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MAIN STREET

## Building a brand on chicken salad

[By Kelly L. Anderson](#)

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It started out as chicken scratch, literally. Now, more than 57 years later, Attleboro-based Willow Tree Poultry Farm has expanded its operation area, thus allowing it to grow its customer base – moving for the first time through the New England states and into metro New York.

“Our facility can handle about 40 percent more capacity now, so we couldn’t really seek out any new customers until we were able to find that capacity,” said Walter Cekala, president of Willow Tree. “So that’s really what we’ve gone through these last three years, getting to this place where now we can pitch bigger markets like Costco and Sam’s Club and go after some more club stores for business.”



PBN PHOTO/FRANK MULLIN

HOME TO ROOST: Walter Cekala, president of Willow Tree Poultry Farm, in the company's Attleboro manufacturing plant. The business started as a poultry-raising farm and has been in the Cekala family since 1954.

The farm put a new warehouse facility on the site that was completed three years ago and just last year finished corporate-office renovations as well, Cekala said.

Those changes mean the one-time mom-and-pop egg provider can distribute its products further south. They also mean more products can be produced with longer shelf life, Cekala said.

The farm started as a poultry-raising farm, selling eggs and chicken to neighbors. Then Cekala’s father bought the farm in 1954 after working there.

The farm raised poultry until the early 1960s when getting feed into the area became an issue, Cekala said. So the company decided to enter into the end-processing side of the business, where they brought the chickens in already slaughtered and Willow Tree did things such as deboning and cooking the chickens and eventually making them into chicken pies, chicken salad and other poultry-line items.

Then came frozen chicken cacciatore and chicken croquettes.

“We started wholesaling the chicken pies, and [they] were really our only product we produced until about 1986,” Cekala said. “We always had a retail store attached to the plant, and we sold chicken salad.”

But it wasn't until RoJacks Supermarkets requested the chicken salad be sold in their stores that the company decided to make it a wholesale product, he said.

“We started selling at RoJacks, then other markets picked it up and within about eight years, we were in about 300 different markets,” Cekala said.

And now, with the chicken salad sold throughout New England, Willow Tree will have their frozen chicken and turkey pies in the New York area in 2012, he said.

To date, Willow Tree Poultry Farm products are distributed in close to 2,000 markets, Cekala said.

New product lines include buffalo-chicken dip, which was distributed this past summer, he said. The dip is the buffalo-wing concept turned into a dip for tortilla chips, crackers and sometimes even as a sandwich spread, Cekala said. It can be eaten hot or cold, although Cekala recommends eating it hot.

And just last month, Willow Tree distributed a new turkey and chicken gravy line.

“We've always made gravy on the premises, but we just invested in a packaging line that hot packs the gravy to give us a longer shelf life,” Cekala said, “again, without adding preservatives or things like that. That's always our main thrust, to create a clean product with a very simple ingredient legend.”

The chicken salad has a 14-day shelf life, which makes it a little difficult to get too far outside of the Northeast region. But that's an ongoing process, figuring out how to get the chicken salad out to a broader customer base.

“We've actually, through just really good manufacturing practices over the years, been able to put out a no-preservative salad that has a 14-day shelf life. So we're pretty proud of that, but still 14 days isn't 28 days, which is what supermarkets would love to have on salad items, Cekala said.

But the company refuses to hurt the taste or the quality of the product just to give it a longer shelf life, he said.

“We want the product to always taste as good as it does today,” Cekala said.

The gravy became available in the major markets Willow Tree supplies in early November in time for the holiday season.

“We’re not certain if they’re going to hang onto it all year or they’re just going to carry it as a seasonal, Thanksgiving Day-type item,” Cekala said. “We moved thousands of gallons of gravy and we just literally launched it in November. ... It’s good when the plan works.”

Cekala said the company is constantly looking at new markets and new products. He tastes poultry samples three times a day and never tires of it.

“We sample the first run off the machinery, and then middle run and then last run, so I’m eating chicken every day,” he said. •

## **COMPANY PROFILE**

### **WILLOW TREE**

### **POULTRY FARM**

**OWNERS:** Walter Cekala, president of the stockholder-held company

**TYPE OF BUSINESS:** Manufacturer of poultry products

**LOCATION:** 997 South Main St., Attleboro

**EMPLOYEES:** 80

**YEAR ESTABLISHED:** 1954

**ANNUAL SALES:** \$14 million