

By Kate Baer

# Kernel of nostalgia

## Mike's Popcorn still popping after 44 years in business

It was over four decades ago that Mike Courtney tucked his daughter into a wagon to take a stroll to their favorite popcorn stand on Wisconsin Avenue.

On that warm summer night in 1968, in place of a fresh bag of their favorite popcorn, Courtney instead found a "For Sale" card on the stand. It wasn't long before Courtney was running the stand himself with the help of his wife and one inherited employee from the previous owner.

"I was always looking for something else to get in to," says Courtney, a full-time employee for a local paper mill. "And I loved the popcorn."

Mike's Popcorn is now available throughout 300 locations in Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The business has continued to see steady growth with an increase of 25 percent in sales from a year ago.

It's that traditional white corn that is served up nightly between April and October that started the loyal fan base. What makes it so popular? Aside from the smell hanging in the air on a warm summer night, the recipe is top secret and is the same recipe that was used back in 1968.

For Courtney and his wife, Judy, the cart on Wisconsin Avenue served as a little extra for the family income.

"The extra from the popcorn stand allowed for family trips and other extras," he says.

As Courtney's four daughters grew up, working the popcorn cart at night became a rite of passage.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK FERRON

**Mike Courtney, owner of Mike's Popcorn, mixes Cheeselicious, one of his most popular flavors. While the company has invested in equipment upgrades to handle its growth, Courtney still personally pops and bags the corn.**

"It was just something the girls knew they were going to do," he says. "And today, the grandkids are working the stand and they like the money."

More than 40 years later, Courtney

owns the business with his four daughters, Ann Bell, Mary Courtney, Kathy Sultze and Sarah McElhone.

"I always wanted to do something for my girls," says Mike [continued] »



**Mike Courtney catches popped kernels at Mike's Popcorn's facility in Kaukauna. The business, which started out selling popcorn on Wisconsin Avenue, now sells products at 300 locations in Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota.**

Courtney. The business also employs several grandchildren during the summer and two of Mike's sons-in-law, making Mike's 100 percent family owned and operated.

Today, the something Courtney is helping his girls with includes a thriving popcorn business that

includes the cart on Wisconsin Avenue as well as a 4,000-square-foot facility in Talisman Park in Kaukauna. The location is home to the production and distribution of the popcorn as well as a small retail front.

Until 2010, every single kernel of Mike's Popcorn was popped by Mike

“People have no idea of how labor intensive popcorn making can be. We wanted to be able to upgrade the equipment without affecting the quality of the corn.”

—Ann Bell, who owns Mike's Popcorn in Kaukauna with her father and three sisters

**WHERE YOU CAN FIND IT**

- » **In stores:** Mike's Popcorn can be purchased at Festival Foods, Piggly Wiggly and Woodman's.
- » **Online:** Order through the company's website: [www.mikespopcorn.com](http://www.mikespopcorn.com).
- » **Seasonal cart:** 210 W. Wisconsin Ave., Appleton, 6 to 9 p.m. from April through October.

himself in his home.

In addition to making the popcorn, it was Mike who took his popcorn to the roadways approaching Walgreens and Piggly Wiggly stores to sell his corn. He also was able to find a cult following at the winter and summer Appleton Farmers Markets.

“People have no idea of how labor intensive popcorn making can be,” says Ann Bell.

Mike churns his old copper kettle to make the popcorn. He also bags it up and packages it for shipping. With the increase in demand, today the family-owned company has invested in substantial equipment upgrades including automated poppers.

“We wanted to be able to upgrade the equipment without affecting the quality of the corn,” says Bell.

While Bell and her three sisters spend their time growing the number of retail outlets where Mike's is available, they recently got a big boost with the addition of Snyder's-Lance Incorporated to facilitate with product distribution.

“One day, Ann saw the guy in his Snyder truck and she went and approached him in the parking lot,” says Mike Courtney. “They were on board shortly after that.”

While four decades have passed, the company has also grown well beyond the traditional white as several other flavors are sold alongside the original. Others include the top-selling Caramelicious, Cheeselicious, Party Mix and Triple Mix.

“When people try it and they like it, the door isn't wide enough to get my head through,” says Courtney. ❶