



## In Cotuit Bay, ice cream floats

# At 17, Payson Titcomb has already started navigating the business world by selling frozen treats on Cotuit Bay

By **Shan Li**

shan.li@nyu.edu

July 12, 2009 6:00 AM

COTUIT — Brainstorm a business idea, run with it, become a rock star in the business world.

These may be the typical fantasies of a forty-something office worker, but 17-year-old Payson Titcomb is anything but. Newly graduated from Sandwich High School, he plays guitar, sails, and takes road trips. He is also the founder of the Ice Cream Boat, an aquatic, hip, distinctly Cape version of the classic ice cream truck.

A Sandwich native, Titcomb grew up sailing and helping out with his father's concrete hardware manufacturing business. In December 2007, midway through junior year, he was casting about for a money-making idea more reliable than a summer job.

His Aunt Sarah suggested packaging his love for the water with his need for college funds — and creating a business.

Fast-forward seven months and the 15-foot Ice Cream Boat began motoring around Cotuit Harbor, Sampson's Island, and Snake River, supplying hungry boaters with ice cream and frozen treats.

If you think Titcomb sailed off from there into a sunset ending, you don't know very much about business.

Titcomb has "always been kind of a saver," but finding cheap startup equipment still equalled a \$2,000 investment, he said. The Internet and his family were helpful tools; Titcomb found a working motor on Craigslist and the actual boat through his sister's friend.

He "considered selling hot dogs," but ultimately decided his childhood was a good litmus test for what summer boaters wanted — and he had always wished for "ice cream on the beach" when growing up, he said.

What followed is a classic example of business trial-and-error: fixing and refixing his boat, investigating ice cream wholesalers, experimenting with refrigeration techniques.

A Hawkers and Peddlers license from the state Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation required an annual \$62 fee — and getting that was the easy part.

At his East Sandwich family home on a recent Sunday, Titcomb donned heavy work gloves and mixed dry ice into three coolers with about 300 ice cream bars from Cape Dairy, a Hyannis wholesaler. He's getting an early start this summer compared to last summer, when he only "made it out six or seven times."

"I wish I'd been up and running earlier last year," he said, then shrugged with a nonchalance befitting his surfer-boy appearance. "But things happened and we got kind of a late start."

His younger brother Tim, 13, helps out and is paid \$40 per day, a handsome wage which keeps him from "running low," he said.

On the water, the Titcomb brothers are one part ice cream men, one part family.

"If people are short, we usually tell them 'Don't worry, pay us back later,' and they always pay us back," Titcomb said.

In the shallow waters next to Sampson's Island, 5-year-olds Sydney and Alexander Purpura and their 9-year-old

brother Riley slipped and splashed towards the Ice Cream Boat.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Jill Purpura of Mashpee, their mom. "It's a great idea. People always want ice cream on the beach but it's so hard to keep cold."

She tipped the brothers \$2 and her children scampered away with snow cones, strawberry eclairs and ice cream sandwiches.

Unlike sunglasses, souvenirs or anything else the Titcomb brothers might have sold, ice cream bars are relatively cheap and hard to resist.

There are two price points for the frozen goods — \$1.50 for strawberry eclairs, ice cream sandwiches, and orange creams; snow cones, ice cream bars, and the most popular item, choco tacos, fall into the \$2.50 category.

"I earn \$1 to \$2 for each ice cream sold," Titcomb said. Daily gross revenue ranges from \$350 to \$500. The business clears a \$200 to \$250 profit every day Titcomb works and, as of Independence Day, he has broken even.

If you wonder how Payson Titcomb — who is considering a business major at the University of Denver this fall — came by his entrepreneurial spirit, you might look toward his family.

His father and uncle began the company Titcomb Brothers Manufacturing, while his grandparents founded and still own Titcomb's Bookshop in East Sandwich. Entrepreneurship seems to be in the Titcomb family blood.

"My dad definitely encouraged me to do this," Titcomb said. "I always like to run things the way I run things."

After an hour on the water, David Lubner of Cotuit waved the brothers over, bought a snow cone, and jokingly offered some business advice: "Let me give you guys an economics lesson. This is the coolest idea, it's so convenient, you could easily raise the price. You're pricing the ice creams too low!"

But Titcomb has his own ideas. He insisted that raising prices, even if his target market of boaters and beachgoers are willing to pay more, is not a business strategy he will undertake.

"I got frustrated with how expensive the ice cream truck prices were," he said. "That's partly why I started this. I'd rather sell more at a cheaper price — keep it affordable."

Looking ahead, Titcomb has some business improvement ideas in the works. He is building a covering for the Ice Cream Boat from metal donated by his dad, and figuring out if the harbor master will allow orders to be radioed in, boat-to-ice cream boat.

"I'm playing it by ear," he said. "But this fall in college, I'm going to be doing some planning."