

Bill McCreedy, master candy maker

Bill Agnew, president, general manager, Riddle Sweet Impressions Inc.

How about this for serendipity? Two men meet at a candy-making equipment auction in 1988 in Edmonton, Alta. One man is Bill Agnew, who, with his wife Wendy, have just moved their growing chocolate manufacturing business out of their basement and into an Edmonton plant. Agnew bought the vintage equipment because they were experimenting with candy making for their company, Riddle Sweet Impressions Inc. The other man is Bill McCreedy, a retired master candy maker. Shortly after, McCreedy shows up at Agnew's door. It turns out McCreedy, who retired in 1971, began working on that same equipment back in 1916. He knows the art and craft of making candy and offers to show the Agnews. McCreedy, who still works regularly at Riddles, will be 93 in September. Riddles manufactures 40 different products, including logo chocolates for hotels, restaurants, institutions and corporations, and a slew of old-fashioned hard candies. Here both men take a look back and forward at the confectionery industry.



(Left to right) Bill Agnew, Bill McCreedy, Gary Sherstan

market. We're a small operation, specializing in niche products, but we listen to our customers and produce products that fit into that marketplace."

McCreedy: "Cost really. When I first started, sugar was two cents per pound. Today it's a \$1 per kilogram. And chocolate! You used to be able to buy chocolate for 35 cents per pound, now it's \$7, \$8 or \$9 per kilogram. That was 77 years ago."

What about opportunities?
Agnew: "There's opportunity in specialized custom-made quality products – what we focus on. Our specialty is being able to do different things for different people. We still make all the traditional candy that Bill made 77 years ago: lollipops, chicken bones, humbugs, jelly slices, orchard fruit mix. People still want the quality, old-fashioned candy."
McCreedy: "Especially the old people."
Agnew: "We also do specialty candies for theme sites like Fort Edmonton Park. And for old-time candy stores in resort areas."

Q&A

What do you love most about your job?

McCreedy: "It's like working in an exercise factory. I don't need to go to the gym. Spinning, lifting and pulling candy – you're always using your shoulders and hands."

What is your management philosophy?

Agnew: "To produce top-quality products and provide excellent service to customers who support us."

What is the most challenging part of your job?

Agnew: "Controlling costs and co-ordinating supplies to make the operation work on a regular flow each day."

How would you describe your operational or management style?

Agnew: "It's hands-on. We teach the techniques and work directly with staff so they enjoy their work."

Where do you see the confectionery industry going?

Agnew: "It's a dying art as far as traditional handmade product goes. There aren't many small operations around anymore. The traditional handmade candy is becoming a lost art. But we still do the same thing each day as Bill did 30, 40, 50 years ago."
McCreedy: "In Western Canada anyway, there aren't many of us left. Not many who know the craft. And it takes you a few years to learn it."

What are the issues your sector is facing?

Agnew: "The increased costs of fuel, labour, ingredients and operations and still being competitive in a world

INTHESPOTLIGHT

MCCREEDY: First job: "A stalker for a linen mill (removing fibres off the outside of flax to be made into linen)." **Favourite food:** "Chocolate."

Mentor: "I don't know. I enjoyed the candy business, it was hard work, but good exercise – that's what kept me in good health."

AGNEW: First job: "Construction, heavy equipment operation."

Favourite food: "Candies, chocolate." **Mentor:** "Bill McCreedy. If I can live to be 92 and have the same disposition, work ethic and enjoy life as much as he does, life would be good."