



This page: Matt Schaeffer, president of Wilcoxon's, says he buys trucks used from all over the country and then puts new stainless steel skins on the boxes and paints them himself. Facing page: Rio Ranieri, 4, enjoys a scoop of Moose Tracks at Pickle Barrel in Bozeman after a hard day at preschool. Rio's mom, Simia, said she brings him to Pickle Barrel for Wilcoxon's quite often after school. 'Wilcoxon's is the only ice cream we eat,' she says.

Sweet 100

The quiet and sometimes shy owners of Wilcoxon's Ice Cream celebrate a century of business in Livingston



The name Wilcoxon's can inspire rhapsody any time, but this year, fans are even more appreciative: 2012 marks the 100th birthday of the small ice cream manufacturing company headquartered in Livingston. Jerri Urbaska Balsam, a Billings native, grew up with Wilcoxon's. "My dad and mom bought the divine fudge bars by the box and filled our freezer—they still do when family visits."

In Yellowstone National Park, where fountain staff have been dipping Wilcoxon's since 1927, Mammoth Hot Springs General Store employee Mike Lentz hands out cones of the ice cream flavor "Stuck in a Rut" with a verbal disclaimer: He's not responsible when the customer is 100 miles away and has to turn around for more. Faye Black, Lentz's supervisor, confesses she sleepwalks for "Stuck in a Rut." "I'm serious—I wake up and a quart is gone." How would she describe the flavor? "It's rich. Carmelly. It's just better." ▶

Story by Beth Judy
Photos by Thomas Lee

Best and better are what many people say about the company's products, and if you ask its employees what they're most proud of about Wilcoxson's, they say without hesitation, it's the quality.

Since 1912, the company has occupied just two locations on Livingston's Main Street, about two blocks apart, and two owners: Carl Wilcoxson (with a few partners), and his son Harold, a slight, quiet-spoken, sharply blue-eyed 89-year-old who comes to work seven days a week. In 1949, the company added a smaller plant in Billings and more recently, a warehouse in Great Falls. Wilcoxson's makes about 50 flavors of hard ice cream (not including its sherbets and frozen yogurt) and is known for giving some of them whimsical names like "Montana Moose Moss" and "Chocolate Runs Through It." Wilcoxson's also makes fudge bars, ice cream sandwiches and other novelties. You can find all of these products in a small store in the Billings plant (where most of the novelties are made), and a selection of Wilcoxson's products in many major grocery stores, smaller stores and gas stations and on menus as diverse as Mark's In and Out in Livingston (one of the few vendors of Wilcoxson's soft-serve) and Chico Hot Springs (found in their classic desserts, mud pie and orange flambé). Wilcoxson's sells only in Montana—mostly east of the Continental Divide—and a small area of Wyoming.

Despite its devoted fans, however, the company name draws a blank stare from some



Montanans. Either it's not sold where they live, or they don't care what brand of ice cream is melting on their cone. And Wilcoxson's is fine with that. It does not advertise, have a website (though that may change), or aggressively seek expansion. Maybe that's how it is when you're 100—and a survivor. In 1965 in Montana, 45 small companies manufactured ice cream from scratch. Today, according to retired employee Doug Grieve, there is just one. Wilcoxson's.



As you'd expect, the rooms in the Livingston plant are spare and spanking clean. For workers, production days have two parts. The second half, taking apart all the equipment and cleaning, is as important as the first half, churning out up to 3,500 gallons of two to three ice cream flavors a day. (Spumoni, however, with three flavors geometrically centered in the carton, takes one whole day to itself.) Matt Schaeffer, 52, and a 27-year employee, explains the flow, from the room where raw Montana milk and cream in enormous stainless steel tanks is mixed

with other basic ingredients like sugar and cocoa; to the next room, where it's heated to kill microbes, homogenized and cooled; to a final room where the mix enters any of three different freezer machines. Final ingredients like nuts or balls of cookie dough are meted out through a funnel as the mixture, nearing completion, flows toward one of three machines—a half-gallon-carton filler, a manually operated filler head for bulk plastic tubs or a machine for assembling the few novelties still produced in Livingston. Pint and quart containers are filled by hand, 1,000 or 2,000 at a time. Over any one of these processes, ▶



'You have to have your mind clear to do this work. I like the responsibility of making the best ice cream in Montana.'

