

## Leo's Ice Cream Parlor : Oh, the People Who Ate There

**By**  
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*Question: What do Norman Rockwell and Mickey Cohen have in common?*

First of all, a little background on these two notables. Mickey Cohen was one of organized crimes' most well known characters of the 50's and 60's. He worked with Bugsy Siegel in establishing the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas and directed many of the crime activities in Southern California during that era. He also lived in Los Angeles much of this time before being given a new address at Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary in 1961.



Norman Rockwell "painted the American Dream better than anyone", according to filmmaker Steven Spielberg. Rockwell painted 321 covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* and often spent parts of winters in Alhambra with his fellow artist Clyde Forsythe, who owned a home on Almansor Street during the 1930's and 40's.



One profound commonality these two notables shared was... they knew their ice cream. And both adored Leo's Ice Cream Parlor here in Alhambra.

"This is the best place to get ice cream ever", Cohen said according to Gary Wagner, the great grand nephew of Leo Anderson, the founder of Leo's Ice Cream Parlor. Wagner, who worked at Leo's added, "Mickey Cohen would pull up in a 1940's Lincoln and he one time tipped me 60 cents (which was nearly an hour's pay)."

"He (Rockwell) said, 'Leo's made the best ice cream in Alhambra'," said Wagner on Norman Rockwell. Wagner noted that Rockwell liked the family atmosphere at Leo's and the artist even had urged Southern California tourists to visit Leo's in an article he wrote.

Hall of Fame baseball player, Ralph Kiner, and Max West also enjoyed Leo's Ice Cream along with 1957 Indianapolis 500 winner, Sam Hanks, who grew up in Alhambra, Andy Crevolin, owner of *Determine*, the 1954 winner of the Kentucky Derby, and another native of Alhambra, drag racing legend, Mickey Thompson.

Leo's Ice Cream Parlor was an Alhambra institution from 1935 through 1965. It was a family run endeavor founded by Leo Anderson. At its height Leo's one time served 156 banana splits on a busy Sunday afternoon and prepared nearly as many root beer floats that same day.

Leo's generally had at least a half dozen of the Anderson clan working at the store and ultimately spanned three generations with many of Leo Anderson's grand children working for the business in the 1950's.

Formally the enterprise was known as Leo's - Ol' Fashun, with the "L" and "s" of Leo's connected by board band running underneath the name. The words "malts, iced cream, and sherbet" surrounded Leo's in smaller script.



Leo Anderson and his brother Elmer followed their employer west from Iowa in 1930. Both worked back in Iowa for a confectioners and ice cream operation that also came out west to Alhambra, Fosselman's. After a few years working there Leo Anderson would start his own ice cream establishment at 1492 W. Main Street in May of 1935.

Elmer provided a loan for his brother to get started and he himself would work in his brother's business. As the operation gained notoriety, the name generally referred to by locals was shortened to Leo's.

Many Alhambrans worked during their younger years at Leo's. Erny Henry, of Century 21 Realty here in Alhambra, worked at Leo's during his youth. "The first thing they made you do when you started working for Leo's was to clean the strawberries and peaches," said Henry. Tom Shea, from Alhambra's Chamber of Commerce, also worked at Leo's during his youth.

Leo's initially served ice cream on a stick. But Good Humor had formally applied and received a patent on the ice cream on a stick approach and Leo's became concerned about infringing on Good Humor's Patent. Leo's began curling thin waffles to hold the ice cream in. I asked Gary Wagner if Leo's could claim credit for developing the waffle cone, but Wagner demurred and said, "well, that was a long time ago."

The most dramatic decade for Leo's was the 1950's as America enjoyed the post World War II prosperity and growth in Southern California. At its peak, three workers prepared ice cream confections in the back of the building while six workers served the clients who waited in line and occupied Leo's four tables.



There were challenges such as the ascension of Fidel Castro in Cuba. "When Castro took over, a bag of sugar (100 pound) increased from six dollars to sixteen dollars," said Gary Wagner. Leo's dealt with these perturbations and remodeled the store in 1958.

Less dramatic challenges to running the enterprise were that Leo's had to buy new copies of the popular record *Earth Angel* three times because "the kids wore the record out playing it so much at the juke box", said Gary Wagner.

During this era Leo's would prepare 500 chocolate malts on a football Friday for Mark Keppel's various football teams and pep squads. As Wagner noted, "Leo's was a meeting place" for people from the entire western San Gabriel Valley.

Leo Anderson passed away in 1964. Family members chose not to continue the family business and Leo's was closed in 1965.

There was a time when Alhambra was well known for having a wide array of ice cream parlors. Fosselman's Ice Cream still serves the community while the Peppermint Palace, Temptation Ice Cream, McKay's Drugstore, and the Dew Drop Inn have been lost to the progress of time. One of Alhambra's ice cream legends, Leo's Ice Cream Parlor, has been gone for nearly a half century now, but is still remembered fondly by many Alhambrans.

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