



T E X A S ☆ T I M E S

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UNITED STATES SENATOR • TEXAS

The Little Creamery That Could

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

One time-honored method of easing the effects of the hot summer weather is sitting down with a tasty bowl of ice cream. In the minds of many Texans, the ice cream of choice is Blue Bell, a home-grown enterprise we've begun gradually sharing with the rest of the country.

A notable Blue Bell anniversary, number 100, is upon us. In 1907, Washington County farmers and local businessmen set up the Brenham Creamery Co. to sell butter made from the excess cream generated by area dairies.

Four years later, the creamery started making ice cream, at first producing up to two full gallons each day. In 1930, the expanding operation adopted the name of the famous Texas summer wildflower, and the legend of Blue Bell ice cream was born.

Today, butter production is long gone. Blue Bell's four plants produce 100 pints of ice cream per minute in 17 core flavors and more than two dozen occasional or seasonal flavors. The company is privately held, so official figures aren't available, but annual sales are estimated at more than \$400 million.

The Blue Bell Creamery will mark its official centennial in July. A "100 Years Tour" has already started, with a "chocolate-covered" 18-wheel truck moving through 66 communities in 17 states, mostly across the southern U.S., where Blue Bell is marketed. Every visitor to the road show receives some company history and a complimentary cup of Homemade Vanilla—by far the most popular variety.

Also, guests of Blue Bell's "Day in the Country" celebration in Brenham on July 19th – 21st will have the opportunity to pose for a picture with Belle, a beautiful Jersey cow that works as Blue Bell's current "spokesmodel."

Blue Bell Ice Cream is now distributed from Arizona to Florida, and as far north as Kansas City. And though it's available in just 20 percent of America's grocery markets, only two other brands (Breyers and Dreyers) sell more ice cream in the U.S.

Blue Bell, like Texas, may yet become the biggest and best, but the company has always been cautious in its expansion in order to protect its reputation for quality. Just last month, Texas dedicated a state Historical Marker at the Brenham creamery. The inscription reads in part:

"During the company's early years, management set the tone for careful business practices and respect for tradition. Under the Kruse family's leadership ... Blue Bell has become one of our nation's most successful ice cream brands with a focus on its 'country' origins, quality ingredients and friendly service."

Among the 17 "permanent" Blue Bell flavors,

my personal favorite is Pecan Pralines 'n Cream. My wife, Sandy, prefers Rocky Road. But in this case, we are consistently outvoted. Homemade Vanilla, Cookies 'n Cream and Dutch Chocolate are the consistent top-sellers across Texas.

The renowned New York Times reporter, the late R. W. "Johnny" Apple, Jr., visited Brenham and wrote about his personal favorite, Buttered Pecan: "I could easily down a pint at a single sitting. Just give me a spoon [no dish required] and stand back, kid."

Apple added that Homemade Vanilla differs from other popular premium vanillas because it has no vanilla bean flecks. "If it is flecks that you crave, you can opt for Natural Vanilla Bean," he noted.

A number of flavors are produced seasonally, as fruit or other ingredients become available. At least one popular product—Cantaloupe 'n Cream—is sold only in Texas, and is available for one single month every year, in July. Another flavor, Cinnamon, is packed in three-gallon containers and sold only to restaurants.

Blue Bell ice cream is now produced in Alabama and Oklahoma as well as at two plants in Brenham, but the quality that has made the product successful originated in Texas. The company's owners know that premium ingredients and processes are important—and so are the people who make it.

Ed and Howard Kruse are the sons of E. F. Kruse, who became the creamery's manager in 1919. They told the Round Top Register in 1997 that the work ethic and dedication of Blue Bell's employees is what really makes the ice cream great.

"The most precious asset that we've got in this whole company is people," Howard Kruse has said.

His statement captures the historic attraction of Texas. Our state's fame is not based only on cattle, cotton, oil, medicine, space travel—or ice cream. Blue Bell is evidence that we excel because of the enduring and unique spirit of the Texas people.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column