

STEENSTRA'S™ St. Nicholas Cookies

By *Mary Toshach*

On June 27, 1920, baker Tjalling (Charles) Steenstra; his wife, Guetje (Grace); and their eight children arrived in New York. Originating from Oppenhuizen, Friesland, Netherlands, their final destination was Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Among their possessions was the family recipe for *Speculaas*, a Dutch spiced cookie traditionally molded and served on December 6—St. Nicholas Day. That led to the creation of Steenstra's cookies, also known as windmill cookies, that have been made in Michigan since the 1940s.

Grand Rapids city directories provide a cursory chronology of the early years and development of the Steenstra Cookie Company. Charles Steenstra started Steenstra and Son grocers in the 1930s. In 1945,

Steenstra Bakery “Bakers of Quality Goods” appears, but listings are muddled until 1950, when once again Steenstra Bakery—Retail Bakery is listed, located at 1107 Leonard NW.

Interestingly, a second bakery, operated by cousins of the Steenstras, opened around that time. Founded as the Royal Dutch Cookie Company, it is now known as the Royal Dutch Bakery.

The Steenstra Bakery was soon renamed the Steenstra Pastry Shop, a retail bakery, and at some point in the 1970s or 1980s, it became the Steenstra Cookie Company.

After the Steenstra's factory based in Wyoming, Michigan, burned down in 1988, the family rebuilt it in Hudsonville. The original cookie press, which survived the fire, was

transported to the new bakery. Rebuilding took a toll on the company and led to a lack of operating capital, which prevented Steenstra's from fulfilling orders for its cookies. A food distributor, Harold Voorhees, purchased the company in 1994 and continues to produce the legendary cookies using the original recipe and cookie press.

Steenstra's cookies are related to a version of the *Sinterklaas* legend, on which St. Nicholas Day is based. The legend tells that *Sinterklaas*, or St. Nicholas, lived by the sea in a windmill. Early in the morning on December 5, a rooster woke him so he could prepare to visit children. All day, *Sinterklaas* rode his horse from orphanage to orphanage to give cookies to all the girls and boys. After a long day that went well into the evening, an owl sang him to sleep. In light of the legend, Steenstra's cookies are molded into windmills, roosters, images of *Sinterklaas* on a horse, boys and girls, and owls. 🦉

Mary Toshach is a native Michigander with a master's degree in historic preservation.

(Photo courtesy of Amy Wagenaar.)



Scenes of the Steenstra's bakery in the 1940s.
(Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids Public Library.)