Davidson Baking Company (Sunbeam Bakery)

Coffee cake, donuts, butterhorns, cinnamon rolls, snack cakes, and, of course, bread. These were all products of the Davidson Baking Company, founded in 1914 by Eugene F. Davidson (1887-1968). In the early years, the company sold Liberty Bread, a mix of cornmeal, rice, rye, bran, whole wheat, and white flour for wartime wheatless Mondays. Mostly, the bakery sold Davidson's Ideal Bread—white and wheat, later known as Davidson's Sunbeam Bread.

Davidson's, one of the largest baking companies in the Northwest, was steeped in baking history. Davidson's father had married into the family of Linus W. Dexter (1813-1899), the East Coast baking legend who invented angel food cake. Abiatha Davidson and his four sons had started a Davidson's Baking Company in Seattle in the early 1900s. Eugene F. Davidson was Abiatha's son.

The company's first bakery was at Northeast 24th Street and Broadway in Portland. In 1918, Davidson built a brick bakery at Northeast 22nd Street and Irving, where the company offices would remain. The bakery included large tanks for ingredients, an 80-foot-long traveling oven, wrapping machines, and a subterranean tunnel that led to the shipping area. In 1948, Davidson expanded the business to Eugene, first purchasing the Korn Bakery and then building a 35,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility in 1951.

Davidson ran the company for just over fifty years. Through those years, the baking industry experienced sweeping changes, including the unionization of truckers and bakers, wage and price controls, and rising costs for ingredients. After World War II, Davidson joined the Quality Bakers of America Cooperative**,** which marketed Sunbeam Bread. Davidsons's Ideal Bread became Davidsons's Sunbeam Bread, marketed with Little Miss Sunbeam. The company even promoted the national Little Miss Sunbeam contest, in which young girls competed to represent the company locally. The association of Sunbeam Bread with Davidson's was so strong that some customers even referred to the company as the Sunbeam Bakery.

When the company celebrated its golden anniversary in 1964, it was baking 12.5 million loaves of bread a year for retail grocery stores, restaurants, and schools—about six or seven loaves per Oregonian. The company had about 360 employees, most of them in Portland and about 80 in Eugene, where Eugene D. Davidson, the founder's son, managed operations. The younger Davidson had begun working in the company in 1938 and had been managing the Eugene bakery since 1952. In 1965, he became general manager of the company.

In 1967, the bakery was sold to Hansen's Northwest Bakers, Inc., though the Davidson family retained ownership of the Portland bakery building. For many years, the bakery's main competitor had been the Portland-based Franz Family Bakery, inventor of the modern hamburger bun, but it was not competition with Franz that led the new owners to close the Davidson Baking Company in 1973. It was the growth of large chain bakeries, such as ITT-Continental and American Bakery, which undercut prices even as wheat costs were rising. Not even Little Miss Sunbeam could save them.

Written by Edwin Battistella

Further Reading:

"Bakery Builds $450,000 Plant." *Eugene Register-Guard*, February 24, 1952.

Foster, Laura O. *Portland City Walks: Twenty Explorations in and Around Town.* Portland: Timber Press, 2008.

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