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## Renfro Foods Celebrates '75 Hot & Spicy Years'



Doug, Becky, James, Jack (white shirt) and Bill Renfro in the company's warehouse.

by Terrie Ellerbee/associate editor

Doug Renfro likes to say that Renfro Foods has grown "from itty-bitty to really small in only 75 years." His grandparents, George and Arthurine, co-founded a packaged spices and pepper sauce business, George Renfro Food Co., in the garage of their North Texas home in 1940.

It has become almost cliché today, but it still is true that some of the most successful companies on the planet—Apple, Nike, Disney and Google among them—started in an American garage.

"We've got a picture of the garage right outside my office," Renfro, who is president of today's Renfro Foods, told *The Shelby Report*. "It is something that kind of keeps you grounded, when you look over and see the garage and the panel van that the whole family had to ride around in with no windows in the back. We don't have any Learjets, but it's a whole lot better than it was for them."

Renfro Foods is No. 10 out of 500 salsa brands available in the U.S. and is one of the nation's top five best-selling salsas distributed in the specialty food category. All told, there are 33 Mrs. Renfro's products distributed to grocery retailers in all 50 states. It has become a global brand as well, most recently expanding into Korea, and is sold in Canada, the Caribbean, the U.K., Spain and Australia—and beyond. Renfro's friends sometimes send him pictures of the product in stores when they travel. One friend sent him a picture from Morocco.

The company's products travel a long way from Texas, and when they are shipped overseas, Renfro Foods makes sure the people who get them know where they are made.

"It is a large part of the legacy," Renfro said. "On our labels for other countries, we put the word 'Texas' in a lot larger font than we do here, partly because the products cost more because we're shipping across the ocean. To help justify that, we like them to

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## C.H. Robinson's 25 Years in Mexico Helped Build Its Global Expertise

by Terrie Ellerbee/associate editor

C.H. Robinson is celebrating a quarter of a century of business operations in Mexico. The company established itself there because many of its customers wanted to sell to or buy from companies across the border. C.H. Robinson originally managed those requests from its U.S. locations.

"The opportunity grew to the point that it made more sense to establish a presence within principle markets in Mexico," Mike Burkhart, director of those operations, told *The Shelby Report*. "Monterrey was opened first in May of 1990, due to the heavy concentration of our customers, with the plan of opening the second location in Mexico City later that same year. As business and relationships continued to grow, we opened in Guadalajara and Queretaro to service the needs of our customers."

The border region presents the kinds of challenges that are inevitable when doing busi-



Mike Burkhart

ness in another country. Most are resolved through effective communication, Burkhart said. What makes that possible are the strong relationships and trust C.H. Robinson has built by taking the time to understand the needs of the customer and then delivering on those needs, he said. "By having a strong presence in both the U.S. and in Mexico, C.H. Robinson is able to develop relationships on both sides of the border and understand the needs of the Mexican and U.S. entities of our custom-



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### C.H. Robinson's 25 Years in Mexico Helped Build Its Global Shipping Expertise

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ers," Burkhart said. "This ability benefits operations, communication and the overall customer experience."

That is paramount when a host of individual companies and organizations are involved.

"There are many parties involved in the execution of one cross-border shipment: a shipper, a Mexican transportation company, a U.S. transportation company, a cross border drayage, a customs broker and a cross-border warehouse," Burkhart said. "Because of the multiple parties involved, the handoff between parties and communication can present a challenge for customers. Having a precise understanding of where exceptions do occur is critical to avoid delays in transit. We have the internal mechanisms to manage the transfer of responsibility among cross-border providers and effectively communicating shipment status and exceptions. This improves service and speed for our customers, thus providing value to their supply chain."

C.H. Robinson also helps shippers overcome these types of challenges by bundling multiple services into one comprehensive solution, he said. C.H. Robinson provides all the services required to execute a cross-border shipment and can adjust as its customers' needs vary.

"These unique opportunities allow us to challenge the status quo by providing a new solution or service," he said. "Listening to our customers and adjusting to their needs is a critical component in who C.H. Robinson is as an organization and the value we provide to our customers and carriers."

The company has expertise in global freight-forwarding, which means it can execute a shipment from almost anywhere in the world to almost any other country via ocean, air and customs services. Burkhart said this allows retailers to seamlessly enter new markets without disruptions to their supply chain.

Doing business in any foreign country requires knowledge from a cultural perspective. To gain that knowledge, C.H. Robinson leverages relationships with top talent-producing universities in Mexico.

"We seek Mexican employees not only to fill our most critical roles, but who can also strike a balance between local cultural considerations and leverage the experience and scale of our global network," Burkhart said. "Mexican universities produce high-quality, bilingual employees who are eager to make a difference and outperform in the marketplace."

All told, Burkhart said C.H. Robinson handles 400,000 annual shipments that either deliver to, pick up from or cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Electronic connectivity between C.H. Robinson, our suppliers and our customers is critical to create efficiencies and deliver accurate information to all parties," he said.

Burkhart believes demand for cross-border transportation services will grow.

"Continued foreign investment and near-shoring to Mexico will continue to create demand," he said. "We look forward to many more years of collaborating with our customers and deepening our value proposition in this growing region."

