Mt. Olive Pickle Company, Incorporated

1926

Mt. Olive

90
YEARS
OF DILL-ICIOUS
AND STILL
GROWING

2016
Mount Olive Pickle Company, Inc. was formally organized on January 2, 1926. Few companies can boast a 90-year history. But for the 13 shareholders present in S.L. Warren’s office that January day, the meeting was a leap of faith, convergence of business and civic enterprise. They founded a pickle company to create a market for local farmers, believing its success would benefit the local economy.

Little could those original shareholders envision the fruits of their endeavor 90 years later. Mt. Olive Pickle today carries the name of its hometown to all 50 states, and in 2016 Mt. Olive is the best-selling brand of pickles, peppers and relishes in US grocery stores.

Even as it has worked to achieve its position as the leading national brand, it has remained true to its original proposition. For nine decades Mt. Olive Pickle has served as a mainstay in the economic well-being of its community. It has done so by focusing on the ultimate goals that are closest to home: to produce an excellent product, to provide a fair return for its shareholders, to be a progressive, compassionate employer, and to remain a valued corporate citizen in the community.

90 YEARS

A PROUD MILESTONE
The early 1900s found the small agricultural town of Mount Olive, North Carolina humming as a small commercial center for the surrounding rural farm community. On Saturdays, throngs of farm families strolled along Center Street for their weekly shopping. The Wilmington Weldon Railroad was the community’s lifeline to the outside world. At least four trains came through town each day, transporting mail, passengers and freight – including carloads of fresh local produce to be sold in northern markets. When bumper crops of cucumbers saturated the market, many fields frequently went to waste. That prompted entrepreneur Shikrey Baddour of Goldsboro to enlist George Moore of Castle Hayne to help him dispose of his excess cucumbers. Enlisting the help of George Moore, Mr. Baddour buys the cucumbers and brines them with the idea of selling them to other pickle companies. When not enough buyers are found, plans begin for a packing operation in Mount Olive.

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The company is incorporated on February 25 with 21 individuals who agree to purchase $15,000 in capital stock. By year’s end, Mt. Olive has 37 shareholders and $19,500 in capital, and it packs 6,250 cases, most under the brand name Carolina Beauty.

Board President I.F. Witherington is hired to manage the company as secretary-treasurer. D.K. Kornegay takes his place as president. Total sales for the year are $50,944 and the cash balance on hand as of April 1 is $1,317.

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Goldsbury to enlist George Moore of Castle Hayne to help him dispose of his excess cucumbers. His factory then begins to sell pickle firms in order to buy the brined cucumbers. He tries to find pickle firms willing to buy the brined cucumbers, but to no avail. Local Mount Olive businessmen saw great promise in Mr. Baddour’s idea and decided to start a pickle company of their own. “Everybody depended on the farmers,” said H.M. Cox, Jr., whose father was shareholder and bank president H.M. Cox, Sr. “Anything that helped the farmer, helped business.”

In the beginning, cucumbers were taken from the vats to nearby tables, where old coffee pots were used to pour syrup into jars.
THE SHAREHOLDERS ROLL UP THEIR SLEEVES AND GO TO WORK

The business people—a collection of merchants, physicians, produce brokers, banking and insurance executives—established the company in 1926, offering shares of stock to Mr. Baddour and Mr. Moore in exchange for their original investment. That first board of directors named H.M. Cox, Sr. as president and hired Mr. Moore as the plant manager and Mr. Baddour as the salesman. In 1928 the board hired Mr. Cox as president. I.F. Witherington was secretary-treasurer. In that role, Mr. Witherington ran the company until his death in 1955. For most of that time, he did so from his insurance office downtown.

The directors could regularly be found in the factory doing menial tasks for which they couldn’t afford a labor force. Teddy Cox Murray, daughter of Mr. Cox, remembered her father getting up after supper and announcing that he had to join the other directors back over at the pickle plant to glue labels on jars.

The company invested $5,799 in a new profit-sharing program for its employees, making Mt. Olive one of the first 200 companies in the U.S. to do so.

Mt. Olive Pickle lengthened its “green season,” increasing production of fresh-pick items due to the development of new cucumber acreage. This strategic accomplishment is credited to R.B. Butler, field manager for the company.

