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Sac City rejoins battle of the bulging popcorn balls

BY MIKE KILEN • MKILEN@DMREG.COM • FEBRUARY 10, 2009

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A decade-long escalation in the war of gigantic popcorn balls continues in Sac City.

World media have shifted into high alert as leaders in the northwest Iowa town of 2,368 people announced it will fire the latest volley on Feb. 28, when citizens rally forces in an attempt to take back the Guinness World Records entry for largest popcorn ball.

In a steely battle of public relations, the Popcorn Factory of Lake Forest, Ill., won the title with its 3,423-pound popcorn ball in 2006. That topped Sac City's 3,100-pound monster that pulls stunned tourists off U.S. Highway 20, their cameras popping off flashes onto the man-made corn meteor.

ADVERTISEMENT A line has been drawn in the dirt of Iowa, where gigantic food is an honorable tradition, from a giant Cheeto (Algona) and huge Rice Krispies treat (Ames) to an enormous ice cream sandwich (Dubuque) and colossal Swedish tea ring (Stratford).

Sac City's Shirley Phillips started the corn clash in 1995, hatching a brilliant plan from her Sac County Economic and Tourist Development office. She called the Guinness offices and asked for the record of largest popcorn ball.

"What's a popcorn ball?" they asked.

In the county where popcorn plants popped up aplenty over the last century, Phillips saw great opportunity.

Citizens gathered with great enthusiasm, pushing and packing together 2,225 pounds into a ball. "They do stranger things," Phillips said.

Reporters and tourists flocked. Dan Martin, manager of the Noble Popcorn Farms, where it was housed, soon grew weary.

"I had to baby-sit the thing," he said.

Sac Citians, never short on solutions, gathered seven sticks of dynamite the next year and tried to blow it up, explosives second only to corn in rural Iowa tradition.

"It went poof," said Emilie VandeWeerd, 68, one of Sac City's most enthusiastic popcorn ball builders.

The ball gently broke into chunks.

An unlikely combatant entered the fray in 1997 — the Boy Scouts of America, who took the record in a blatant stunt for popcorn sales during a fundraising drive.

Years passed in defeat in Sac City. But by 2004, history was ready to be made again as the town celebrated its sesquicentennial. Forty-four volunteers toiled for seven hours and 13 minutes, punching together a 7-foot, 3,100-pound popcorn ball to be housed in a building on Main Street. The state Department of Transportation weighed it and the secretary of agriculture made sure it was edible, which is required.

VandeWeerd was exhausted and covered in syrup, but proud. She had moved from Des Moines years before as friends questioned Sac City's excitement. They had never built a gigantic popcorn ball.

To the victors go the spoils. Phillips said they gained \$1 million worth of publicity. Weddings were performed before its great mass. The ball led parades. Traveling bicyclists and motorcyclists saluted it with beverages.

The Illinois popcorn makers' assault on the record in 2006 is now set to be answered. Learning of the Iowans' plans, Mary Sweitzer, office coordinator at the Popcorn Factory in Lake Forest, cried out: "No way!"

The army of volunteers forms. A nervous Martin has scratched out a preliminary plan: 1,500 pounds of popcorn, 2,400 pounds of sugar, 1,100 pounds of dried corn syrup.

"I'm not sure if it's going to happen or not," he said.



SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

This photo from 2004 shows kids with Sac City's 3,100-pound popcorn ball — at the time, it was the largest in the world. The record was broken, but the northwest Iowa town's residents will try to reclaim the record on Feb. 28.



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--Volunteer Jane Norman uses rubber gloves to pack and form the large popcorn ball at Noble Popcorn Farms in Sac City Saturday, June 12, 2004. Their goal was to create a 3,000 pound popcorn ball. (Holly McQueen/The Register) milowaEyePopcorn3hm-CAPTION: While you were busy lazing away a late-spring Iowa weekend, 44 volunteers and five staffers from Noble Popcorn Farms of Sac City were setting a world record by building a 3,100-pound, 7-foot-tall popcorn ball. They worked in stages Saturday, filling buckets full of the snack, top right, and then carting it to the base of the titanic treat. Above right, volunteer Emilie Vande Weerd of Sac City shows that not all of the sticky popcorn reached its intended destination. At left, volunteer Jane Norman uses rubber gloves to pack on the kernels. Time of the task: seven hours, 13 minutes. The masterpiece bettered the old Guinness record for popcorn ball heft, a puny 2,377 pounds. In August 1997, a 1-ton Sac City popcorn ball was blown up at the Sac County Fair. This new giant gem will be housed in its own building near the city's museum complex, creating a tourist draw along U.S. Highway 20. RAN B & W

Sac City goes for the record

The assault on the record books for the world's largest popcorn ball begins at 8 a.m. Feb. 28 at Noble Popcorn in Sac City. Volunteers work in shifts. Food is available in addition to the sticky popcorn volunteers can pull from their shirts and pop in their mouths.

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Details remain troublesome. The ball is judged on weight, not size, so to fit in the building the ball might actually be a football. Time is also a factor, working with half the equipment because of Noble's popcorn plant expansion.

The hour grows near.

"Here we go again," VandeWeerd said.

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