

# Raleigh woman revives NC company that made Peach Buds hard candy

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Dec. 08--Some people probably thought Dena Manning was out of her mind.

Almost two years ago, she bought a Nashville, N.C., candy company in foreclosure.

Manning, 52, of Raleigh, had no business experience, let alone any in the food industry. She had spent her adulthood as a stay-at-home mom, raising two sons and a daughter, stitching school uniforms, coaching her sons' baseball team and teaching youth religion classes at St. Francis of Assisi Church in North Raleigh.

But Manning had known the candy company's previous owners and loved the product -- an old-fashioned hard candy with a coconut stripe down the center. Manning was certain that bringing back this confection, which had been off the market since 2009, was too valuable an opportunity to pass up.

"I knew the product was so good," she explained. "I knew it had a following."

Manning was right. Local retailers are delighted to see Butterfields candy return to their shelves.

Elizabeth Mills has owned Gingham Posh, a North Raleigh gift basket company since 2006. Butterfields' top-selling Peach Buds were a staple in her gift baskets featuring North Carolina products. ("It tastes like you're eating a peach," Mills said.) She was disappointed when she called to place an order about four years ago and found the phone number disconnected. Then, last year, someone wandered into her store off Glenwood Avenue with Butterfields samples and brochures.

Mills' reaction: "Oh, my gosh, you're back!"

In addition to Peach Buds, Butterfields also makes key lime, lemon, honeybell orange and holiday buds. The candy squares are slightly smaller than a Scrabble tile, with irregular edges. Once in your mouth, they burst with the flavor of sweet peach, sour lime or tart lemon.

Manning has to cultivate new fans to hard candy, while making sure old fans know the candy has returned to store shelves. At this year's N.C. State Fair, she had to cajole young children to taste her treats, explaining they're "like a sucker," when she proffered samples. They didn't know what hard candy was, she said. For older folks, Butterfields candy is like running into an old friend; customers are so excited to discover that a taste from their past is still available.

"It's so nostalgic," she said.

Last week, Sidney Gibson, 73, of Lillington, drove 100 miles round-trip to taste a Peach Bud again.

"It's been years since I had any," Gibson said. When a cousin mentioned the hard candy recently, Gibson went online to try to find a source for them and discovered Butterfields. He told his wife: "We're going over there to get us some." The couple came home with a pound for themselves and four small boxes to give as holiday gifts.

Butterfields Candy company has a deep, meandering and even tragic history in North Carolina. Manning thinks it began as Cane Candy Co. in Winston-Salem in 1924.

By the late 1970s, it had become the Wilson Candy Co., owned by Charles Doak, whose father was the former N.C. State baseball coach for whom the university's baseball stadium is named. The company was known for its hard candy and its old-fashioned peanut squares. In the late 1980s, Doak was working the counter at his downtown Rocky Mount candy store when an intruder robbed him and beat him to death with a candy cane the size of a baseball bat. The killer was convicted and is serving a 70-year prison sentence.

The company was sold eventually and came to be owned by a couple Manning knew socially, Tracey and James Brooks West III of Raleigh. Making as many as 20 flavors of buds, Butterfields developed a nationwide reputation and clientele, Manning said. Then, the couple divorced and James Brooks West took over the business. By 2010, he defaulted on \$450,000 worth of loans to BB and the bank sold the foreclosed business the next year, according to court records.

That's when Manning took over. She admits she surprised even herself when she bought the company, based about 45 miles northeast of Raleigh. She comes from a family of entrepreneurial risk-takers. At 21, her grandfather made newspaper headlines in 1931 for a daring 3,500-mile flight from Los Angeles to San Jose, Costa Rica. He went on to start several South American airlines, and her father started the first domestic airline in Honduras.

In the late 1990s, Manning's father encouraged her to go into business importing art from Central America. She incorporated and scouted locations for a retail store, but the venture took a back seat to child-rearing and never got off the ground. Now, her children are grown and she has embraced her new undertaking.

"I really didn't know I had it in me, but I have an extremely hard work ethic," she said. "I always wanted to have my own business."

Manning has a lot of help from family, including her ex-husband, Charles "Rocky" Manning, with whom she enjoys a cordial relationship. Rocky Manning, an engineer, and their older son, Joseph, a graduate engineering student, refurbished the battle-worn candy-making equipment and fix it when it breaks down, as it often does. The equipment is so old that the manufacturers no longer make or sell parts for it, which means they have to find other solutions, like having replacement parts fabricated by metal shops.

Manning's younger son, Harry, 23, also works at Butterfields, doing everything from making candy to packaging it and selling it at holiday shows. He has watched his mother grow into a successful business owner.

"I don't think she knew what she was getting into when she started," he said. "But she's learning and persevering."

About her family, Dena Manning said, "There's no way I could have been able to do this without them."

Since last year, Manning's seven-employee company has sold \$200,000 worth of candy. She is making progress with many local and national retailers. Chapel Hill's Southern Season includes the Peach and Lemon buds in several of its gift baskets. The Umstead Hotel in Cary does the same in guests' gift baskets And Manning is in discussions to get on the shelves at more Fresh Market grocery stores.

Beyond the success of her business, Manning is motivated by a sense of duty to restore a part of the state's culinary fabric.

In an email this week, she wrote: "I resurrected this company because if I had not done this, part of this state's heritage was going to die. The peach buds would have just vanished."

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