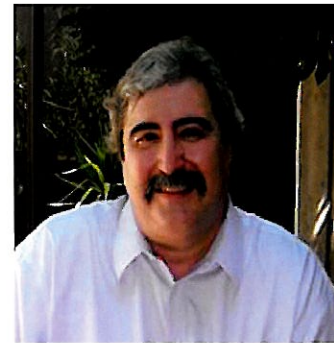


Eggs for Arizona: The Hickman Family Farms

By Jack L. August, Ph.D.



Arizona's largest egg producer--Hickman Family Farms—developed from a small, family farm located in rural Kansas into a dynamic and pacesetting twenty-first century agribusiness with corporate offices located in Buckeye, Arizona. According to family patriarch, Bill Hickman, Sr., though the official establishment of the family operation in Arizona dates from 1944, the Hickman family's egg business actually started during the decade of the 1930s. Put another way, the Hickman family has been in the egg business for nearly seven decades. As the company website at www.hickmaneggs.com puts it: "Remember, there are almost 300 million hens out there each producing about an egg a day. Billions of eggs are eaten around the world daily, and many people depend on them for their daily nutrition. Eggs contain the most digestible protein available in nature."

Bill's father, Guy, was a miner in Kansas and his mother, Nell, took care of a small number of chickens on the family farm. The reality of silicosis of the lungs, a common malady for miners at the time, and the disease which felled Guy's father, who also worked in the mines, prompted Guy to abandon his miner's job and turn his energies to egg production. In fact, one of Bill Sr.'s first memories was of going to town on a Saturday evening with his parents and brother, riding in a back seat with two cases of eggs riding between them. The eggs were to serve as the family's weekly grocery money. The grocer told Guy that he would pay .06 per dozen. Guy refused and took the eggs home and stored them in the cool cellar. The following Saturday, he took the cases back to town and received .11 for them, a more suitable price and an amount worth the week-long wait.

The Hickman's moved to Arizona in 1938 and Guy found work on the construction crew that built Bartlett Dam on the Verde River. In the years just prior to World War II Guy bounced back to Kansas as well as California and Arizona in his effort to keep his family fed. Ultimately, the Hickman's found some farm land in 1944 at 67th Avenue and Missouri, purchased two dozen laying hens, and the Hickman Family Farms operation in Arizona commenced. As Bill, Sr. recalled, "We

operated in Arizona the same way we did in Kansas in the 1930s." In its early days, Hickman's entered the Arizona food service market by providing fresh, locally produced eggs direct to small independent restaurants, and directly to consumers. Every afternoon, one little refrigerated panel truck was sufficient to deliver the day's production to coffee shops in Glendale and to Carnation Restaurant on Central Avenue in Phoenix.

In 1957, Bill, Sr. married his wife, Gertie, and the newlyweds decided to enter the egg business with his parents. They exhibited the entrepreneurial skill sets that have kept Hickman's competitive for decades. He purchased half of the family equipment, raised 500 baby chicks, matching the existing 500 and went to work building upon what his parents had started. Through the 1960s and 1970s, Hickman's began dominating the local market and by 1993, Hickman's was the only Arizona egg producer with chickens and a USDA-inspected processing plant. Despite myriad challenges to the egg industry at that time, the Glendale farm continued to expand. In the late 1990s a new operation opened in western Maricopa County near Buckeye with laying houses that boasted hundreds of thousands of chickens.

The Hickman's have kept the egg operation in the family as the third generation has embraced technological innovation to advance and maximize the production capabilities,

created environmentally friendly and sustainable practices in their use of water, increased the use of wind power, and partnered with organic vegetable farmers and golf course operators in the production of fertilizer byproducts from its poultry waste. There is an on-site compost operation at the farm. Furthermore, the traditional barnyard has been replaced with environmentally controlled laying houses.

Thus in 2010 Hickman Family Farms owns over 5 million birds that produce in excess of 3 million shell eggs per day. In addition they market egg products, manure, and fertilizer. Regardless of change and progress, the family remains committed to the Hickman basic business formula: good service and excellent quality at a fair price. Hickman products are available at Arizona retail outlets, including most grocers, Costco, and Wal-Mart, as well as to the foodservice industry. Notably the company gives back to the community. Hickman's donates over one million eggs per year for those in need including Phoenix Children's Hospital, various foster children organizations, educational organizations, and area food banks. Besides the corporate website, there is a related website at www.goodeggproject.org that delves into the family's business and community philosophy. It is lively, robust, highly recommended, and features current Hickman family members in concise digital clips explaining how the company operates in an efficient, environmentally responsible and community-involved fashion. Indeed Hickman Family Farms is a leader and innovator in the industry. ●

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