

Donation of the Month

Object: Harris Baking Co. souvenir
Catalog #: 1991.49.24
Donor: Museum Purchase



“Tender Crust Bread Speaks for Itself.” A bold statement, but in this case a true one, for this bun-sized, cotton-wool creation with its painted-on crust and raisin (or is it a currant?) has a surprise hidden inside — a squeaker mechanism. Most likely manufactured in the 1930s or 1940s as a salesman’s souvenir, the bun is a fun reminder of the days when the Harris Baking Company (HBC) was the largest employer in Rogers and the delicious aroma of fresh-baked bread filled the downtown streets.

Earl A. Harris (1896-1959) started the bakery in 1926, when he and his sister bought the Strom bakery at 107 West Walnut (where Shofner’s Office Supply is today). Back then getting the ingredients to the second-floor mixing room required a team of mules and a pulley. The business was a success from the start, even during the Great Depression, producing up to 250 loaves per day. Independent salesmen bought the bread wholesale for eight cents, then sold them to customers along their routes for a few pennies more. Roy Webster was one such entrepreneur, selling not only HBC bread but his wife’s pies, too. (Eventually the pair went on to found the House of Webster , selling jams, jellies, smoked meats, etc.)

By 1936 the bakery had outgrown its Walnut Street location, building a modern plant on the southeast corner of Second and Elm. As the *Rogers Daily News* proclaimed, “The new plant is striking in appearance, bold in its conception and strictly in keeping with the modern school of thought.” The Art Moderne-style building introduced many “firsts” to Rogers: the first office with air conditioning; the first casement windows; the first corner windows; and the first use of conveyor belts to move product around. With its two ovens the bakery could produce 1,200 loaves daily. As Earl Harris’ son Pat once explained, “It was one of the most modern bakeries in Mid-America at the time, and people came from all over to see it.” As a 1938 publication put it, HBC was:

. . . the home of the famous “Tender Crust,” H.B.C. and Harris Special Milk Bread. These products are made from the finest flour that money can buy, prepared with care and cleanliness and all secondary ingredients of the best quality as well. The firm also produces a full line of high grade cakes, pies, cookies,

rolls . . .

HBC sold their bread and other products to small groceries in the four-state region of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma and operated five routes out of a hub at Harrison, Arkansas. One early truck driver, Fred Boyer, remembered making his runs with one-third of his load strapped to his roof because he didn't have enough space in the van of his truck. Driving the unpaved rural roads around Harrison, Boyer sometimes had to shoo cows out of his path or keep his truck doors closed at certain delivery stops to keep the hogs out!

But Earl Harris had other interests besides the bakery. In 1935 he bought the bankrupt Lane Hotel at 121 West Poplar and renamed it the Harris Hotel. True to its motto of "Palace of the Ozarks," in 1939 he added the Orchard Room on the north side of the building. With its large round table and apple blossom-patterned china, the restaurant was one of Rogers' most popular eateries. Harris sold the hotel to Warren Felker and the Arkansas Hotel Company in 1948.

The bakery was only one example of Harris' efforts to bring jobs to the area. In the 1930s he was president of the Beaver Dam Association, a group which lobbied for flood control along the White River. Harris' work on the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission and the Rogers Industrial Development Corporation in the 1950s and 1960s helped bring Daisy Manufacturing Company and Wendt-Sonis to Rogers, introducing an industrial revolution to the growing town.

As modernization and industrialization came into its own in the 1950s and 1960s, the small, locally owned HBC lost ground against its big national competitors. Rather than go out of business, in 1966 the bakery was bought by Ozark Empire Distributors, a company comprised of independent retailers in the four-state area. Grocers such as Milgram's and the Independent Grocers Association (IGA) sought to create their own low-cost, in-store brands to compete against national brands. Operating in a sense as a non-profit company, HBC was able to lower the price of their products by cutting out the middlemen, eliminating the need for sales reps, and using their own fleet of trucks to transport bread to their grocery customers. In 1978 HBC used about 700,000 pounds of flour each month to make over a million loaves of bread, about 100 loaves a minute. By its 60th birthday in 1986, HBC employed 100 people in downtown Rogers and produced 15 miles of bread each day.

By the end of 1992 the smell of fresh-baked bread was gone from downtown Rogers. In order to meet increasing demands for its product and to operate an up-to-date facility, HBC moved to a new plant at 2301 South First Street, celebrating their transition in 1993 with a "bread slicing" rather than the more traditional ribbon cutting. By the early 1990s the company baked up to 75,000 units (such as a bag of hamburger buns) a day, impacting the local economy to the tune of \$250 million.

Unlike a lot of Rogers' old buildings, the structure at 114 West Elm wasn't demolished to make room for new, modern buildings or a parking lot, although the latter idea was considered. Long before HBC was scheduled to move out of downtown, the folks at Main Street Rogers began conducting studies and courting potential developers to return the old building to active use. Their good work paid off when Connolly, Carson and Haynes General Partnership Group and Hanes and Associates purchased the 34,000-square-foot facility, eventually renovating it into modern offices, shops, and restaurants while retaining the building's historic character. Thanks to the efforts of these preservationists, the corner window and Art Deco letters spelling "Harris" can still be found on the Elm Street side of the building.

CREDITS

"Harris Baking Company," in *A Message to the Homeseeker* (1938) in the Permanent Collection of the RHM [1975.426.2]; HBC ad and untitled article, *Rogers Daily News* (7-1-1950); "Heart Attack Kills Rogers Civic Leader Earl Harris," *Rogers Daily News* (10-3-1959); "HBC: Smell of Success for 60 Years," Dean Cheatham, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (5-25-1986); "Harris Baking Unusual in Terms of Ownership," Dean Cheatham, *Rogers Daily News* (9-5-1978); HBC ad, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (5-25-1986); "Harris Block to Be Renovated for Downtown Shops," Nancy Woodard, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (12-5-1992); "Harris Baking Marks Move With 'Bread Slicing,'" Patricia May, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (5-20-1993); "Renovation of Business Block Result of Careful Planning," Kyle Peterson, *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* (6-23-1995); "Baking Our Daily Bread," Jackie Holston, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (12-5-1992); and "Downtown Offers Variety of Architecture," Thomas Sissom, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (5-21-1997).