THE SOUTHERLAND FAMILY

If working at Mt. Olive has a family feel, perhaps it’s because so many families work here, and have for decades. Take the Southerland women, who have all worked in Packing. Daisy Southerland was here from 1949 to 1972. Her daughter Inez would eventually become the first African-American Packing Department supervisor, retiring in 1985. Inez’s daughter Mary Joyce retired in 2001 after 17 years of service, and Mary Joyce’s daughter Wynona has been here since 1998. They represent the generations of families whose strong work ethic have helped make Mt. Olive a great company and brand.

Committed to the Mount Olive community since its modest beginnings, Mt. Olive Pickle launches its Employees Community Fund to help fund charities and other non-profit organizations in the area. The program starts with approximately $1,000 and is governed by an employee committee.
A PASSIONATE COMMITMENT TO ITS PICKLE PEOPLE

Over time, Mt. Olive Pickle earned a reputation for its commitment to its people. When it implemented a profit-sharing plan for its employees back in 1943, it was one of the first in the country to do so. In the late 1950s, the company launched a tuition reimbursement program for employees who wanted to further their education. Today, a company-wide wellness program and an aggressive safety initiative – Carolina STAR – firmly establish a culture of employee health and safety at Mt. Olive Pickle.

I.F. Witherington, when he discovered a double payment on an invoice, to a young John N. Walker: "The company is doing all right and all, but not well enough to pay invoices twice."

TRUE TO ITS ROOTS

With its beginnings as a true "community stock proposition," as Mr. Witherington described it in 1928, Mt. Olive Pickle stayed true to its roots. During the economic recession of the mid-1970s, the Town of Mount Olive found itself in a cash crunch. To help, the company – the largest taxpayer in town - volunteered to pay its taxes early. "The town was in a bind," said John N. Walker, who led the company from 1955 to 1990.

The company’s support of community endeavors goes back decades. In operation since 1959, the Employees Community Fund in 2016 alone distributed $133,575 to 48 area nonprofit community organizations. In all, Mt. Olive Pickle provides more than $750,000 in financial and product contributions annually. Beneficiaries include organizations from the University of Mount Olive to youth recreation leagues and volunteer fire departments, United Way of Wayne County and Habitat for Humanity of Goldsboro-Wayne.

The National Pickle Packers Association names John N. Walker as its president.

Gross sales break the $5 million mark.

The 4,000-year-old secret of how fermentation works inspires controlled fermentation studies at Mt. Olive Pickle. The research is led by Dr. Jack Etchells of the USDA’s ARS Food Fermentation Lab and Lloyd Hontz of Mt. Olive Pickle. The results in 1973 improved fermentation methods used throughout the pickle industry.

The National Pickle Packers Association names S. L. Warren as its president.

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Efficiency and productivity escalate following the installation of the first computerized production equipment. Over the next two decades, all production equipment in the plant is upgraded and automated.

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A BOLD BRANDING MOVE PROVES REWARDING

Like most regional pickle companies of the day, Mt. Olive packed a variety of brands, and by the 1950s Mt. Olive’s most popular brand was Carolina Beauty. Under the guidance of John N. Walker, the company began the gradual consolidation of all of its products under the single Mt. Olive brand, one of the first pickle companies to do so. The Mt. Olive script logo first appeared in 1953, and by 1967 the company introduced the familiar logo that continues to grace our labels. This single, distinctive, identifiable brand proved easier to promote with customers and consumers alike. It also laid the foundation for the company’s launch as a national brand decades later.

ON THE CORNER OF CUCUMBER AND VINE

While business-focused and civic-minded, Mt. Olive Pickle includes one other vital ingredient in its approach—fun. Its pickles are packed at the Corner of Cucumber and Vine, an address that was first uttered aloud by H.P. Stowe in the 1960s and made official in 1996 when the Mount Olive Town Board of Commissioners renamed the intersection. Each New Year’s Eve at precisely 7 o’clock midnight (7 p.m.), the company lowers a glowing three-foot pickle to the cheer of thousands. Corporate décor is whimsical pickle art created by local high school students each year at the North Carolina Pickle Festival. Favorite giveaways are the legendary “scratch ‘n sniff” pickle stickers, and the gift shop offers everything from pickle ornaments to pickle golf putters.

