

Do You Know The Muffin Man

You can find The Muffin Man in Jiffyville

By Rita Fischer and Shelia Pursglove- 2003

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The children's nursery rhyme "The Muffin Man" says that he lives on Drury Lane.

Wrong.

He lives on North Street in Chelsea.

Those famous little packets of "Jiffy" mix -- the first retail prepared mix item that first hit American grocery shelves back in 1930 -- got their start at Chelsea Milling Co. in Chelsea.

Free tours of "Jiffyville" are offered to visitors on weekday mornings and include a tour of the facility, a slide show and -- of course -- samples.

Visitors start with a slide show about the history of the company, which dates back to 1887, when the Holmes family -- in the milling business in Kansas, Illinois and Indiana since 1802 -- bought the Chelsea flourmill. In 1901, the mill -- once one of 488 gristmills in Michigan, now one of only five -- became the Chelsea Milling Co.

The pocket-sized "Jiffy" mixes came into being in 1930 when Mabel White Holmes, the mill owner's wife, took pity on a motherless boy who was eating lunch at the Holmes' home. The child's packed lunch was an unappetizing homemade biscuit more closely resembling a cross between a doorstep and a hockey puck.

The practical Mabel decided to come up with a product easy to make and, in doing so, she started the home baking mix market, which is now a \$2 billion industry.

The "Jiffy" name came from Mabel's remembrance of the family cook from her childhood, who would tell the little girl, "Now, Miss Mabel, you tell your father them good, hot biscuits will be ready in a jiffy!"

Mabel became president of the company after her husband was killed in an accident at the mill in 1936. Her twin sons, Howard and Dudley, took over the reins in 1940. Today Howard's son, former racecar driver Howdy Holmes, is president and CEO. His brother, Bill, a pilot for American Airlines, is on the board of directors.

Deciding the company needed an overhaul to survive in a competitive market, Holmes applied what he had learned in the business end of racing, updating the factory and the schedules of the 350 employees on Team Jiffy.

He even dared to do the unthinkable, altering the age-old design of the famous box. Now the back of the best-selling corn muffin mix shows other Jiffy products.

The company makes 18 products, including 16 sold in the familiar little blue box. Products include muffins, cakes, brownies, frostings, pizza and pie dough, pancake mix and all-purpose baking mixes.

The mill is not only a family business, but treats its employees as family, too. Tour guide Lynne Roskowski says that generations of families have worked there. She has



Howard S. "Howdy" Holmes

been on board for 28 years, following in her mother's footsteps. Another employee, Louise Knickerbocker, has been a fixture for almost 50 years.

"My mother was here for about 20 years," Roskowski says. "I've stayed because I like the feel of the old-fashioned family business."

After the slide show and refreshments, visitors -- clad in hairnets -- tour the facility, which is about the size of a city block.

"Jiffyville" even has a "roller coaster." It will never rival the thrill rides at amusement parks, but people don't ride it -- boxes of Jiffy Mix do.

Empty blue boxes are pulled onto the conveyors by suction cups to start their two-mile ride. As they travel along, liners are placed inside the boxes.

They are then filled with Michigan winter white corn. The company uses 2.5 million bushels of flour each year, held in 27 on-site silos.

Before it reaches the mill, the grain has to meet muster. Once approved, the wheat is sent to the roller mills to be cracked open. Some of the unused wheat is sent to Kellogg's in Battle Creek to be used in bran cereal, and the rest is used for animal feed.

The wheat then moves on to special sifters -- each as tall as a person -- with silk screens to keep out unwanted material.

The last stop before being sent to the final destination in boxes is a flour purifier. A pneumatic mill pushes the wheat back and forth. Samples are sent to a laboratory, where technicians use red dye to check the leavening, fat, flour and sugar content.

Only when the mix is exactly right does it make it into a famous blue box.

The one-hour tour ends in the corn muffin room, where visitors are handed their own boxes of Jiffy Mix, a fuzzy, stick-on critter in a chef's hat and a book of recipes.

Visitors can then watch trucks being loaded with the famous boxes. When the mill is running at full capacity, more than a million boxes a day leave for their track journey to grocery stores and supermarkets across the country and overseas.

When Jiffy Mix appeared in 1930, it beat out General Mills' Bisquick mix by several months. Mabel's famous baking mix

currently ranks second behind Bisquick.

In the home baking market, "Jiffy" -- with annual sales of \$100 million -- leads all six muffin mix categories, owning 57 percent of the nation's muffin mix business. Jiffy outsells General Mills, Martha White, Pillsbury and Duncan Hines.

Jiffy's cornbread mix is the seventh fastest moving dry grocery item in the country, controlling 85 percent of its market. Each day more than a million people pick up one of those little blue boxes on grocery stores shelves.

So now you know where the muffin man lives, drop by and pay him a visit.