

Business booming for Belgium ice men

Written by SARAH McCRAW
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From its roots in the family garage, Krier Refrigeration has grown into an operation that delivers 60,000 pounds of ice a day to customers in six counties

The coolest place in the Village of Belgium is Krier Refrigeration, which produces almost 40,000 pounds of ice every day during the summer. One of the leading ice production businesses in the area, Krier's machines are running almost non-stop.

August is one of the busiest months for brothers Mike and Jim Krier, second-generation owners of the business started by their parents in 1950.

The brothers and a seasonal crew work out of a 6,000-square-foot facility on Commerce Street that houses towering automatic ice machines, large freezers and refrigeration units in a variety of sizes.



The company distributes ice makers to 250 clients and packaged ice to approximately 180 stores in Ozaukee, Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Washington, Waukesha and Milwaukee counties.

Keeping up with the demand for ice during the summer means a constant cycle of production and distribution, Jim said.

"We come in and bag ice in the morning, then there's a little break and then in the afternoon we have to bag again," he said, comparing their schedules to that of a farmer.

"It's very seasonal. When the sun's shining farmers make hay and we make ice," he said.

Herb and Bea Krier started the business in the family's nine-car garage, where they serviced refrigeration units at area restaurants.

In 1967, they began providing ice makers for businesses to rent.

Jim and Mike joined the family business in the 1970s and started running it after their father died in the late 1980s.

It was a suggestion from a liquor store owner in Elkhart Lake in 1981 that led to the sales of bagged ice.

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The store owner had rented an ice machine and was bagging his own ice to sell during Road America races.

“He would hand bag it, and he knew the machine wouldn’t keep up (with sales),” Jim said.

Back at the company’s headquarters, ice was being discarded from machines being tested after repairs.

Seeing a customer in need of ice while they had plenty to distribute gave the brothers an idea.

“I said, ‘Why don’t we grab a couple of your bags and fill them at our shop and we’ll run them up here as quick as we can?’” Jim said, and a new venture was born.

Today, a large automatic ice machine freezes water in cylindrical tubes and dices the ice into individual pieces. The ice is tossed into a large storage container where it is kept before being loaded into bags.

Weekends yield the most work for the Kriers and about 10 employees who bag and distribute seven and 20-pound bags of ice, each emblazoned with the family name and its penguin logo.

Jim’s son Spencer, 26, has been working at the business since he was a teenager and took a few classes on refrigeration at Moraine Park Technical College.

Spencer helps bag ice and coordinates order deliveries to clients.

“I get everybody out on their routes on the weekends and the weekdays to make sure they know where they’re going,” he said.

Jim said, “Our drivers are actually our salesmen, which works great.”

It’s the direct contact salesmen have with clients that provides an extra level of service, he added.

“We’ve got a lot of new accounts because other companies were not serving people well,” he said.

Weather is a driving force behind sales, and so are the dozens of festivals held in area communities each weekend.

“I know people like to buy ice during those one or two-day events so we cater to a lot of small events that way,” he said.

Work doesn’t slow down much during the winter months, Jim said.

Crews keep busy by performing maintenance on refrigeration units and ice makers and

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creating a stockpile of bagged ice in a freezer that can hold 400,000 pounds.

Four trucks deliver 60,000 pounds of ice to clients on an average summer day.

“That stockpile diminishes pretty quick,” Jim said.

Large freezer chests are used to make more than 230 10-pound blocks of ice, a popular summer-time product, Spencer said.

“Fishermen like them a lot so we sell a lot of them at the harbor and to people who go camping because they stay together longer in a cooler,” he said.

Larger ice cubes designed for cocktails are sold as a specialty item a handful of stores in Ozaukee County.

While supplying different products in the ice market is helpful for business, Jim said, it's their experience and knowledge of refrigeration that keeps their business competitive.

“We do the refrigeration and we put out the packaged ice, so if there's a breakdown in equipment we can take care of it and not be dependent on another company to come out for repairs,” he said.

Image Information: THOUSANDS OF BAGS of ice are stored in a large freezer at Krier Refrigeration in Belgium. Jim Krier (front left) and his son Spencer held 20-pound bags bearing the family name. Employees (from left) Joe Weyker, John Schmidt, Joe Schmidt, Shannon Cain, Luke Kaat and Luke Wendorf help with the production of 40,000 pounds of ice each day.

Photo by Sam Arendt