Laurie Ford



This page, top: Schaeffer wears a T-shirt commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of Wilcoxson's Ice Cream. Bottom: Harold Wilcoxson, is Wilcoxson's chief executive officer. Facing page: Production Manager Laurie Ford dumps peanut butter cups into a vat while making Moose Tracks ice cream. Bottom: Wilcoxson's inventory is kept in huge freezers.



one to six employees hover as needed. Schaeffer recaps, pointing back through the stages of production. “Thirty-eight degrees, 160 degrees, 38, 22 through the freezers, and then minus 20: a day in the life of an ice cream molecule.” Continuing the tour through various freezer rooms, Schaeffer’s glasses fog and unfog. He shrugs. “It happens a lot.”

If some things about Wilcoxson’s are predictable, others surprise—like when Schaeffer, the company president, points to the shop where he says he constantly fixes equipment. In one room, a sound stops him short. “I’ll have to look into that,” he says, as tuned to his plant as a mom with a baby monitor. Much of Wilcoxson’s machinery was bought—some, already used and refurbished—in the 1950s or 60s. Schaeffer says they don’t replace the pasteurizers, for example, which take an hour and a half per batch versus newer, faster machines, because they believe the old ones make better ice cream. Schaeffer also handles the company’s refrigeration and welding and paints the trucks. Might the company ever contract out the painting? “Not the way I do it,” Schaeffer responds. “It would be too expensive.”

Drivers, who are really customer liaisons/salesmen, wash their own trucks and change the oil and tires. When needed, certain drivers fill in on the assembly line. And some think up flavor names. For 12 years, Schaeffer was a driver, including the Yellowstone route (“600 trips to the park, 280 miles roundtrip, bear and buffalo jams”). One morning, driving toward the park in the dark, the name “Stuck in a Rut” occurred to him for a new flavor—because that’s

what he and his co-workers were, trying to come up with a name. “We’ve gotten a lot of mileage out of it,” he says. (It’s the flavor President Obama chose when the Obamas visited Yellowstone.) Schaeffer also came up with “Buffalo Chip” (8-year-old Sasha Obama’s choice) and others. “Nothing’s formal here,” Schaeffer says of the company. There are no product development or marketing teams, analyses or focus groups. If a flavor sells, Wilcoxson’s figures that people like it.

The production schedule is similarly simple: when a product runs low, the company makes more. “It’s pretty neat when you think about it,” comments Billings employee Brenda Davis. “It means our ice cream’s fresh. All our fudge bars were made last week.” Pull one of those bars from its wrapper, and you might gasp. It’s ginormous. “It used to be longer,” Schaeffer says, but recently the company went to a new kind of wrapper, and had to shorten it—so they made it fatter. As many companies subtly shave product sizes, Wilcoxson’s fudge bar remains a hefty four fluid ounces; half-gallons are still half-gallons. “I’m not caving to that crap,” Schaeffer snaps. Likewise, because Harold Wilcoxson says so, the company still uses real Madagascar vanilla instead of cheaper synthetic vanillin. (Vanilla is the most popular ice cream flavor.) Quality, explains Doug Grieve, “is a Harold thing.” The company refuses to play the shelving game, too, Grieve says. Freezer space is limited in grocery stores, and many stores actually charge fees for it. For big corporations, that’s just doing business, and once their products dominate a freezer, they may gain clout with placement and

competition, too. Wilcoxson’s does not pay for freezer space. “We survive by popular demand,” asserts Grieve.

Only about 25 employees statewide handle all the production and business. Once Wilcoxson’s employees get a job, they tend to keep it. Many are Livingston natives and were schoolmates or friends before they were co-workers. They stay, says Davis, because they’re well taken care of. “And who doesn’t like selling ice cream?” she adds. They seem to enjoy the variety of their jobs. Davis works in the Billings store but also drives vacationing drivers’ routes.

