

Bringing History to Life

Clabber Girl Opens Its Doors to the Community

By Tom Schuman

The Hulman name is certainly well-known and respected in the city of Terre Haute. Yet, despite the many public signs of corporate and family commitment to the community, relatively few residents knew about Clabber Girl and its illustrious history.

All that has changed in recent years. Clabber Girl has adopted a culture that helps reveal a tremendous business success story. It has embraced the community and is serving as a catalyst for local progress and development.

Hulman & Co. has roots in Terre Haute in the grocery business that date back to 1850. Twenty-five years later, it expanded into baking powder – at the time made from a mixture of baked fireplace ash and sour milk called “clabber.” Herman Hulman developed and perfected a new baking powder formula, originally known as Clabber Brand and later changed to Clabber Girl.

Hulman purchased property at Ninth Street and Wabash Avenue in downtown Terre Haute in 1889. That property is still home to the company’s manufacturing and other business operations. A wholesale building opened three years later. The general merchandise and grocery business closed in 1995, but the company has diversified into other business areas, as well as adopting the role of community host and convener.

“Clabber Girl is still the No. 1 brand in the country,” notes Gary Morris, who came to the company six years ago and serves as president and chief operating officer. “Today, scratch baking (the hallmark of the company over the years) is considered adding two or more items to mix. We’ve added corn starch to our product line. We’re expanding our expertise to mixes and multi-purpose baking mix. We’ve moved into the industrial market – products for tortilla manufacturers. We’re in 34 foreign countries.”

Helping those in need

The company’s efforts to give back begin with its core business. It has been a national and international leader in developing a peanut-free facility (requiring extensive procedural changes at the plant and sending samples for independent testing) to protect children who are especially vulnerable to such allergies.

Clabber Girl sells dry cookie mixes for fund-raisers. One-quarter of the proceeds of every tub sold goes to the Riley Hospital Children’s Foundation – one-half for the children’s camp and the other half to the Camp Riley portion of the Wabash Valley Community Fund in order to provide financial resources into the future.

The biggest change, however, has been the welcoming of residents from Terre Haute and beyond. Marla DeHart, executive director of corporate operations and a 23-year member of the Clabber Girl team, explains.

“The only folks really invited here, or welcomed here, back in the day were those running the mom-and-pop stores (to make wholesale grocery purchases),” she relates. “Then, from 1995 to 1999, that part of the building sat empty and was rather desolate. Now, we welcome everybody with open arms. Gary’s vision was ‘let’s open this up and showcase the family’s history.’ ”

The philosophy relates back to the necessary business approach for a private company that often competes with large, publicly traded organizations.

Clabber Girl has been headquartered at the same location in downtown Terre Haute since 1889.





"We have to try and make it personal, connect to people," Morris contends. "When customers call here, Megan answers the phone. They're not going to be caught up in some complex voice mail system. When people buy one of our products maybe it's not a scratch product anymore, but we want it to be just as good as when Mom did it."

Sharing the story

While business is moving forward for Clabber Girl and others at a rapid pace, the history is too good to be left behind. That's what is on display for visitors through a country store, museum and bake shop that have all been incorporated into the company home over the past few years.

"Our goal is to be a destination, a reason for people to stop by Terre Haute," Morris offers. "That quality of life is what attracts people to the community. Downtown is in the process of changing, not just physical change – you can feel the difference."

Clabber Girl and other Indiana-based cooking items are featured in the store, as well as baking accessories, collectibles and other memorabilia. The bake shop has become a popular spot for food and drink, including the Rex brand coffee that was developed by the company in the 1800s.

The museum, however, is the premier drawing card that elicits the "wow" response from visitors, according to DeHart. Everything from a Victorian-era home parlor to business ledgers and telecommunications equipment developed and used by the company to stoves, generators and many other items is included.

There is a re-creation of the Pig & Whistle tavern that occupied the land before the Hulman purchase in the late 1800s, as well as a race car from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Clabber Girl's sister company. Tony Hulman Jr., who made Clabber Girl a national name through innovative marketing schemes, purchased the famed race track in 1945.

Minus the race car, Morris says everything on display has been used in the operation of the company at one time or another. "Very few companies as old as this have preserved their history in this way. While we have to move forward, we need to preserve that history for those who come along 100 years from now."

School groups and bus tours, including antique car clubs and others from a number of states, have come calling. "To see how things



Gary Morris shows some of the company's product labels in the onsite test kitchen, located not too far away from the popular country store.

The bake shop is another piece in the vision of Morris to showcase company history and attract people to the community.





A few of the many pieces of history in the Clabber Girl museum.

have evolved in the last 20 years is amazing,” DeHart states. “There’s a tremendous sense of pride I feel when I see the expressions on people’s faces. If people didn’t have a reason (in the past), they didn’t come here. Our goal now is to make sure everybody in the community is aware of what we have.”

Providing a home

The latest addition to the Clabber Girl lineup is the hiring of a chef to conduct cooking classes for area residents in the company’s onsite test kitchen. The chef also serves with the Indy Racing League, providing another connection with Clabber Girl’s sister company.

The outreach doesn’t stop there. Clabber Girl has provided the electrical resources needed to help turn a lot adjacent to its property into a community gathering place. An estimated 16,000 people attended a downtown street festival last year. DeHart helps coordinate the farmers’ market events that take place in the same location. An annual Brickyard BBQ occurs the week before the NASCAR race in Indianapolis.

For non-profits seeking meeting space, Clabber Girl has made its conference room available at no cost. This not only offers a valuable service to these groups, but introduces even more people to the company and its history.

“This has become a hub for downtown,” Morris says. “We want to see these events down here. I’m really sold on this community, and we want to be a part of it.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Clabber Girl at (812) 232-9446 or www.clabbergirl.com