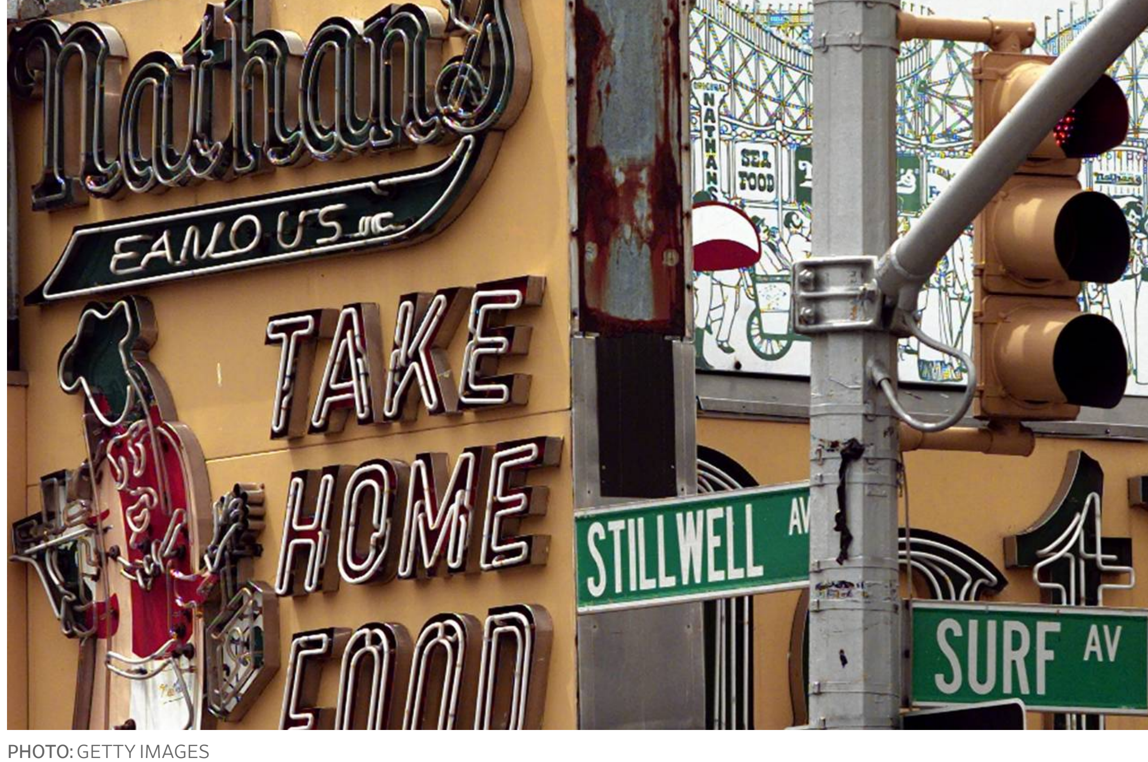

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

America's Top Dog

Nathan Handwerker often slept in the store on sacks of potatoes. He installed a bell so that if somebody wanted a frankfurter at 4 a.m., they could wake him up.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*

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SAVE PRINT TEXT 58

Nathan Handwerker's business went from bed to wurst, but he wound up famous.

He was the indefatigable refugee from a Galician shtetl who came to America in steerage in 1912 and went on to build a business empire based on selling hot dogs in Coney Island. His Nathan's Famous, originally a 5-foot-long counter, grew into a block-square extravaganza that still stands, with outposts across America and as far afield (and as unlikely) as Cairo.

Now Nathan's story is being told in competing books by two of his grandsons, first cousins who don't exactly agree on a number of the founding facts and fables of the family business. Indeed, the parents of one author refused to speak to the other author, but that's another story.

FAMOUS NATHAN

By Lloyd Handwerker
Flatiron, 306 pages, $26.99

NATHAN'S FAMOUS

By William Handwerker
Morgan James, 192 pages, $29.95

The gauzier, cinematic version comes from Lloyd Handwerker, a filmmaker who has already produced a hagiographic if herky-jerky documentary on the family. Working with a collaborator, Lloyd Handwerker has turned out "Famous Nathan," a flavorful paean to his grandfather topped with heartwarming anecdotes about Nathan's Famous and Coney Island in its heyday as the proletarian Riviera.

He includes an obligatory and mercifully brief potted history of the frankfurter as a pork-filled and likely canine-enhanced wurst in Germany in the Middle Ages (hence "hot dog"), its evolution into a mixed beef and pork sausage in Vienna (hence "wiener") and its arrival in the U.S. during the wave of German immigration in the second half of the 19th century. The first franks, so it's said, were served in America with a white glove for the customer to cradle the hot dog. Eventually, someone figured out that plunking the frank into a sliced bun did the job—and fast food was born.

Nahum (later Nathan) Handwerker was one of those compact but implacably tough Jews who fled to America—sometimes by foot across Europe—in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to escape the czar or the Cossacks or, in his case, the draft agents of the Habsburg empire. At 19, he managed to cross three borders by train without papers and sailed to New York with cash stuffed in his sock. He had someone write out his name and practiced copying it on shipboard so that he could disguise his illiteracy and win admission at the golden door. Within a few days, he was working, and in four years he had saved enough to open his tiny counter in Coney Island.

