

## Omar Knedlik - ICEE

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

When the weather is hot outside, what is as refreshing as a cold, half-frozen, flavorful drink? Those are especially good when they are cold and icy. Today we'll learn about a company which was so excited about the potential of such drinks that they used the name ICEE. Now generations have enjoyed these tasty, refreshing drinks, but they may not know that the founder came from rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Omar Knedlik is the founder of what became the ICEE company. Here is his story. According to the Kansapedia website of the Kansas State Historical Society, Omar Knedlik was born in Barnes, Kansas in 1916 and grew up on a nearby farm. Barnes is located in Washington County southwest of Marysville.

Omar served in World War II and returned to Kansas. He used his military pay to purchase an ice cream shop. He tried various other business ventures such as hotels and in the late 1950s, bought a Dairy Queen franchise in Coffeyville.

According to legend, he didn't really have a working soda fountain in his store. Instead, when the weather got hot outside, he improvised by putting bottles of Coke in his freezer and selling them to customers super-cooled and halfway frozen. He noticed that his customers loved the icy drink. He started advertising it as the "coldest drink in town," and it was a big hit.

Omar Knedlik's innovative mind went to work. He wondered if he could devise a machine that could create and dispense a similar frozen carbonated beverage on demand. He tinkered with an old ice cream machine until he came up with a device that produced a slushy, icy drink.

Omar took his primitive machine to a company in Texas to refine and produce it. It took him five years to develop a machine which could produce drinks with the slushy consistency that he wanted. He received a patent for his machine in 1960.

Omar Knedlik debated what to name this product. A local artist and friend of his developed the idea of the name ICEE, complete with a logo including snow and icicles hanging on the letters.

The Texas company built and sold about 300 models of the ICEE machine. According to the ICEE Distributors website, the company was soon faced with "an avalanche of sales orders and an overwhelming volume of field service and customer service requests."

In 1965, the 7-Eleven company bought several ICEE machines and the company took off. The convenience store chain later changed the name of its product to Slurpee. If you have ever heard the sound of a car full of kids enjoying those drinks through straws, you can guess the reason why.

The products have proven immensely popular. Today, there are many variations of the product such as Italian ice and other semi-frozen concoctions in fruit or soda flavors. The ICEE company, now headquartered in California, estimates that 500 million ICEEs are sold each year. In other words, that is half a billion ICEEs – with a B as in, boy, that's a lot of cold drinks. ICEEs are sold coast-to-coast in the United States and in Canada, Mexico, China, and the Middle East.

ICEE employs about 850 employees in the U.S., Mexico and Canada and has more than 100 service centers across the nation.

There are 32 ICEE flavors but the most popular flavors are said to be cherry, blue raspberry, and cola. (Cherry is the best, based on a scientific survey of me and my kids.)

Omar Knedlik was witness to this explosion in the popularity of this product. He eventually moved his family to Joplin, Missouri where he passed away in 1989 at age 73.

Several generations of hot, thirsty families would be grateful for his innovation and creativity which produced this refreshing drink. It's quite an accomplishment for a farmboy from the rural community of Barnes, Kansas, population 148 people. Now, that's rural.

When the weather is hot outside, what is so refreshing as a flavorful, half-frozen drink? We commend Omar Knedlik for making a difference by creating this concoction – so cold that it is icy.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.