“I consider all the people here really talented,” says Schaeffer, but one is “the hardest working woman—or guy—I’ve ever met.” That’s Laurie Ford, a pretty, unassuming woman whose work day, during summer months when output doubles, can start at midnight or 1. “The mix has to be ready at 7 a.m.,” Ford explains, for manufacturing. Meticulously, she plans each day’s sequence of production—only certain flavors may follow each other, to avoid taste or color contamination—and needed ingredients. She used to assemble and stage them, too, lifting 100-lb bags of sugar even at seven months pregnant. Now her son, Casey, who predictably was nearly born in the plant, assembles ingredients. She’s training him in her job because, she says, “What if

something happened to me?” At 19, Casey has been full-time at Wilcoxson’s for two years. In the freezer room, he works alongside his mom as she watches six things at once—valves, gauges, dials—grabs a big wrench and, during a moment where all hold their breath, reverses the flow of ice cream from the half-gallon to the one for plastic tubs. After the first few tubs fill, she grabs one, whirls with the speed and precision of a rodeo horse and sets it on a scale, then reaches to adjust the air in the mix. She steps away and smiles. “You have to have your mind clear to do this work. I like the responsibility of making the best ice cream in Montana.” Behind her, Schaeffer has slipped seamlessly into her spot. The two learned the work about the same time from a man who had been with the company 40 years. Their co-worker Bob, who helped at the half-gallon filler, is four years shy of that number.

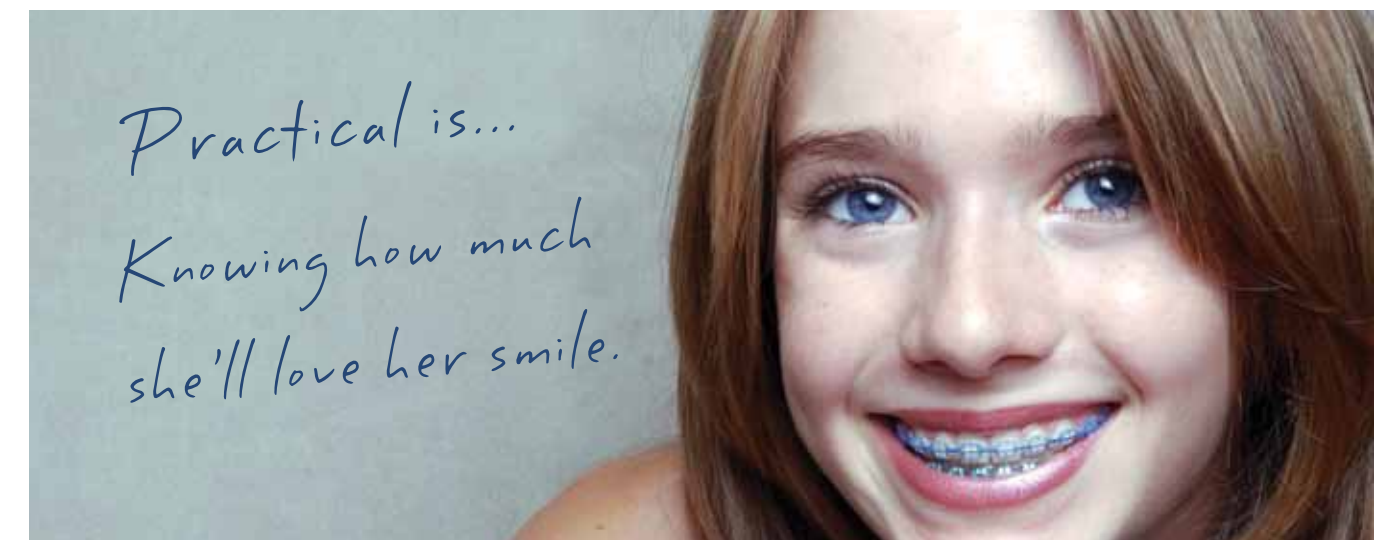
“We’re just here, keeping the company going,” Schaeffer says. “In another 20, 30 years, a different crew will be doing the same.” He takes a spatula, dips some fresh Double Chocolate Almond, and scrapes it into a cup. Laying a flat wooden spoon in a paper wrapper beside it, he pushes it forward. “Here.” ■

A frequent contributor to Montana Magazine, Beth Judy writes from her home in Missoula.

Facing page, top: The only sign for Wilcoxson’s is at the back of the building, along the alley. Bottom: Cartons of Moose Tracks about the consistency of soft-serve ice cream go into paper packaging before heading into a freezer at minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit to harden.

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Matt Schaeffer



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