### Renfro Foods: Celebrating 75 Hot and Spicy Years

From page 1

know it's Texas salsa made by Texans in Texas."

Salsa is a staple in pantries across the globe today, but the Renfro family was making salsa before anyone called it that.

"I'm not sure that my granddad knew what salsa was, because that really became a term after he passed away in 1975," Renfro said. "At trade shows, people say, 'Are these all your grandmother's recipes?' And I say, 'no, but wouldn't that be cool?' She never ate at Chipotle. Nobody ate chipotle pepper in 1940, 50, 60, 70."

If they could somehow visit with their descendants today, some of the products might surprise Mr. and Mrs. George Renfro. The company's best seller is habanero salsa.

"When I got into R&D—inherited that—about 22 years ago, one of the first things I got to come out with was the black bean and habanero," Doug Renfro said. "And, of course, the family all has input as we sit around and fine tune, but somebody made the comment that 'it'll be cute to have that extra hot salsa, but we'll never sell much'."

It has been the best-selling product for about 15 years. He wouldn't say who made the "cute" comment. "It's a family business. If I name too many names, I might get disinherited or something," he joked.

The No. 2 best-selling Renfro Foods product is green salsa—a heritage item that Renfro said would be called salsa verde if it were developed today. It was a product created by the second generation, Doug Renfro's dad and uncle, Jack and Bill, respectively.

"Because it was developed in the 1970s, we actually used to call it green taco sauce, and now we've changed it to green salsa. That's as fancy as we got, and we sell a ton of it. A lot of green salsas are mild, and this one's very hot. It's jalapeno based, so it is a very unique verde sauce."

At No. 3 on the Renfro Foods hit list is ghost pepper salsa. And just because his family name is on the label doesn't mean Doug Renfro, who uses salsa as salad dressing, will eat every product.

"I don't eat the hottest things. They hurt," he said. "But I have friends who eat our ghost pepper salsa like it's ketchup, and I can barely get near it."

#### An iconic family business

Doug and his cousins, Becky and James, who are the children of Bill Renfro, run the company today. Doug and Becky were at a major trade show in New York earlier this summer. They were looking at their table when Doug Renfro made an observation.

"I said, 'You know, our grandmother is looking up at us, because she's on top of all the jars. You're doing your job and you've got your grandmother looking up



Co-founder George Renfro with sons, Jack and Bill. (Historical photos provided by Linda Renfro)



Arthurine Renfro with a portrait of her husband, George.

Athurine, never got to see her image on the jars or know the depth of passion consumers have for the company's products.

"She has no idea that her image has been spread around the country and the world tens of millions of times," Doug Renfro said.

His grandfather didn't get to see the company expand to the West Coast. Having the products available in California would have been considered "exotic" in his time, Renfro said.

Renfro Foods did begin making salsa before Arthurine passed away, but it was called taco sauce then.

When asked if the company will be around 75 years from now, Doug Renfro is compelled to say yes, and one of the reasons he thinks so is written in ink.

"There's a certain fanatic fan base. We're very active in social media, and we found this guy who has my grandmother's image from our packaging tattooed on his leg," he said. "I thought, 'surely it's a temporary tattoo,' and we reached out—no it's permanent. You know there's a certain level of notoriety and brand loyalty when somebody tattoos a grandmother on their leg."

There also is an "enjoyable, strange music video" about Mrs. Renfro's Habanero Salsa produced by three Canadians that was posted on the company's Facebook page.

"That's the first we knew about it," Doug Renfro said. "We had no idea who these people are. That sort of fanaticism makes me think in some way, shape or form...I won't be alive, but I do think we've created something that has a heritage that will outlive us and is bigger than any of us are."

#### An honest company

Arthurine and George set the company pace at "slow and conservative," Renfro said.

"We're not interested in doubling and tripling and leverage," he said. "We keep a low debt load."

The company doesn't have many contracts, either.

"We have at least two, maybe three, 30-plus-year customers on the side where we co-pack. We make product for them according to their specifications and there's no contract. It's a handshake. It's been 30-plus years, and we just do what we say we're going to do," he said.

The company also is Safe Quality Food (SQF) Level 2 certified, which is a very high standard and threshold of safety and quality.

"When I was a kid, I like to say that we squirted stuff in a bottle and prayed, and that was QA (quality assurance)," Renfro said.

It took a "good six-figure amount of money and about three years to get up to that quality level," he said.

Renfro's products have been recognized by the likes of *Woman's Day*, *Real Simple* and *Fitness* magazines.

Renfro Foods as a company has won too many awards to print, but among the most notable are the Texas Treasure Business Award, which has been given to just 129 businesses in the state, and ethics awards from Baylor University, Texas Christian University and the Better Business Bureau of Fort Worth and Tarrant County. It also has twice been a regional finalist for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Dream Big Small Business award.

Of that last honor, Renfro said, "We've not won the whole thing yet, but it's another thing you wish your grandparents could see, is when we're all sitting around in Washington, D.C., waiting to find out if we won small business of the year for the entire country. That was pretty cool."

The Mrs. Renfro