

A Fresh Look At Nebraska



By LuAnn Schindler

It's America's original snack food. Its roots can be traced to the Bat Cave, a primitive agriculture community in New Mexico, where rations of the food date back 5,600 years.

Now, it's deeply rooted in Nebraska's agriculture scene, and it's popping hot!

Nebraska leads the nation in popcorn production, harvesting 294.5 million pounds of shelled popcorn. Here, in the Cornhusker State, farmers grow 34 percent of the nation's popcorn crop, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, the latest available statistics.

In our region, two companies – one from Nebraska, the other from Iowa – make a dent in the state's popcorn production. Clearwater's Morrison Farms ships quality popcorn products worldwide to 50 countries. Jolly Time was the first corn that made the "guaranteed to pop" claim.

North Loup, proclaimed the "Popcorn Capital of the World," believes the popcorn industry is healthy for the area economy. Stop by local businesses and receive a free bag of freshly popped corn. The practice of doling out popcorn began in 1901, and since then, the tradition has become the community's trademark.

It may very well be the state's first adventure in agri-tourism. Who knew a little ingenuity, popcorn and oil would be a drawing card?

Popcorn is definitely healthy for the heart, as long as it isn't drenched in butter and salt. My youngest daughter, Courtney, would say that takes all the fun out of eating popcorn. She always wants popcorn for a snack, which I correlate to my cravings for popcorn and Hot Tamales during my pregnancy with her.

Now, I've never been involved in the production end of the snack food. I've only been the consumer, and I'm guessing I've devoured my fair share of the fluffy white kernels.

I'm not alone. The Popcorn Board estimates Americans eat 16 billion quarts of popcorn each year. That's 52 quarts per person.

Through the years, my family has kept popcorn farmers in business. Popcorn was an evening treat at my grandparents' house. Grandma would fill a kettle with oil and salt, toss in a single kernel, and as soon as it popped, she'd add the rest of the corn. She'd pour the snack into a yellow Pyrex bowl and pass it around. If all the grandchildren were home, she'd keep refilling it until we'd had enough.

We didn't eat popcorn at Grandma Larson's house very often, but when we did, it was definitely a treat. Grandma bought Jiffy Pop and my sister and I took turns moving the foil-covered pan across the stovetop. We were amazed how the foil cloud grew before our eyes!

My Aunt Deanna introduced me to the best popcorn in the world: her sugared popcorn. She'd pop a batch and fill a brown paper sack that we'd take to the Neligh Drive-In Theater. It was one of the perfect summer activities when I was growing up.

Popcorn may not be mentioned in the same breath as hot dogs or apple pie, but popcorn is undoubtedly an all-American and a Nebraska indulgence.

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