Selling soft pretzels was a boyhood bonanza

One of my most vivid memories of growing up in Philly during the final days of the Great Depression is the time my old pal, Hughie McLaughlin, and I for one brief summer became soft-pretzel tycoons.

Like just about every other city kid of that period, Hughie and I were always looking for ways to make a few pennies.

Back then, a few pennies would buy a bag full of candy, a 12-ounce bottle of Pepsi, a rubber ball, an ice cream soda, several pieces of George Washington cake, a pack of baseball cards or a comic book.

They also would provide admission to a movie and were the key to a zillion other things that populated a young boy’s imagination.

Yet pennies were scarce and there were relatively few of us with parents who could spare many for our foibles.

One day, Hughie had a brainstorm.

Three years older — and with far more business acumen, he had already shared with me many of the gems from his bag of tricks.

I had already learned how to get into a movie without paying admission and how to get free passes to the circus. Now, he had come up with a plan for making money that he believed would be far more rewarding than any of the schemes we’d already tried.

Hughie liked to explore the city. He would ride his bike into various neighborhoods or sometimes spend an entire day riding trolley cars around town.

During one of his trips of exploration, he had discovered a pretzel bakery that was only about a half-hour walk from our homes.

The way Hughie described it, we would become soft-pretzel entrepreneurs.

We would buy those tasty morsels at two for a penny and then go out on the street and sell them for a penny each. With every two pretzels we sold, we would double our investment.

And it had to work. After all, in Philadelphia, just about everybody ate soft pretzels.

In no time at all, we would have all the change we needed for the movies, or for candy, soda or whatever else we greedily yearned for.

Getting started required only a wicker picnic basket with a handle, a clean dish towel to cover the pretzels and keep them fresh and a small jar of mustard.

(Hey, what’s a Philadelphia soft pretzel without mustard?)

With the exception of the basket, we could borrow supplies from our own kitchens. Our only monetary investment was a few pennies to buy our first supply of pretzels. We would start small, buying just a few, then selling them, and returning quickly to buy and sell more.

Early each weekday morning, Hughie and I would set out for the bakery. Once there, we’d stand in line waiting our turn, all the while taking in the delightful aroma of freshly baked pretzels being turned out by the thousands.

(It was an aroma I’ve never forgotten.)

Then we were off, each in a different direction through the streets of Kensington, each calling out in a clear, loud voice — “Fresh pretzels! Get your fresh pretzels!” — over and over.

Younger children would trail after us, often calling to their mothers for the pennies they
needed to purchase our wares. At a penny a pretzel, a nickel would provide enough pretzels for an entire family.

Each of us eventually developed our own route up one street and down another — past factories, garages and neighborhood playgrounds. People along the way got to know us, and we got to know them. Most of them had a pretty good idea of the time we would be coming by — and they would be waiting for us, pennies in hand.

Sometimes, a young mother with children yearning for the taste of a fresh pretzel but who herself was short of change would ask us to give her credit till the day her husband was paid.

Often, entire groups of factory employees would congregate on their short breaks and empty our baskets. Occasionally, they, too, asked for credit.

On particularly good days, we could easily sell more than 100 pretzels, netting several dollars a week — a tidy sum for a youngster back then.

But it was hard, hot work, walking the dusty streets of the city for hours in that sweltering summer heat. On rainy days, we were generally out of business.

Then I suddenly had the solution.

Rather than trekking all those streets, looking for customers, I’d find a cool location where the customers would find me. And I had the perfect place, Independence Hall, where every day back then, hundreds of people came to see the Liberty Bell.

What could be more natural than Philadelphia soft pretzels at Philadelphia’s most famous tourist attraction?

Basket in hand, I took a position beside the famous bell and within minutes was doing a thriving business.

But the newfound bonanza came crashing down around me with the arrival of a National Park guard, who immediately (and sternly) insisted that I leave the premises.

His idea of what was best for the visitors at a national shrine just didn’t jibe with mine.

Gradually, the novelty of the pretzel business wore off, along with the soles of our shoes, and Hughie and I returned to our normal summer routines of playing baseball and trying to keep cool.

Today, whenever I pass a neighborhood pretzel bakery and pick up the scent of freshly baked soft pretzels, I’m mentally transported back to the streets of Philadelphia and the days when the sight of a young boy approaching with a picnic basket under his arm was eagerly anticipated by children and adults alike.

Note: Those pretzels that Hughie and I bought at two for a penny in 1941 sell on average at about 50 cents today.

Jerry Jonas’ column appears in the Life Section every Sunday.