

An Eggstraordinary Town

Mentone, Indiana, is for the birds. And that's just the way the residents of this tiny Kosciusko County town like it. For more than a century, this unassuming little burg about 40 miles south of Elkhart (population 900) has been one of the nation's leading producers of eggs.

And just in case a passing motorist might drive through town without stopping to appreciate this fine-feathered distinction, the citizens of Mentone have erected on Main Street a giant 3,000-pound egg with bold letters trumpeting, "Welcome to Mentone: The Eggbasket of the Midwest."

"For generations, everyone in this area raised chickens and, naturally, had eggs to sell," says Eileen Bowser, librarian and town historian. "Back in the 1880s, an interurban line ran through town. So all the farmers brought their crates of eggs to town to distribute by train around the state."

By the 1940s Mentone eggs were being shipped all over the country. Chicken farms around town grew in record numbers and helped make Indiana the second-leading egg producer in the United States. Folks at the Northern Indiana Coop Association were so proud of the hen-loving



Hard-boiled? Plants in Mentone can process 900,000 eggs a day, helping make Indiana the country's second-largest egg producer.

hamlet that they "shelled out" the funds to build Mentone's oval icon.

Today, Mentone is still a leading producer of eggs and egg products. Family-run operations, such as Midwest Poultry Services, are in their fifth-generation of business. Egg processing plants, such as Mentone Egg Products, boast many national clients, from large bakeries and salad dressing companies to premium ice cream makers.

"When we first started, we cracked and separated the eggs by hand," explains Steve Tucker of Mentone Egg Products. "At that time we only processed about two to three crates of eggs a

day. Now, we have an automated system that cleans, cracks, separates and cools the eggs. Today we can process more than 2,500 cases a day. That's roughly 900,000 eggs."

At a time when small towns and small-town industry are on the decline, Mentone is an unusual success story, partly due to townfolk who choose to see the sunny-side-up of the situation. "People from small towns tend to stick together," explains Mentone resident Orabelle Meredith. "We've had a lot of folks around here work hard for many, many years to make our little town a success, and we're real proud of that."

So proud, in fact, that each year the town throws its own little shindig, the Mentone Egg Festival, to crow about its accomplishments. "We look forward to the Mentone Egg Festival all year long," Bowser says. "It's *the* big entertainment event of the year."

Along with such standard festival fare as popcorn and cotton candy, the Mentone Egg Festival naturally features egg booths that serve the poultry product any way you like it. On the main stage in the heart of all this hubbub, plucky citizens dress up in giant chicken outfits and strut about, singing and dancing, says Meredith, a member of the Henhouse Five, one of the popular acts at the festival.

Some may think that the residents of Mentone are a bit hard-boiled, but these fun-loving folks don't really care. To them, 3,000-pound eggs and chicken dances are the natural outgrowth of a proud and successful heritage that lives on in a town that's all it's cracked up to be. ■

—Todd Gould

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