

The Wizard of Snow

by
Errol Laborde

When George Ortolano would leave for work each day, he could rightfully say that he was off to see the wizard. He could even go one step further and say that he was off to make the wizard. Ortolano, who died recently at 86, was a craftsman who never got the publicity he deserved. He created a machine that triggered a native industry. At the risk of some generalization, he's the guy who invented the snowball machine.

His creation, the Ortolano Sno-Wizard, was not the only ice-crusher on the market, but it was the one used at most local snowball stands. In New Orleans snowballs are a serious business, and routine ice machines won't do. A New Orleans snowball differs from the miserable snow-cones sold at traveling carnivals and in other, more-deprived localities in that the ice is finer, a true snowy blend. In 1937 Ortolano created the first Sno-Wizard and began using it to sell snowballs at his grocery on the corner of Magazine and Delachaise streets. His machine was a rectangular box with a door in the front for loading the ice, which would be pushed toward the grinders inside by a crank at the back. The original SnoWizard had a wooden cabinet. Its successors have been made of stainless steel. The machines got their wiz from a cutterhead that featured a triple-headed beveled blade that rapidly scraped the ice into a powder.

"There was no machine on the market that could do the job mine was doing," Ortolano once told me. "Mine could shoot the snow right into the cup. In 10 seconds it could fill a 16-ounce cup." Like the impact Eli Whitney's cotton gin had on farming, the Sno-Wizard changed snowballs from a sweetshop also-ran into the object of a proliferation of neighborhood businesses. "Before I made the machine," Ortolano explained, "people couldn't go to all that expense, because the amount of snowballs they could make with one of the old obsolete machines wouldn't pay them to go into it. But with my machine, a person can push enough snowballs to make a profitable business. The machines have revolutionized the snowball business. It made snowballs a business. It brought it to the front."

"Ortolano is a true craftsman," a snowball vendor once told me. "If someone wants him to just slap a sharpening job on a machine, he's not going to do it. Each machine and each set of blades that he puts in, he's going to try to make as good as any other set. That's how proud of his work he is."

It is a proud inventor indeed who is able to turn ice into gold.

