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OH, FUDGE!

JILL POLLACK Herald Staff Writer

It's 10 p.m. All the resort-wear shops, shoe stores and interior decorators' offices along Delray Beach's East Atlantic Avenue are closed. Only one storefront's light burns, a tiny pink-and-white shop where 14 Mormons -- father Arnold, mother Joanne, and a dozen kids -- make their living on fudge.

A customer walks out of a bar around the corner and is drawn to the unassuming shop, not by the glaring white light, but by the rich, chocolately smell of fudge, cooling in a copper vat.

Inside he finds the Howses -- south Palm Beach County's biggest Mormon family running Delray Beach's only sweet shop.

Fudge. It's put the older kids through college, it keeps the younger kids in the latest fashion. It provides the family's income, source of entertainment, and reason for being.

Each child plans a future in fudge. The two oldest daughters have convinced their husbands to drop majors in communications and go into the fudge business. The younger children talk of opening fudge shops all over the country.

"The kids say, 'What will I do with my children if I don't have a fudge store?' It's so much a part of their lives I suppose," said Mrs. Howse, whose her storybook family seems out of a different era.

Larger than three or four families put together, these well- groomed, fair-haired devout Mormons are like the fudge they make -- pure, wholesome, authentic and sweet. The children are taught at home by their parents. They don't smoke, drink or swear. They spend a good portion of their time at Howses' Candy House at 1130 E. Atlantic Ave.

Kip, 19, stands over a 100-year-old stove -- once stoked with coal, now operated by gas -- and stirs a 30-pound vat of boiling chocolate. When it reaches 234 degrees, he and his brother Chris carry the copper kettle to an inch-thick marble slab where they pour out the thick brown liquid to cool.

After creaming the syrupy mixture into a clay-like texture, a few adept strokes whip the cooled fudge into a thick mound just right for slicing and selling.

Behind the counter, the ever-smiling Annette, 20, offers customers a taste of her favorite, butter pecan fudge.

Jody, 9, wishes he could be of more assistance in the fudge-making operation, but he is assigned simpler tasks -- wrapping caramels or stamping boxes with the store's name. Chocolate-faced Timmy, 2, is content to be the official taste tester.

The fudge shop does not advertise. It depends on word of mouth -- either by locals discovering the creamy fudge for the first time, or snowbirds who remember the tasty product from up north.

Chicagoan Helen Moats was thrilled to discover another branch of the fudge store she and her family have visited on summer vacations in Michigan.

"The only place my kids wanted to go when we were up there was to watch the kids make fudge," Moats said.

While other stores along the avenue have seen business slow lately, the fudge shop has been busier than ever the past two weeks.

Last week, customers purchased hundreds of pound of fudge and dipped chocolate eggs to send north for Easter.

This week, the family has worked around the clock to turn out enough fudge for the Delray Affair, the city's 21st annual street festival that is expected to attract 100,000 visitors this weekend.

Not certain what kind of business the festival will bring, Mrs. Howse said the family will "work like crazy, do up a ton of fudge and hope we sell it."

The Howses got their start in fudge in 1961 when Joanne Howse got a job at Randall Krump's fudge store in Harbor Springs, Mich., to help put her husband through college. After college, Arnold worked summers at the store and winters as a biology teacher.

As the Howse family got larger, so did their share of the fudge store's profits until Arnold Howse finally took over the business in 1976 after Krump retired.

"As we kept on having more kids, people would say, you have to have a farm. My husband would say 'Honey, I'm not a farmer, I'm a city boy.' So we did this. It's sort of our urban farm," Mrs. Howse said.

Hurt by Michigan's recessed economy in recent years, the Howses realized if they were to continue their standard of living they would have to come up with a second source of income.

"Michigan is awfully dead in the winter," Howse said. "We'd sit there thinking of all our customers down here and we knew we had to do something."

Last summer, four Howses drove around the perimeter of Florida looking for the best place to set up shop. They stopped in Delray Beach one evening and noticed an empty storefront a block from the beach. The next morning they secured the lease for the winter. Once set on Naples, Mrs. Howse now believes a divine power guided them to Delray Beach.

"We thought and prayed about it a lot, it seemed like everything pointed to here," Mrs. Howse said.

So Howse packed 10 of the 12 children into a van and a station wagon last November, along with some furniture and fudge-making equipment, and moved from Michigan to Florida's Gold

Coast for the winter.

For their first season, the Howses rented a three-bedroom townhouse west of Delray Beach. Here, the parents and the baby share one bedroom, the older boys share a second bedroom, the younger boys share a third bedroom, and the two girls sleep in the living room on a pull out couch.

Meals are often catch-as-catch-can, except breakfast. Following the morning prayer, the family sits down to a hot breakfast at the dining room table -- a fudge counter disguised with a tablecloth.

The family misses their big house and yard in Michigan, Mrs. Howse said, but the move has proved "we don't need the security of our home. We're a strength in ourselves."

Splitting the school year between Michigan and Delray Beach, the Howses got permission from the Harbor Springs School Board to educate the children at home this year. The Palm Beach County School Board had no say in the matter.

"As far as we know, his kids are 'on vacation' from Michigan. They're enrolled there and all the credits are going through there," said Dick Reed, director of secondary schools for south Palm Beach County.

The Howses enjoy the flexibility of home teaching.

"I have complete say over what my kids learn," Mrs. Howse said. "And if we feel like spending a day at the beach, we'll just study more tomorrow."

Annette said she's noticed a big difference in her 17-year-old sister Carey's outlook.

"She's doing much better. She's much happier. We don't drink or smoke and the big thing at school is to go out to parties. It's been a little hard," Annette said.

Jody, who read his 100-page reader in one evening out in front of the fudge store, has since moved on to travel books, the world atlas, or anything he can get his hands on.

The largest family in the church's 420-member south county ward, the Howses have also been one of the most active families, according to Patricia Bishop, president of the women's group.

"The children have gotten involved in everything. They're very gifted musically, so they've helped a lot that way," Bishop said.

While the family hasn't exactly struck it rich here, they've earned enough this season to make Delray Beach their permanent winter headquarters.

"It's been a good first year, we'll be back," Mrs. Howse said. "We really don't know how we'll do it next year ... where we'll live, what we'll do with the kids. I've really enjoyed teaching them, but I'm not sure how long society will accept it. We have a lot of thinking to do."

Illustration:photo: The Howse family, David Howse, Jody Howse with brother Timmy

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