

New Ice Age

No workers needed; machines make, store, dispense automatically

By: Jane Roberts

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Ice House America intends to be to the ice industry what ATMs are to banking.

If you can't picture it, spend a half hour watching ice move at 3866 Park or 4609 Elvis Presley, where Memphians Lowell and Laura Brister own the walk-up ice houses that not only turn out ice day and night, but their Twice the Ice machines also store it, dispense it -- in bags or bulk -- and accept cash too.



All with no employees.

"Really, every convenience store in town sells ice, but they can't sell it for what we're selling it for," said Lowell Brister.

Hence the name. For \$1.50, customers get a 16-pound bag or 20 pounds if they bring their own coolers -- easily half the price of ice at convenience stores, which often sells for 25 cents a pound.

"No. 1, we don't have employees. And we don't have to haul in anything and put it into storage containers," Brister said. "Our machine makes it right there. And our delivery system is a bag."

The Bristers double-filter the water "to make it taste better." It must also pass health department inspections.

"We have a score of 100 right now," Brister said.

"We spray the equipment with an antibacterial spray that restaurants use. We do that at least once a week and more if we're real busy."

Ice House America LLC started production in 2004 in Moultrie, Ga., turning out its patented 200-square-foot vending machines, which include a chute for dispensing and its trademark blue awning.

"Our growth has been tremendous," said Jennifer Foran, vice president of dealer development. "In the beginning, I was excited to get two orders a week. Now, we're getting 10-20 orders a week."

Machines sales in 2004 nearly doubled to \$11 million in 2005.

"If you place your order today, it's going to be two months out before you can get it," she said. "We're building on average one machine a day."

Each can make 70 pounds of ice every eight minutes, or 6,500 pounds a day.

Over the Fourth of July weekend, Brister doubts it will be enough, even at the Park location, which turns out 13,000 pounds a day and made \$50,000 in first-year sales last year.

The Elvis Presley store, opened since October, has made \$30,000, and is currently his No. 1 store.

"We have all kinds of businesses that use us because their ice makers can't keep up," Brister said. "A lot of caterers come through, plus restaurants and bars.

"Some of our biggest customers are construction workers, who come in to fill up their big orange coolers." Because the ice is made by machine, it never touches human hands, eliminating a vast source of contamination.

Ice House also mandates strict cleaning procedures including a boiling process in the event that the municipal water supply is contaminated.

Dealerships are sold based on population. While Foran would not comment on territory prices in Tennessee because there are none left, a territory with 2 million people would cost about \$85,000, excluding the price of the ice machines.

"Each dealer must own a certain number and sell a certain number of units over the term of the contract," Foran said.

The states of Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, Arkansas and Kentucky are also sold out.

While contracts vary depending on population, a territory with a million people -- about the size of Memphis -- requires the dealer sell 60 houses over four years, she said.

"Selling the houses has not been an issue. When we get calls from people who want to invest, we direct them to the dealers in those states," Foran said.

Shelby County is divided into two sales territories. The Bristers own the north half and intend to expand in Bartlett, Frayser and Raleigh.

They plan to open store No. 3 -- at 611 N. Highland -- before July 4.

A partnership of three -- Ken Cope, Scott Adams and Jerry Martin -- owns the south half of the county, including the first outlet at 5899 Knight Arnold and another to open this week at 7977 Lowrance.

"This is going to be the new way you are going to get your ice," Foran said.

"I love this ice. It just tastes better than the rest," she said, crunching on a chip as she quickly filled an empty coffee mug from the bag her boyfriend brought to the car window.

"We come here twice a week," said Rodney Harmon. "She eats ice."