



## 2013 Baking Hall of Fame



# Ernest Nickles

Nickles Bakery, Inc.

**W**hen Ernest Nickles came on board, the family baking company already was a large business. But it was a very different company than it was to become under Ernest Nickle's leadership.

In addition to sustaining a family business, and demonstrating an extraordinary work ethic and some amazingly distinctive qualities, Ernest Nickles is credited with moving Alfred Nickles Bakery from a home-service delivery baking company prevalent early in the 20th century into a different model that allowed the company to thrive as a major regional wholesale baking company more than 100 years after the business was established in 1909.

"His greatest accomplishment was transitioning the company from home service-oriented retail delivery baking company with over 600 routes to a grocery and restaurant wholesale delivery baking company with over 500 routes serving 7 Midwestern states with products made in 5 bakeries," said David A. Gardner, president.

His success in modernizing the Nickles business model and nurturing the next generations of company leadership (Mr. Gardner is a nephew of Mr. Nickles)

is underscored by the company's survival through decades of baking industry consolidation. Nickles Bakery is one of a few family-owned regional baking companies remaining in the United States.

It was for Mr. Nickles leadership in baking that he has been elected to the 2013 class of the Baking Hall of Fame.

The oldest son of company founder Alfred Nickles, Ernest Nickles was born in New Philadelphia, Ohio, but lived nearly all of his life in Navarre, Ohio. He was a graduate of Massillon Washington High School. He attended Northwestern University and graduated from the American Institute of Baking.

Marrying his sweetheart Lucile (Cookie) Rowe, he joined the baking company in 1925 as a sales manager. The business had been established in 1909 by his father, a native of Switzerland, trained in baking in his native country as well as in Paris.

When Alfred Nickles died in 1949, Ernest Nickles succeeded him as president and chief executive officer. In 1955, the company became a charter member of The Long Co., an independent baking cooperative in Chicago.

Over time, the management of Nickles came to

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include his brother Edward; his brother in law, David E. Gardner; and his son-in-law Jim Gerber.

In a 1984 interview with *Milling & Baking News*, David E. Gardner, president and chief operating officer of Nickles Bakery, said of Mr. Nickles, "He has been a person who is completely dedicated to the business, to the company, to the industry. His whole life has been wrapped up in this, as was his father's and his brother's."

This commitment to his work was reflected in a variety of ways. He worked seven days a week, walking to the baking plant located only one block from his home. He had a habit of inspecting the bakery on different nights and would go to the plant to wish the watchman a "Merry Christmas" on Christmas Eve. In turn, employees at the company felt comfortable calling Mr. Nickles by his first name — Ernest or Ernie.

He continued working for the baking company until just before his death in 1995. Actually, a day before a debilitating stroke that eventually would lead to his death, Mr. Nickles held a two-hour meeting with a young wholesale salesman who was preparing to return to college.

Not a fan of outsourcing, Mr. Nickles was committed to offering a wide range of bakery products, including the following that were baked on the company's production lines — bread, buns, dinner rolls, pies, sweet rolls, danish, cake donuts, croutons and stuffing mix, bread crumbs, cookies, snack cake, layer cakes, angel food cakes, fruit cake, puff pastry, yeast raised donuts.

Mr. Nickles' management style and dedication to the bakery was reflected in the regularly scheduled meetings that required immediate action and follow-through. Every Tuesday, the Navarre bakery, which

eventually housed 13 lines, held a four-hour production meeting to sample products, improve quality and create new baked items.

Every afternoon, the company held a three-hour sales meeting where Mr. Nickles' passion for growing the company's business became renowned. Every Friday, the bakery held a three-hour planning meeting, which addressed production, maintenance and sanitation issues. "These meetings occurred 52 weeks a year without fail and without interruption," an A.S.B. biography stated.

Beyond his management capabilities, Mr. Nickles had extraordinary sensory skills, his nephew David Gardner said.

"Ernest Nickles had the greatest sense of taste that I have ever seen," Mr. Gardner said. "I sat in on thousands of taste-test meetings and production meetings with Ernest. He was the only in these meetings who could identify ingredients like honey and other flavorings in baked foods."

Mr. Gardner said when Mr. Nickles passed away, he left a legacy that survives to this day — a business operated on the principles of sound ethics, conservative decision making and "based on integrity between the company and customers and between the company and its suppliers."

He also established a tradition of maintaining a low profile at Nickles, "shunning publicity for himself, his family and for his company, only taking extreme pride in the assortment of quality baked foods he helped create for Nickles customers," Mr. Gardner said.

At the time of his death, Nickles Bakery had 2,000 employees and 84 shareholders, all but two of whom were descendants of Alfred and Emma Nickles, and their children Ernest, Edward and Marie. MBN