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Stephanie Kaplan Cohen

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The Ice Cream Man

by Stephanie Kaplan Cohen

As soon as I heard the familiar jingle of the bell, I ran in, shouting, "The ice-cream man. The ice-cream man is coming. Quick, give me the money." I knew that he would never wait for me, that I would miss my chance, that I would watch the other kids licking their pops, eating their Dixies, and would be left out, stranded, ice-cream-less, on the shore of our street.

My mother never hurried despite my begging, despite my jiggling from foot to foot as she fetched her pocketbook, searched around for the little leather change-purse, slowly opened it, and asked, "Which ice-cream man?" I knew, because there was a difference in the tone of their bells, but I always said, "I don't know. I think it's Bungalow Bar." If it was Good Humor, she might decide she wanted ice-cream, and then she'd come out, and do something terrible like telling me to wipe my mouth or that I was dribbling. I could just die whenever she did something like that in front of the other kids.

Despite her refusing to hurry, I never missed the ice-cream man, and I never remained calm while waiting for the money. I always knew it was a hairbreadth race, and I was in deep danger of missing out.

We had two ice-cream men who came, jingling their bells, every day. Their bells were different, and we knew when they came to the corner just who each one was. They rode some sort of bicycle contraptions, which were essentially five-wheelers, the front wheel being attached to a four-wheel box, which held their wonderful treats.

One ice-cream man peddled Bungalow Bar Ice-cream, and the other, Good-Humor. The Bungalow-Bar man had to reach deep down into his box for our ice cream, since the box opening was on top. Smoke billowed forth whenever he opened the cover. "Dry Ice," some smart kid told me, and I knew less than before what kept the ice cream so cold. "It's ice, sort of," my big sister told me, "but

it doesn't melt. That's why they call it dry ice."

Bungalow Bar ice-cream cost five cents. Five cents for a Dixie cup, half-chocolate, half-vanilla, tasting cold, cold, cold. Too cold to taste other than cold until we were close to the bottom. The inside cover of the Dixie was covered with a thin piece of tissue paper which we carefully pulled away to reveal the picture of a movie star. Deanna Durbin, Judy Garland, Robert Taylor and Errol Flynn were favorites.

We collected these covers, and traded them among ourselves. Some of the boys on the block gave us their covers. Dixie-cup covers were a girl thing, just as bubble-gum cards, with their pictures of baseball stars, were a boy thing. The boy who lived right across the street from me, Jay Weiss, always gave me his Dixie covers, and I always gave him my bubble-gum cards.

The girls all liked Good Humor better, but at least every other time, we bought Bungalow-Bar for the sake of those covers.

The Good Humor man fought back. Inside some of his ice-cream cups was the legend, "Redeem for one free Ice-cream Sundae." A Sundae cost twenty-five cents, and contained a much larger amount of ice cream in its big cup, with a generous icing of chocolate or strawberry. The regular Dixie cost the same nickel, was only one flavor, either velvety chocolate, or vanilla, creamy ivory in color, with tiny flecks of black, which he explained were only produced by the pure ingredient, genuine vanilla. It didn't matter. Most of the kids who decided to get Good-Humors chose chocolate, which, if we were not careful, ran over our play clothes, ran over our fingers, ran down our bare legs. Somehow, the Good Humor Man's trailer, which he opened from the back, did not seem to freeze ice cream so cold, and so it melted much sooner than the Bungalow-Bar's Dixies.

When the mothers came out for ice cream, al-





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

ways they waited for Good Humor. Good Humor was classier, more sophisticated, and somehow, motherly. The Good Humor Man's uniform was always sparkling clean, shiny white, just like his trailer. The Bungalow-Bar man's rumpled uniform had occasional smears of ice cream, and his trailer, with its big colored pictures, certainly did not have the pure appearance of the Good Humor Man's tidy blue script, proclaiming his name.

Several times a week, Helen and I pestered our mother for ice cream pops. Margaret was too little, and could never be allowed a pop. Only big kids could be trusted with them. They melted. They fell off their sticks. They got little kids even dirtier than the Dixies. And if we were talking about the Good Humor pops, they cost a dime. Who did we think our mother was? She informed us that she was no Rockefeller, no millionaire to hand out dimes for ice cream pops which we would undoubtedly waste, dropping them all over the street, bringing vermin,

and dirtying ourselves beyond what her washboard could repair.

"But all the other kids," one of us would whine. "All the other kids get pops. And there's even a chance to get one free." On some of those Good-Humor sticks were inscribed "Get one Good-Humor free."

One day my mother yelled about starving children who never ever had a lick of ice-cream, who never had enough food, whose mother probably fed them on less than five cents a day. "And furthermore," she told us, one hot day, "I'm thinking of cutting out the ice cream money. Mr. Jo at the beauty parlor charges three for a dollar. I'll get a hair wash, set and manicure with the money I save."

That shut me up for the rest of the summer. I was scared I was about to lose my chance to have the best collection of Dixie covers.

