



*(Left) Kness's product line has grown from the original home-made invention to a wide variety of products designed to ensure a pest-free environment.*

# Building a Better Mousetrap for the World

Two generations of Knesses have led this Albia-based manufacturing company on its journey from janitor's invention to worldwide markets in the world of capturing rodents.

STORY BY JIM POLLOCK, PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL GATES

You might assume that mousetrap makers found all of the world's mousetrap markets and divvied them up long ago, but the company that sprang from a high school janitor's invention is still adjusting. "We've doubled our international business almost every year for the past four or five years," says Kathy Kness Wauson, president of Kness Manufacturing.

Marketing manager Dwight Mater has been visiting Europe a couple of times a year, making stops at pest control industry shows in England, Germany, and the Netherlands, in addition to Kuwait. International sales now comprise 10 to 15 percent of the company's business, and the plan is to grow that number. "I'll probably be going overseas at least four times a year from now on," says Mater. He's working on accounts in Saudi Arabia and Africa and hoping to expand footholds in Australia and New Zealand.

Then there's the other necessity for doing business these days: the internet. Personally, Wauson could live just fine without it. You think email is the wave of the future? She thinks it's "an irritant." And Mater, who's 62 and not all that far from retirement, says, "I find computers mind-boggling."

But they realize that ignoring the cyberworld is not an option. Kness Manufacturing has had its own classy web site for a couple of years, and as 1999 drew to a close, the company was preparing to begin selling mousetraps on-line. "We do draw calls through our web site, but as far as increasing our business, it's been a very small impact," says a somewhat skeptical Wauson. But 2000 has arrived, it's time for the electronic storefront, and Wauson says, "I'm not averse to trying it. We'll just have to wait and see."

All of this doesn't put Kness in the same cutting-edge category as all of those dot.com startups in Silicon Valley, but it does show that even a conservative family operation has to hustle these days.

Kness Manufacturing got its start in 1924 when Austin "Brick" Kness decided that he'd had enough of the mice at Audubon High School. The 35-year-old janitor, raising six children alone after his wife died, whipped up a trap with an oil can, a tobacco can, a spring from a curtain rod, and the wooden base of a crate. The first night, according to family lore, his contraption lowered the Audubon High School mouse population by five.

He called it the "Ketch-All," and in a lifetime of inventing and tinkering, this would be the idea worth some real money. It didn't always seem that way, however. Kness formed the company in 1927. Then came a factory at Buena Vista College in Storm Lake. Then came the Great Depression in 1929, and it looked as if that was the end of his mouse-catching enterprise.

But he built a few more traps in 1938, and his three sons got financially and personally involved in 1942. More struggling years followed. An overnight success? This wasn't even an over-decade success. It took the government—OSHA, no less—to put the Kness family over the top. The Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration decided that it wasn't enough to trap

**W**hen Kuwait's Ministry of Public Health opens a batch of boxes that say "Kness Manufacturing" and distributes the contents to the citizenry, it's good news for the folks over there. Certainly better than another visit from Saddam Hussein. But it's also good news for about 50 workers in a spacious building at the south edge of Albia, Iowa.

Kuwait represents another new market for the new millennium. Another step on a journey begun 75 years ago. Another affirmation that no matter what high-tech marvels come along in a world of computers, satellites, and must-have cell phones, one thing never changes: The planet is crawling with mice and people want to get rid of them.



(Above top) Employees at the Kness plant package products for worldwide shipment. (Above) A worker checks plastic molds.

mice when they showed up in food processing plants. The little creatures had to be caught inside a box so their hair particles didn't get into the air.

The spotlight spun around and found Kness Manufacturing plugging away, making the same thing that Brick Kness had cobbled together in 1924: a box trap that worked.

Kness built a new production facility in 1975 and kept rolling from then on. Wauson added to the building in 1990, bringing the total to 50,000 square feet.

They closed out the millennium with a burst of progress. Again, the mousetrap business isn't quite as cut-and-dried as a person might think. Mice don't appear to change much, but the threats to their furry little lives evolve constantly. Five new products joined the Kness line in 1999: the "Tip-Trap" live capture mousetrap; two "Mini-Mouser" multiple-catch traps; an "Environmental Shield" to protect the Ketch-All from liquids; and, in a complete departure from the war on rodents, the "Ants No More" ant bait station.

Still, there's one more trend that a small business can't ignore. The business world seems bent on mergers and consolidation, turning every string of small operations into one megacorporation. What's the future for a modest-sized, third-generation mousetrap manufacturer?

Wauson, who was talked into running her grandfather's brainchild in 1986, is the only Kness involved day-to-day in the business. She and five relatives own the company; of those five, only one lives in Albia. Now and then, Kathy and



(Center) Kness products are tested before they leave the plant in Albia. (Above) The manufacturing facility covers 50,000 square feet.

her nearby cousin, Russell Kness, ask each other what comes next.

"One party is interested in buying the company and has kept in contact for the past five years, but the family has no interest in selling," Wauson says. She would love to see the family tradition carry on for another generation. Might happen, might not.

"I've told my son he should go out and experience the world and do what he wants to do. He can always come back to the business if he wants to," Wauson says. Then there are nieces and nephews who are "fully capable" of taking the reins. "But at this point, no, they haven't shown an interest."

Whoever runs the place, they may find it tougher and tougher to do. "The vendors want to deal with high-volume people, not the low end," Wauson says. Already, she has to commit to a year's worth of steel all at once rather than play the market as it unfolds.

"If the suppliers want to knock us little guys out, we're going to have to look at big guys gobbling us up."

Jim Pollack wrote about The Maytag Store in the October/November issue of the magazine.