He barely broke even at the start, then had the brainstorm that propelled his fortune: Every other stand on the island charged 10 cents for a dog. Nathan cut the price to a nickel. The customers flocked to his counter. "Give 'em and let 'em eat" was his motto. He insisted on quality beef, freshly fried potatoes, home-blended fruit drinks and antiseptic cleanliness—all exceptions to the Coney Island rule. His specially spiced franks came in natural casings made from animal intestines that produced a satisfying snap and explosion of juice when bitten into. To calm customer jitters about tainted fare, he dressed some locals in doctors' white coats and had them photographed blithely chowing down on his dogs.

He lived for the store, which expanded bit by bit over the years until it filled an entire block. In the early days, writes Lloyd Handwerker, "he had no life. Nathan was spending all his time at the store, often sleeping overnight on a straw mattress or on the big burlap sacks full of potatoes. He installed a bell on the counter so that if somebody wanted a frankfurter at three or four in the morning, they could ring the bell and wake him up."

Soon he married his sister's friend, Ida, and she joined him toiling away at their place. More Handwerkers arrived from the old country, married and had children. In time, brothers, sisters, in-laws, nephews and grandchildren worked the counters and the prep rooms, many of them spending long hours packing greasy quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies into wrappers to deposit in the bank.

To his employees, whether kin or outsiders, Nathan could be a mean, overbearing boss—a "momser," in Yiddish. "I don't have heart attacks, I give them," he liked to say. "I trust myself and the stove. I don't trust anybody else." Indeed, he liked to pull a fedora down on his brow or don a wig and skulk around in front of the store, checking up on the counter men. Nobody challenged him except his sons, which exasperated him so much that he threatened to turn Nathan's Famous into a merry-go-round. "Carousel horses," he barked, "don't eat and don't s— and don't talk back to their father."

Nathan's Famous prospered. First, the new Stillwell Avenue subway terminus disgorged weekend mobs in the path of the store, where they often bought franks for the family on the way to the beach and at sundown on the way home. The nickel dog proved a bonanza during the Depression. Using his connections, Nathan managed to keep the place going full-blast during World War II despite the blackout intended to thwart German U-boats off the coast.

Nathan operated a few stands at the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens, but he never wanted to expand beyond Surf Avenue. His sons—Murray, the oldest child, and Sol, a union organizer who later joined the Communist Party—had their own ideas. Their ambitions drove a wedge between father and sons and between the sons themselves, a family drama that's reflected in these two books.

Lloyd curiously never mentions that he is Sol's son but extols his father's vision for Nathan's while claiming that his uncle Murray's schemes almost bankrupted the company. In a 300-odd-page book, he never mentions his cousin William Handwerker, Murray's son, who worked in the family business and its successor for 30 years. In his pedestrian rival book, "Nathan's Famous," also written with a collaborator, William never mentions Lloyd so far as I could tell and portrays his Uncle Sol as an impractical dreamer who often obstructed Murray's imaginative plans.

It was plain to Murray, as William tells it, that the postwar flight to the suburbs was leaving the Nathan's mothership behind in Coney Island, where urban-development czar Robert Moses was systematically destroying the old playland, with its sideshows featuring Spiderboy, The Man With the Revolving Head and the microcephalic Zippo and Pippo. Murray wanted to make over a huge dining emporium in suburban Long Island called the Roadside Rest as the first of a chain of enhanced Nathan's. Sol, anticipating McDonald's and KFC, wanted to open a string of mini-Nathan's all over. The patriarch resisted, and Sol struck out on his own.

Murray subsequently embarked on various expansion strategies with mixed results. Working with a meatpacker, he franchised the sale of—horror of horrors!—skinless hot dogs in supermarkets across America: a triumph. He merged with the Wetson's chain of fast-food outlets, a third-string McDonald's: a disaster. He took over Toffenetti's, a mammoth faded restaurant in the heart of Times Square, and opened lavish offices across the street to impress investors: a disaster. He took the family business public: a triumph that in 1968 had Nathan's valued at $855 million in today's money, only to see the stock collapse to a few dollars a share. Finally, the company was sold in 1987 to what today would be called a private-equity firm for the equivalent of $45 million now.

In William Handwerker's telling, all his father's gyrations saved Nathan's Famous and propelled it into our times. He's probably right: The Coney Island store survives—with its ballyhooed annual July 4th hot-dog-eating contest—although its Yelp reviews aren't great. At supermarkets or online today, you can find nine different versions of Nathan's franks, among them Angus Beef, Cheddar Cheese Beef, even the Original Coney Island. And there are all those outlets around the U.S. and the world.

Nathan himself was long gone by the time all these changes resolved themselves. He died of a heart attack in Florida at 81 in 1974. After decades of obsessive labor, he left an estate of about $15 million in today's money, not much in the world of the one-percenters. Still, a hundred years after an illiterate immigrant opened that 5-foot counter in Coney Island, and for all the family and commercial trauma, Nathan's Famous flourishes in Coney Island and is a national and global brand. If you didn't know better, you might call it the American dream.

—Mr. Kosner wrote about his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News in a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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