

Schweppe Inc. Going Strong After 70 Years

By **Wailin Wong**
Medill News Service

Emma Schweppe has worked all her life, and she has the hands to prove it.

In the 1930s, when she made food deliveries in a Model A Ford with a defunct foot brake, she kept one hand ready to grab the emergency brake and the other ready to keep the boxes of popcorn behind her from toppling over.

Seventy years later, Emma's wrinkled hands sort paperwork for the business she and her husband Augie founded during the Great Depression.

Started in 1932 as DuPage Supply, Lombard-based Schweppe Inc. now generates \$16 million in annual sales. It started as a bar and tavern snack business and has grown to include kitchen equipment supply and kitchen design.

Yet for all its growth and expansion, the business looks much as it did when Augie and Emma began bagging popcorn and pretzels out of their Elmhurst basement.

Schweppe family members have run the company for three generations. Augie and Emma's sons, Ralph and Bud, ran Schweppe from 1950 to 1989. Bud branched off to form a used kitchen equipment business while Ralph stayed on as chairman of the board.

Ralph's older son, Jeff, is now president and chief executive officer, and his younger son, Randy, serves as manager of equipment sales and corporate secretary.

Emma, now 93, comes in from 9 a.m. to noon every weekday to help in the office. Augie died in 1973, shortly after the company moved to its Lombard location.

"I just wish he was here to really see, to just look in for a little bit to see what his sons have done," Emma said.

Ralph and Bud expanded Schweppe to include kitchen design and installation services in 1973. Since then, the company has designed hundreds of kitchens in corporate headquarters, restaurants, schools and churches in the Chicago metropolitan area.

This sector, the commercial and the retail sales divisions each account for one-third of revenue.

Last year Schweppe outfitted the kitchens at Lucent Technologies Inc.'s two new office

buildings in Lisle and Naperville. The company also has supplied 39 restaurants of Portillo Restaurant Group Inc., an Oak Brook-based company.

"I consider them almost like family," said founder and president Richard Portillo. "There's just a warmth dealing with them that you don't see in a lot of businesses."

Portillo began ordering equipment from August Schweppe in 1967, when Portillo opened his second hot dog stand. He has watched two generations of Schweppe boys grow up and take over the company. The latest restaurant to use Schweppe-supplied equipment is a new Portillo's on Route 34 and Ogden Avenue in Oswego that opened this month.

Jeff Schweppe said the company focuses on a 20-mile radius and has no immediate plans to expand into other markets. And while some of its competitors have broadened their product lines to include perishable food items, Schweppe is committed to providing equipment and supplies.

The company has made itself a specialist in kitchen design, seeking the best utilization of space, acoustics and traffic patterns.

"It's a tough economy right now," Schweppe said. "I think that customers recognize us as having a good knowledge of the food service industry. They can be assured that if they need something, we'll have it. There's still opportunities in giving good service."

In Schweppe's store at the Lombard headquarters, walk-in customers can find the same kitchen equipment available to the company's commercial clients.

James Howell of Fredericksburg, Va., who visited Schweppe during a recent trip to the Chicago area, said a sales clerk at a nearby Williams-Sonoma store referred him to Schweppe.

"It's a good store," Howell said. "I'm used to shopping out of catalogs. This is the first time I've been in a store this big that sells commercial products."

Jeff Schweppe said the most common retail purchases are disposable utensils—the same ones he and his brother used to count and sort by the

BUSSINESS PROFILE

Company: Schweppe Inc.

Founded: 1932

Location: Lombard

CEO: Jeff Schweppe

Revenue: \$16 million

Employee: 60

Philosophy: "We're committed to fair play and high ethical standards for our vendors and suppliers as well as our customers."



Marcelle Bright/Daily Herald

Jeff Schweppe is president of Schweppe Inc. in Lombard, a kitchen equipment supply business where his grandmother Emma, 93, and one of the founders, still works daily after 70 years.

hundreds when their father brought them to the office on Saturdays. And for the more ambitious home chefs, the Schweppe store sells wide wooden pizza paddles and heavy-duty refrigerators.

At 47, Jeff Schweppe said he has many years left at the head of the family business. His 15-year-old son, Brian, the oldest of the Schweppe great-grandchildren, seems to be the heir apparent, although Jeff said there has never been pressure on any of the children to run the company.

For the Schwepes, the feeling of family is more important. The average length of employment for the 60 employees is 15 years, a staying power Jeff names as one of the benefits of a family operation.

"We have a really good relationship with all our employees," he said. "The big thing is to know you have a family person you can trust working with you."