

Laughner Brothers

Founded: 1888

Locations: 4 Indiana Avenue (1888–); many subsequent locations; 4004 South East Street

William Jonathon Wesley Laughner, born in 1862, grew up on a farm in Whitestown, Indiana. His father ran a country store and sold produce between Whitestown and Indianapolis from a horse-drawn cart. Following his father's example, Jonathon operated a lunch wagon at fairs and in city parks throughout central Indiana. In partnership with William J. Perry, he opened Laughner & Perry Confectionary on 4 Indiana Avenue in 1888. It was the first in a long line of dining establishments operated by members of the Laughner family in central Indiana. Laughner & Perry began selling fudge, peanut brittle, taffy, and hand-dipped chocolates but soon began serving sandwiches and sodas as well. Laughner bought out his partner in 1892. In 1900 he opened Laughner's Dairy Lunch at 106 North Illinois Street, introducing new cafeteria-style service, which catered to the growing body of middle-class shopgirls, skilled tradesmen, and office clerks looking for a quick lunch.

At Laughner's cafeteria, customers selected food from glass cases and steam tables and ate their lunches in wooden chairs with tables attached to the chairs. Lunches served this way in cafeterias were sometimes called "one-arm lunches." Good food and quick service was the Laughner trademark. Laughner's cafeteria served meals around the clock to the city's war-swollen population during World War I. Many members of the extended Laughner clan operated cafeterias, confectioneries, and restaurants in Indianapolis over the years. (MCL Cafeteria, Laughner's primary regional competition,

was begun in 1950 by a Laughner relative.) Laughner's brothers—George A., Elmer, and Ora—all entered the business. In 1909 Jonathon and George opened a restaurant at 310 West Washington Street. In 1913 Jonathon and his son Claude F. operated a restaurant at 162 North Illinois Street. Claude met his wife Flora in the back of his father's confectionery. The couple's five children grew up working in the family cafeterias, selling candy door to door, and helping run the concession stands that Claude operated at the State Fair, Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and Riverside Amusement Park beginning in 1912. "We worked the stands, we rode the rides free, and we slept on peanut stacks," Frances (Laughner) Tierney later recalled. "We ate peanuts all day long, and we were the envy of other children." Claude and Flora introduced straight-line tray rail service at the Central Cafeteria at 805 North Alabama Street, which they opened in 1920. During the 1930s the Laughner family ran many cafeterias in downtown Indianapolis, usually two or three at a time. In 1939 Claude and Flora divorced, and Flora opened her own cafeteria at 5115 East 10th Street the following year. (She later opened a second cafeteria at 10th Street and Emerson Avenue after her son Lloyd took over the East 10th Street location.) Claude retired from the business in 1958.

In 1957 Claude and Flora's three sons—Charles, Lloyd, and Richard—formed Laughner Brothers. Charles took the lead in adapting the family business to the changing times. Much of Laughner Brothers middle-class clientele was moving to the suburbs, and fast-food competition was contributing to the cafeteria's decline in popularity across the country. In the 1950s Charles tried to enter the nascent fast-food market with two unsuccessful drive-in restaurants (one of which featured the "Double-L," a double-decker hamburger with lettuce, cheese, mayonnaise, and special sauce that foreshadowed the Big

Mac). After touring various restaurants throughout the country, Charles decided on a new look for Laughner's Cafeterias. In addition, the brothers made the decision to move into the suburbs. In 1964 the brothers built a free-standing cafeteria adjacent to the Southern Plaza shopping center on US 31 South, which featured elaborate Tudor-style dining areas replete with wood paneling, wall tapestries, pewter chandeliers, and stained-glass windows. The Southern Plaza cafeteria set the look for Laughner Brothers' cafeterias for the next twenty-five years. The restaurants built an appeal based on basic midwestern fare, which included sliced roast beef, sugar-cured and smoked ham, fried chicken, real mashed potatoes, and homemade desserts, such as Laughner's signature strawberry pie.

Gradually the brothers introduced further innovations. Beginning in 1969, the company opened cafeterias outside the city, eventually including locations in Kokomo, Terre Haute, and Plainfield. They opened the Dutch Oven, a pie shop and cafe, next to the Southern Plaza location in 1971 and Jonathon's Restaurant and Pub, a full-service restaurant, in 1978. Their Castleton location, opened in 1987, featured a brighter, Southwest decor and departed radically from the traditional straight cafeteria line, offering various stations for different type foods, including a grill where food, such as blackened red snapper, mahimahi, swordfish, and filet mignon, was cooked to order; a drive-thru window; and an inside pick-up counter for dinners to go. By the mid-1990s, Laughner Brothers, headed by the fourth generation of the family, operated eight cafeterias, in addition to the Dutch Oven, Jonathon's, Classic U.S. Foods, and The Oven. The cafeteria closed intermittently in the late 1990s, the last one in 2000.