When Ruth Parker and her sisters were little girls, her parents bought a share of Mt. Olive Pickle stock for each of them. W.P. and Lilly Martin used the dividend checks to teach their daughters tithing and saving. Today, Ruth’s daughter Margaret Ann Parvin sits on the board of directors and continues her grandfather’s downtown business, W.P. Martin Store. While many shareholders today are three and four generations removed from the founders and may or may not have physical ties to Mount Olive, a deep sense of pride in the company’s success remains. “We’re fortunate because we have a group of shareholders that understands the heritage of the company, and they believe in it,” said Bill Bryan, executive chairman.

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Growth through the 1990s became crucial to the company’s survival as the climate of corporate consolidations and mergers impacted virtually every American business segment. This was evident in the pickle industry as many of the country’s smaller pickle companies simply began to disappear. While one of the best-selling brands of pickles in the Southeast, Mt. Olive was still only a regional pickle company with distribution in just a handful of states.

“We decided that if we wanted to remain independent, we had to grow larger,” said Bill Bryan, who took the helm as president in 1990. What followed was an aggressive strategy to expand Mt. Olive’s distribution and sales. Led by Executive Vice President Bobby Frye, Mt. Olive’s sales team successfully extended Mt. Olive’s reach to national proportions. Today, new markets, innovative products and packaging, and superior customer service remain the key elements in the company’s continued growth.

Ed Borden is named chairman of the board.

The company introduces tamper-evident banding on its products.

The year marks the end of a five-year consumer boycott at Mt. Olive, when the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and the National Farmworkers Association signed a labor agreement. This marked the first time in the nation’s history that workers had won back their union contracts.

Mt. Olive purchases a five-cucumber-harvesting machine to begin a mechanized harvest program in North Carolina. Mt. Olive’s first mechanically harvested cucumbers were ready for market the next year.

When anyone asked longtime Maintenance Superintendent Ray Joyner how things were going in the plant that day, his reply was always, “What have you heard?”

“Our drivers have represented us well on the public highways and at our customers’ warehouses,” President Bill Bryan said at the time. “They have carried themselves, and our company name, with good humor, dependability, and a strong sense of pride. Today, Mt. Olive’s products are picked up from our distribution center and delivered by our own fleet, or by third-party carriers. Our fleet of local trucks continues to carry bright, colorful Mt. Olive graphics – rolling billboards still.”

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

2009
Mt. Olive’s over-the-road truck fleet is retired.
Ollie Q. Cumber replaces Mr. Crisp as the official company mascot.
Mt. Olive is certified as a Safe Quality Food (SQF) facility. SQF is designed to bring consistency to third-party audit standards, and to enhance food safety and quality.
Malcolm T. Murray, Jr. is named chairman of the board.

2012
After 40 years of its two-toned paper labels, Mt. Olive rolls out pressure sensitive labels sporting a fresh, sophisticated new look.

2013
Mt. Olive now has distribution in 50 states with its entry into Safeway and Albertsons stores in Washington and Oregon.
Phil Denlinger, Mt. Olive’s ag procurement manager is named President of Pickle Packers International.
Mt. Olive mourns the passing of John N. Neal Walker, president emeritus of the company.

AN UNWAVERING INNOVATIVE SPIRIT

Selling Mt. Olive pickles has been a Frye family affair for over eight decades. Birdie Frye Robinson, or “Mrs. Birdie,” came to work for Mt. Olive in 1933, leading the company’s southern sales until her retirement in 1976. Her son Bob would become national sales manager and is still with the company after 63 years. Her grandson Bobby came to Mt. Olive sales in 1981 and was executive vice president before he was tapped as president and CEO in 2015. Bobby’s son Robbie is currently on the sales team in Gastonia. The company “has been good to me and to the Frye family,” said Bob, “and we hope the foundation laid down by Mrs. Birdie will remain in place for decades to come.”

Over the years, Mt. Olive’s products could be spotted in movies and television shows. “Click,” an Adam Sandler comedy, comes to mind, and fans of TV’s reality show “Jersey Shore” watched as Snooki regularly purchased, and ate, her favorite Mt. Olive Koster Dills. Mt. Olive made its official national TV debut in November 2007 on the legendary television game show “The Price is Right.” (The contestant who won the games that included our picklePAKs would go on to win the car.) The Food Network came calling shortly after, and production of our Bread & Butter Chips was featured in an episode of “Unwrapped” in 2008. Mt. Olive and its products would go on to be featured in three more “Unwrapped” episodes in 2009 and, as on an another Food Network show “How’d That Get on My Plate?” and History Channel’s “Made to Eat.” In 2015 and 2016, the camera crews returned again. Mt. Olive’s Pepperoncini production was featured on an episode of “Food Factory” on the FYI Television Network, and “Unwrapped” returned in 2016 to feature production of our Simply Pickled Bread & Butter Chips.

