Jean Manchester Biddick

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Jean Manchester Biddick’s career in the meat industry is remarkable for its many firsts. She was the first woman in the country to own and run a wholesale meat plant, taking over ownership of Neesvig’s after her husband, Ted Neesvig, died in 1965. The Madison, Wis.-based company was among the first in the country to eliminate hanging rails for handling carcass beef, buying less wasteful boxed beef instead.

Biddick was also the first woman elected to the board of the National Association of Meat Purveyors, and served on its board from 1976 until 1988, when she sold Neesvig’s.

After working as an Extension home agent in Grant County, Wis., Biddick joined the National Livestock and Meat Board in Chicago in 1950, where she tested meat recipes, developed cookbooks, and taught week-long cooking classes in cities across the country. Twenty-eight years after being an employee of the Meat Board, she was appointed to serve as one of its directors, from 1978 to 1988, contributing to leadership of the Beef Industry Council, Pork Industry Group, and the Nutrition, Advertising and Research committees.

Biddick, a 1948 University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate, credits her success and the success of Neesvig’s to “an excellent workforce that received continuous education in the meat industry.”

Under Biddick’s leadership, Neesvig’s prospered by embracing new marketing practices and by increasing the efficiency of its workforce. The company was among the first to buy boxed beef, which reduced the amount of byproducts and waste associated with hanging beef. It also specialized in the new portion-controlled cuts concept for the hotel, restaurant, and institutional markets.

“Important to the philosophy of the company was helping customers realize the benefit of purchasing not by the pound, but rather by the portion, plate-ready servings,” says Biddick. Customers would no longer need trained meat cutters, saving both time and money.

Neesvig’s opened a new east-side plant in 1973 to accommodate the company’s substantial growth. The new plant included a consumer center designed to teach the general public how to buy the new portion cuts and understand meat grades. Biddick also helped develop a gift box business and an extensive meat export trade at Neesvig’s. The company distributes its products nationally and internationally.

“By the time I sold the company in 1988,” Biddick says, “the business had grown to 50 full-time employees and over 100 part-time employees during the gift box season.”

Biddick lives in Middleton with her husband, Roger. She has six children, Jon, Tim, Dan, Ann, Reed and Ellen.