



Times staff / PETER A. ZINNER

Sonny May, owner of May's Water Ice, looks out the window of his new store which is directly across the street from the old store. May's has been a fixture at the corner of Second and Parker in Chester since the 1940s.

Landmark makes a move

■ May's Water Ice was threatened by expansion, but found a new location right across the street.

By **MATT ZAGER**
mzager@delcotimes.com

CHESTER — On a hot September afternoon, the schoolchildren, firefighters and other travelers take part in a ritual that has gone on for decades at this intersection.

The ritual only costs a little pocket change — it never has cost much more than that — and forms the core of the May family's history here.

That legacy, selling water ice to the people of Chester, was threatened recently by a road expansion, but the Mays came up with a remedy: They moved their business across the street.

Owner Sonny May had to vacate the old brick building, bought by his parents in 1924, by Labor Day.

May's Water Ice was one of the structures in the way of a PennDot project that will expand Second Street — also Route 291 — from two lanes to five.

May, whose father, James, founded May's Water Ice at Second and Parker streets in 1947, said he had heard rumors for years of a road project that would displace the business.

Then he found out for sure about two years ago, he said.

He and seven siblings were

raised on the second and third floors, which served as the family's home, while the business operated on the ground floor.

"It hurt," he said, sitting in the new May's, a newly constructed hut with sliding windows. "We were raised in that house."

Now tagged with spray paint for demolition, the old May's sits next to a vacant lot overgrown with weeds, another vestige of the industry-that-once-was along the waterfront nearby.

As a kid, Sonny sold water ice at Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., and to other workers. The Mays sold it from carts and trucks in the city's neighborhoods.

Sonny was born in 1931 and dropped out of Smedley Junior High School to work full-time in his parent's business.

He worked 15 hours a day seven days a week, said his brother, Frank. Ironically, the only vacation day was the Fourth of July.

It was sold in paper cones back then. Now it comes in cups.

But, "you don't eat May's water ice with a spoon," says Kevin May, who will take over the business from his father.

May's water ice cost a nickel or a dime in the old days; it ranges from 50 cents to \$2 now. The brothers laugh at their father's response to a suggestion that he raise the price to 15 cents.

"He said, 'Who the heck would buy it if it cost 15 cents?'" said Frank.

His parents, immigrants from Italy, sold hoagies from the first-floor store along with water ice. May's became strictly a water ice business in 1961. James May died on Christmas morning in 1968. His wife, Phyllis, died in 1996.

May's stopped sending vendors to neighborhoods about five years ago.

The business shuts down for the winter around the end of September. Sonny sells Christmas trees after that.

May's is one of the few businesses on Second Street. The lot where the new May's was built had a horse stable long ago, said Sonny. Later it was a gas station. The lot was empty when they bought it.

A steady stream of customers stopped off at May's on a recent afternoon. One car swung off Second Street with a sense of urgency. The driver rushed to the window and ordered.

A little later, two fire engines pulled up. Since he was 10 years old, says Chester Fire Department Capt. John Barbato, he has bought May's water ice.

"This is a regular for the fire guys on hot days," he said as he waited in line. "It cools us down."

Kevin May says May's has about 26 homemade flavors, offering four a day. Kevin, of Chester Heights, concocts the varieties himself.

A grand opening is scheduled for Saturday.

"It's more than a business," said Frank May. "It's something they grew up with."