

American Profile December 2006

Made in
America

Making Baking a Jiffy

by MARTI ATTOUND *Contributing Editor*

When Mabel White Holmes saw the

hard-as-rock biscuits that a single father had baked for his sons in 1928, she set about finding a fix. For two years she experimented in her kitchen in Chelsea, Mich., until she had combined the perfect proportions of flour, shortening, sugar, salt and baking soda into America's first prepared baking mix.

For the first time, a homemaker could simply add milk to a packaged mix, and with little fuss or chance of failure, bake a batch of delicious, fluffy biscuits.

Seventy-eight years later, Holmes' grandson and his 350 employees continue to churn out more than a million boxes of Jiffy baking mixes daily at the Chelsea Milling Co. in Chelsea (pop. 4,398).

"Grandma thought, 'Wouldn't it be neat to invent a product that would taste great and be so easy that a man could make it?'" says Howdy S. Holmes, 58, company president. "The whole idea was to provide a service to homemakers."

Initially, Mabel puzzled over what to call her new product. Inspiration struck while she was behind the wheel of a car on a trip with her husband, Howard. She nearly wrecked in her excitement, Howdy says.

"My grandma remembered that when she was a small child, the lady helping in the kitchen would say, 'Mabel, you run and tell your daddy that those biscuits will be ready in a jiffy.'"

The first boxes of 40-ounce Jiffy all-purpose baking mix cost 28 cents – and sold like the hotcakes they made. Homemakers spread the word about the timesaving mix and to this day, the company relies on word-of-mouth promotion. The savings in advertising is reflected in the \$1.49 price on the 40-ounce box and



Mabel White Holmes,
Jiffy's mastermind



Howdy S. Holmes is proud of his family's flour-milling tradition in Chelsea, Mich.

the smaller 8.5-ounce boxes, which sometimes sell for three for a dollar.

Loyal customer Harriet Humphrey has stocked her cupboards with Jiffy mixes for 49 years. "The cornbread is an old standby," says Humphrey, 71, of Pittsford, VT (pop. 3,140). "I couldn't keep house without it."

The Holmes family has been selling baking ingredients to homemakers for nine generations. The family began milling flour in 1802, bought the Chelsea flour mill in 1887 and introduced its popular Jiffy mix in 1930.

Six years after launching America's baking mix industry, Mabel assumed the role of company president when her husband died in a grain silo accident. The couple's 23-year-old twin sons, Howard and Dudley Sr., ran the company and the Jiffy line continued to grow with a pie crust mix in 1940 and a corn muffin mix in 1950.

Today, Chelsea Milling Co. fills 1.6 million Jiffy boxes daily with biscuit, cake, frosting, fudge brownie, muffin, pizza crust and pancake mixes. From the start, the company has been a do-it-all manufacturer – from milling its own flour to making its own cheery, blue boxes. With its gleaming white silos, the Chelsea plant – nicknamed Jiffyville – is a downtown landmark and favorite destination for tour groups. Visitors end tours with free samples of hot fluffy biscuits or muffins.

While today's boxes look nearly identical to the originals and carry the slogan, "Quality and Value since 1930," Chelsea Milling Co. has endured by changing with the times. When Howdy retired as a racecar driver and returned to the family business in 1988, he modernized the plant, built a \$4.5 million warehouse in 1996 and introduced commercial-sized mixes to cater to restaurants and hospitals.

Still, he admires the perseverance of his flour-milling forefathers and cherishes the ingenuity of his grandmother. "Grandma had a simple idea and followed through," Howdy says. "She wanted to save people time and money in the kitchen."

Those basic ingredients are still valued by America's homemakers.