Controlled for mutation studies, both N.C. State researchers in the USDA ARS Food Fermentation Lab and conducted on Mt. Olive in the late 1980s, improved sourcing methods throughout the industry. In such that same time, the company was the first food manufacturer to use high fructose corn syrup instead of sugar. Years later it became the first pickle brand to produce pickle products sweetened with the no calorie sweetener SPLENDA®, and the first to use pressure sensitive labels.

More recently, Mt. Olive has been recognized as an innovation agent rather than salt, which has been used as a food preservative for centuries. Once again working with the ARS Food Fermentation Lab, in 2011 Mt. Olive began to carefully ferment pickles with calcium chloride. By 2016 the company was producing hundreds of thousands of cases of calcium chloride product. Already used by Mt. Olive as a firming agent, calcium chloride is more environmentally friendly than salt, as its waste can be used as a soil enhancer. And, its use enables Mt. Olive to cut the amount of salt discharged into its treated wastewater.

In keeping with this focus on innovation, the company consistently upgraded its equipment and facilities, embracing new technologies to keep pace with customer demands. Such improvements not only reduce our footprint but remain competitive, but to set the industry pace by improving efficiency and productivity.
A number of projects, in planning throughout 2013 and continuing into 2014, significantly change the layout of the production areas. The line 2 relish line is reorganized and extended into the finished goods department to make room for an additional pasteurizer for Line 1, the hand line. A 5,000 square foot onsite glass warehouse is under construction. Construction also begins on a 7,000 square foot addition to the distribution center, the time to make room for two new production lines.

Faison Hester is named chairman of the board.

Mt. Olive is featured in a National Geographic video news article regarding its groundbreaking use of calcium chloride as a fermentation agent.

For the first time since 1990, Mt. Olive announces a change at the helm. President Bill Bryan is named executive chairman of the board, and Executive Vice President Bobby Frye becomes the new president and CEO. Chairman Faison Hester is named vice chairman and lead director.

The Simply Pickles line, featuring fewer, select ingredients, is launched. These non-GMO products with distinctive labeling use sea salt, sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup, and turmeric in place of FD&C Yellow #5.

The new Line 10 at the Distribution Center goes into service in June.
In its 90th year, Mt. Olive Pickle stands in a virtual tie with its primary competitor as the number one brand of pickles, peppers and relishes across all US outlets. It broke production records with 15 million cases produced in fiscal year 2016. Its physical footprint in the community is at its largest ever – 1.1 million square feet of manufacturing and warehouse space across 150 acres. The possibilities for continued growth through innovation, new markets, private label, and higher penetration in existing markets all square. It’s found in the deep and abiding relationships nurtured with shareholders, employees, customers, and community. While much has changed since 1926, Mt. Olive’s core values remain the same.

“Mt. Olive continues to be measured not only by sales, market share, and numbers. It’s based on the deep and abiding relationship nurtured with shareholders, employees, customers, and community. We want to give our shareholders a fair return on their investment while being a great place to work,” said Bobby Frye, president and CEO. “We want to give our customers innovation with products, employees, physicians, and community. We want to give our employees a place they can call home.”

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Mt. Olive Pickle

PO Box 2900
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In 1926, the Mt. Olive Pickle Company was founded by Lewis H. Summerlin and Company. Since then, the company has grown to become a major player in the food industry, providing high-quality pickles, peppers, and relishes to customers across the United States. The company has continued to innovate and expand its product line, ensuring that it remains a leader in the industry.

The Mt. Olive Pickle Company is committed to giving back to the community and the environment. The company has been recognized for its efforts to reduce its carbon footprint and operate sustainably. In addition, the company is dedicated to providing fair wages and safe working conditions for its employees.

The company is proud to have a long history of community involvement, supporting local charities and organizations. Mt. Olive Pickle Company is a great example of how a company can make a positive impact on the community while remaining successful in the business world.

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