did it come to pass that John eventually made Brownsville his permanent home?" I asked George.

"John had six brothers and sisters," George explained. "The oldest,

Mike, went to high school in Brownsville because his dad was still the priest at St. Ellien's in those years. Mike later went to Thiel and Harvard Law School.

"Yet of the seven Mitchell children," George continued, "I think my uncle John was probably the brightest of the group. He was valedictorian of his 1938 graduating class in Wilkes-Barre, and he should have gone to college."

I talked with John Mitchell's widow, Katherine, at her Pearl Street home in Brownsville, and I asked Katherine why John, with his outstanding academic credentials, had not enrolled in college.

"John's father died right after John graduated from high school," Katherine said. "He felt a responsibility to support his mom and his younger brother George, so he turned down a scholarship to go to Bucknell University and instead went to work full time."

As she spoke of John's life-altering decision, I could not help but glance over her shoulder to a bookshelf on which are displayed framed photographs of John and Katherine Mitchell's three grown children, Mark, Janet and Kathy. All are college graduates.

"When John's father died," Katherine continued, "John, his mother, and his brother came to Brownsville. They moved into the other apartment over the store, next to the one in which Hallals lived. John began working full time for his brother-in-law at Fiddle's."

In 1942, John became engaged to Katherine (Kitty) Sieg, whose father Abe had operated a store on Brownsville's North Bend until his death in 1932. I asked Katherine how she and John had met.

"I had known John as a child," she said, "when his father had been the priest at St. Ellien's. Our families had been very close, and we liked each other even then as young people.

"But we didn't see each other for many years, because his father was transferred to Niagara Falls and then to Wilkes-Barre. Then one day while John was visiting his sister in New Jersey, he came to visit me in New York, and we resumed our relationship."

John entered the military in 1942. Before he left for his overseas assignment, Fadell Hallal took his twenty-two-year-old brother-in-law aside and spoke with him.

"When you come back from there," Fadell told John, "you'll be a partner."

The offer gave John something to look forward to during the long years away from home.

"Where did John serve during the war?" I asked Katherine.

"He was in the CBI."

"CBI?"

"The China, Burma, India Theater," Katherine said. "He flew the 'Hump' [the Himalayas] as a first lieutenant navigator. It was very tricky flying."

When John returned to Brownsville near the end of the war, Fadell Hallal kept his word to his brother-in-law and made John his partner in Fiddle's Confectionery. In 1945, John and Katherine were married and bought a house at 382 Pearl Street in Brownsville.

"John, his mother, and his younger brother George had been living in the apartment over Fiddle's prior to our marriage," recalled Katherine. "We got married and bought this house from its builder, Tom Aubrey, who owned Aubrey Lumber in West Brownsville. When we moved in here in 1945, John's mother and brother, who graduated the following year, moved in with us."

I asked Katherine how Fadell Hallal and her husband shared the responsibility of running Fiddle's.

"At first, John worked the split shift," Katherine said. "He would go to work at eleven, come home at five, eat and rest, go back at nine and work until about two. Then he would take the waitresses home. Some lived in Denbo, some in Allison or Republic."

"Those are long hours," I said. "How many days a week was Fiddle's open?"

"We were open seven days a week," Katherine said, "and we closed on only the three big holidays each year – Christmas, Easter, and . . . ," pausing and smiling, "Kennywood Day!"

The long hours didn't slow Johnny Mitchell down behind the counter.

"People tell me how fast my dad was and how fast my uncle was," chuckled George Hallal. In 1967, Brownsville *Telegraph* reporter John J. Bogorae wrote about John's deft handling of his duties at the grill.

"The other afternoon," wrote Bogorae in his column, *Breezy Banter*, "we watched Johnny Mitchell, grillmaster par excellence, at Fiddle's in action for several minutes. The local hot dog tycoon had two orders of French fries in one of the deep fryers, one of shrimp in the other, and after the French fries were done he tossed in a batch of onion rings. He was also preparing two salads to go, there were two cheeseburgers on the grill, and bread in the toaster for two ham sandwiches.

"While all of this was going on, he made a hoagie and a corned beef sandwich and took time out to get four hot dogs, two of them to go with coffee. A customer at the counter, viewing all of this action, asked, 'Where is my Western?' Mitchell smilingly came back with, 'I'm way ahead of you,' as he made the western sandwich. He had the ingredients cooking in a skillet while all the other culinary actions were taking place.

He placed the western on the counter before the hungry customer could think of anything else to say. A real culinary magician, that Mitchell, and he really works out behind the counter!"

Betty Sutton, widow of the late Bert Sutton, offered a touching tribute to the role Fiddle's played in her life and to Johnny Mitchell's soft-spoken nature.

"Fiddle's is where Bert and I met," Betty told me. "We were a little old for carving initials in the booths, but we talked over what seemed like gallons of coffee and fell in love. I was a young widow with a little girl, and I had never met anyone so charming and funny. It was a romance that lasted for forty-four years during which he adopted my daughter Michelle, and we had two sons together, Bert and Andrew. In memory of Bert, I would like to tell you a little story about Johnny Mitchell, one that I call 'the dishwashing story.'

"I was in high school," Betty continued, "and a lady named Bessie Sanders was renting a room at my parents' home on High Street. She washed dishes for John Mitchell at Fiddle's, and one time when she had to have surgery, I agreed to do her job while she was in the hospital.

"One Sunday night, I decided it was too hot to go to work and stand over that steaming wash tub, so I simply stayed home, and I didn't call off either. When I showed up for work on Monday morning, John came back to see me. He said quietly, 'You know, Betty, we needed you last night. We were very busy and you weren't here. You didn't even call to say you weren't coming in.'

"Well, I had fully expected him to yell at me, and when he was so nice instead, I just lost it and started to cry. So he put his arm around my shoulder and said that he was sorry he had made me cry, that wasn't his intent, but he just wanted me to know that he was depending on me, and I had let him down.

"I can tell you, it was a most valuable lesson," Betty said, "and I have carried it with me throughout my life. Fortunately I was able to have the chance to relate this story to John and Kitty one day when Bert and I were visiting them. John had not remembered the incident, but he had tears in his eyes when I thanked him for his gentle way of handling the matter.

"They are such wonderful people, the Hallals and the Mitchells," Betty concluded, "and we were always pleased to know them. Bert and I often talked about Brownsville and the wonderful people we knew there. It was a great place to grow up."

In 1990, after fifty-five years at Fiddle's, John Mitchell retired at the age of seventy. He sold the confectionery to Mike and Beverly Novotny, local residents who still operate Fiddle's Confectionery today. In

Fiddle's in 2010, the confectionery's centennial year

January 1993, John Mitchell died. He is buried at Lafayette Memorial Park.

Fadell Hallal and Johnny Mitchell.

They had quite a run, didn't they? For seventy-two years from 1918 to 1990, these two men served up hot dogs slathered with mustard and onions, talked with thousands of customers who patronized their confectionery, and through their front window witnessed the rise and fall of twentieth-century Brownsville.

Though they didn't realize it, Fadell Hallal and Johnny Mitchell did something else. They created a legendary Brownsville landmark.

Fiddle's.

Growing up in Brownsville.

One and inseparable.