

HERE FOOD PROCESSORS CAN FIND BOUNTIFUL GROWTH



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

THIS BUD'S FOR YOU



Around Rocky Mount, Dena Manning is known as The Candy Lady. Thanks to her, an iconic North Carolina candy company is back in business, and a new generation of candy lovers is discovering the distinctive taste of its handcrafted hard candy treats.

Four years ago, Manning rescued the Butterfields Traditional Candy Company from bankruptcy, where the previous owner abandoned it in 2009. She risked just about everything she had - savings from her career with the Durham County court system, a modest inheritance from her grandmother and a small investment from her former father-in-law.

What she got were four big copper kettles, a few vintage stainless steel tables and cooling trays and some creaky conveyor belts and packaging equipment- all gathering dust in a bright blue metal building off a country road in western Nash County. With them came the company's most valuable assets - the secret recipes first formulated in the 1920s and exclusive rights to make the whole family of Butterfields Buds, featuring the Peach Bud, the Bud that made that family famous.

Her friends thought she'd gone mad. But she knew something they didn't. She knew Butterfields Buds had been beloved by four generations of kids in the Carolinas. She knew they'd once been a staple of small-town adolescence, as much a part of growing up as baseball cards and Barbie Dolls. She also knew that as recently as the late 1990s, Butterfields had topped \$3 million in sales. With the unshakable faith of a natural-born entrepreneur, she knew she could take it there again.

The history of Butterfields Buds is tangled and twisted and some even say a little bit cursed. The first batch of Buds came out of the copper kettles in the back room of a Winston-Salem candy store in 1924. The first

Peach Bud was born eight years later. The creators began by selling to their own customers and eventually turned it into a business they called the Cain Candy Company. In the late 1970s, descendants of the founders sold to Charles Doak - son of the coach for whom the N.C. State baseball stadium is named - who changed the name to The Wilson Candy Company and moved it to a downtown Rocky Mount storefront.

The Peach Bud's popularity spread across the Carolinas, mostly by word of mouth. Then in 1987, it all turned sour. Late one afternoon, Mr. Doak was behind the counter when a young white drug addict came into the store, picked up a nine-pound candy cane and hammered him to death. A ghoulish mix of skull and brain and shards of candy cane splattered the floor behind the counter. The killer is still in prison, halfway through a 70-year sentence.

The next owner was a Raleigh couple Manning knew socially. They stuck to the original recipes and manufacturing processes, but changed nearly everything else, including the company name. They brightened the packaging, added new flavors, courted distributors at candy conventions, began selling on the internet. By the late 1990s, they were the toast of the candy world. Soon after that, they were just toast. A bitter divorce left the company in the hands of the husband, and within three years the Butterfields story had come to the 11th and what seemed like the final chapter.

That's when Manning stepped in. "I come from a long line of entrepreneurs and risk-takers," she said. "My grandfather went to Costa Rica in the 1920s to work the silver mines. He learned to fly and made headlines in 1931 with a solo flight from Los Angeles to San Jose, Costa Rica. They called him the 'Charles Lindbergh of South America'."

"He convinced some investors to back him in starting several airlines in South America," she said. "My father followed in his footsteps. He learned how to fly at a young age and once served as Madame Chang Kai-shek's personal pilot after they were expelled from China. He eventually settled in Honduras and started the first airline in that country."

Manning grew up in Honduras but came to the U.S. in the late 1980s to enroll at NC State. There she met and married an engineering student named Rocky Manning and had three kids. After her marriage ended, she began looking for opportunities to own her own business. By now, Butterfields was in bankruptcy and Manning decided it was her destiny to bring it back to life.

The bank didn't share her optimism. "I kept after them for at least three years, and I think they got really annoyed with me," she said. "Eventually they just gave up and wrote the whole thing off, and I was finally able to take over."

It took another year to get the plant cleaned up and the machinery repaired and running. Some of the machinery was so old she had to hire a machinist to fabricate parts to get it running. Manning says she couldn't have done it without her ex-husband, a principal of a Raleigh engineering company, and oldest son Joseph, at the time a graduate engineering student at NC State.

Today she and her seven employees - including her youngest son Harry- produce about 1200 pounds of Buds per day. They do it the old-fashioned way, exactly as it was done in 1924. They still use pure cane sugar and all-natural fruit essences, and they still do most of the production by hand. In an age when many food products are never touched by human hands, Butterfields Traditional Candy Company is a welcome throwback. Thanks to Dena Manning, the Peach Bud is reborn and a treasured North Carolina tradition is once more a budding success.



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP