

# Top 100 PRIVATE COMPANIES

JULY 31, 2006

## #1 Ben E. Keith Co.

### Celebrating 100 years of excellence

BY ROBERT FRANCIS  
Fort Worth Business Press

Few companies – let alone companies celebrating 100 years – can boast of the success, good fortune and prosperity of Ben E. Keith Co., Tarrant County's top private company.

With \$1.82 billion in 2005 sales, it is the ninth-largest food service distributor in the country and the nation's largest Anheuser-Busch distributor. Ben E. Keith provides products and services to restaurants, grocery stores, convenience stores, bars and institutions throughout the region. As it passes its centenary milestone, the company hardly seems to be resting on its laurels. Last year, for example, the company acquired F&E Food Service of Wichita, Kan., to gain better access to the Kansas market.

"As a company, we have continued to develop a core business foundation for future growth," said Robert Hallam, 65, CEO of Ben E. Keith Co. "We will continue to serve our communities while valuing our tradition of excellence so that we can build on 100 years in existence."

The company was founded in Fort Worth in 1906 by Benjamin Ellington Keith and others as the Harkrider-Keith-Cooke Co. The name was officially changed to the Ben E. Keith Co. in 1931. Starting as a local fresh-produce distributor, the enterprise has grown over the years, establishing a food division to provide a broad assortment of foods from global producers to customers throughout its operating area. In addition to produce, the company now sells fresh and



Kevin Bartholomew, president of Ben E. Keith Beers

frozen meat, frozen foods, dry and refrigerated items, and restaurant equipment and supplies.

Its food division, Ben E. Keith Foods, is the nation's ninth-largest broadline food service distributor. The company is headquartered in Fort Worth and employs more than 2,200 people. The food service operation serves customers in 10 states through its distribution centers in Albuquerque, Amarillo, Dallas-Fort Worth, Little Rock, Oklahoma City and San Antonio.

For Hallam, who started working at the company while he was in high school, the business is a family affair. His brother, Howard Hallam, 63, is president and chief operating officer, and his father, Gaston

Hallam, began working for the company in the early 1920s, becoming president in 1962. Gaston Hallam died in 1990.

"His father, my grandfather, died when he was 16 and he needed a job to support the family and he began working here, eventually becoming president," said Hallam.

Ben E. Keith's beer division was formed after the repeal of prohibition. Hallam said when the beer division aligned with Anheuser-Busch, it was almost a fluke.

"When prohibition hit, the beer manufacturers like Anheuser-Busch had to shift their production line to other products, like ice-cream malts and syrups, so Mr. Keith signed a deal to do that. Then, after prohibition ended, he began distributing their beer.

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There were hundreds, if not thousands, of other beer makers out there and he happened to be with one that was one of the most successful," said Hallam.

Anheuser-Busch manufactures and distributes popular beers such as Budweiser, Bud Light, Michelob, Redhook, Kirin and Negra Modelo. Since starting the beer division, it has expanded distribution of Anheuser-Busch products throughout 60 counties in North Texas with eight distribution warehouses employing 960 people. Ben E. Keith Beers services over 9,000 retailers in North Texas and sells 36 million cases of product annually through eight distribution centers located in Abilene, Commerce, Dallas, Denton, Fort Worth, Llano, Palestine and Waco.

"We are especially grateful to all of our employees and retailers, both past and present, for allowing us to reach this tremendous milestone," said Kevin Bartholomew, president of Ben E. Keith Beers.

According to Hallam, the business has remained very much as it was when he started doing odd jobs at the company at age 12.

"The business is basically the same. We have more SKUs [number of products] now than we did then. We probably had several hundred when I started, but now we have over 20,000," he said. "Of course, computerization has helped us keep up with all those products and that's been a big change, as well."

The beer business has changed too, said Hallam.

"When we started, we probably only carried about 10 brands," he said. "Now we carry over 100, with the different types of brands made by Anheuser-Busch, as well as different brands they distribute."

The company also has made a name for itself supporting a variety of community events. Gaston Hallam got the company involved in several community organizations, including the Salesmanship Club of Dallas, Goodwill Industries, Greater Dallas Crime Commission, Dallas Chamber of Commerce, United Way, Dallas Opera, Dallas Symphony and the Dallas Summer Musicals.

The company also has helped sponsor other events, such as the Willie Nelson Fourth of July Picnic that has taken up residence at the Fort Worth Stockyards as an annual event.



*Mike Roche, right, oversees the work of Julio Rodriguez at the Ben E. Keith warehouse.*

## Ben E. Keith Co.

601 E. 7th St.

Fort Worth, 76102

Phone: 817-877-5700

Web: [www.benekeith.com](http://www.benekeith.com)

Product/service: Food service distributor

No. of local employees: 1,265

Top executive: Robert G. Hallam III

Year founded: 1959

2005 sales: \$1,822,000,000

company's success, says Hallam, has been its employees.

"We couldn't have been around this long and been this successful without their support," he said.

The company is known for supporting its

"If we find an event that we think will benefit the community and we can help support it, we will," said Hallam. "Part of our philosophy is to give something back to the communities in which we serve."

Part of the reason for the

employees as well. The company began offering pension and profit-sharing plans in 1943, making it one of the first companies in the country to adopt the employee-friendly options.

"More than just a birthday, this first 100 years has given us an incredible foundation on which to grow our business and service our customers to the highest degree possible," said Mike Roach, president of Ben E. Keith Foods. "With our record growth over the past several years, we have shown that we can become a large and successful company by sticking close to our values and our customers."

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