

Schimpff's Confectionary

Founded: 1891

Location: Preston Street, Louisville, Kentucky (1858–91); 347 Spring Street, Jeffersonville, Indiana (1891–)

Speculation envelops the first years of Gustav Schimpff's candy enterprise.

Schimpff was born in Bavaria and immigrated with his family to Louisville, Kentucky, before the start of the Civil War. It is possible that he and his brother Charles opened a confectionery together in Louisville and that he helped his brother open a candy store in Jeffersonville, Indiana, during the 1860s.

What is known for certain is that Gustav and his son Gustav Jr. opened G. A. Schimpff's Confectionary at 347 Spring Street in Jeffersonville on 11 April 1891. Father and son made available fruits, nuts, candies, popcorn, and tobacco products for retail purchase and wholesale delivery. One of the company's most famous creations is the Modjeska, a marshmallow treat dipped in caramel, named for the famous Polish actress Helena Modjeska, whose show passed through Louisville in 1883. Pictures reveal that at one time Schimpff's delivered candy to businesses and homes by wagon, at least through the early 1920s. In the 1990s the store continued to make candy by hand just as Gustav Sr. and his son did.

Gustav Jr. took over the business after the turn of the century then handed it to his son Wilbert, who in turn passed it to his sister Catherine and his son Wilbert "Sonny" Schimpff, Jr., born in 1925 in Clark County. Sonny continued the family tradition until 1988. After his death, Catherine Schimpff, Sonny's aunt, ran the business alone for another year. When she died the company ceased operations for nine months. Warren and

Jill Schimpff, the fourth generation of the family to operate the company, bought the business from Catherine's estate. They were living in California but could not stand to let the family's business disappear. Less than a year after it closed, the store was back in business. Bill Lett, a longtime employee, was hired as the manager in 1989, a post he held for four years. Warren and Jill refurbished the building, setting the look of the store back to the 1930s. A marble soda fountain, a picture-window-size mirror with an elaborate wooden case, glass counters, the original wooden booths, and dropped lights help create the image. On 25 May 1991 Warren and Jill celebrated the business's centennial. The mayor of Jeffersonville, Dale Orem, proclaimed the day "Schimpff's Day." Red hots sold for six cents a pound, the 1891 price. The owners also made an oral history video to commemorate the occasion.

The business has endured many tests, including several depressions and three floods. (Many of the store's heirlooms survived, including a handwritten recipe book penned by Gustav Sr.) During the depths of the Great Depression the Schimpffs began serving hot lunches to help keep the business afloat. They started selling trains, cowboy action toys, and other diversions in the 1940s, and after Sonny married in the 1950s he added a hobby section to the store. He published a newsletter that included the most recent updates on models, radio-controlled planes, painting sets, and other hobby activities. By the mid-1960s the hobby venture reported sagging sales, however, so Sonny let it go. Luckily, demand for the company's candy products remained strong—so strong, in fact, that the Schimpffs added a mail-order section to the business in the late 1960s.

The Jeffersonville company grew during the 1980s and avoided becoming a historical footnote. By 1985 the partners employed eleven people, and sales exceeded \$100,000. Sonny came to be known as a master candy maker. He loved the old-fashioned traditions he had inherited and was proud that his company offered only small-scale production.

In 1998 the confectionery continued to make candy and ice cream in the family tradition and to send their products around the world. Warren (with a Ph.D. in chemistry) and Jill (a former English instructor) took early retirements so they could devote themselves to the business full time. They hired Mary Lee Wessel as the store's manager in the mid-1990s. The Schimpffs expected to complete a \$250,000 expansion of the business to include a museum and demonstration area by the end of 1999. The company's most requested products—often shipped around the world—are its fish candy, horehound and lemon drops, and cinnamon red hots, as well as its Modjeskas and turtles.