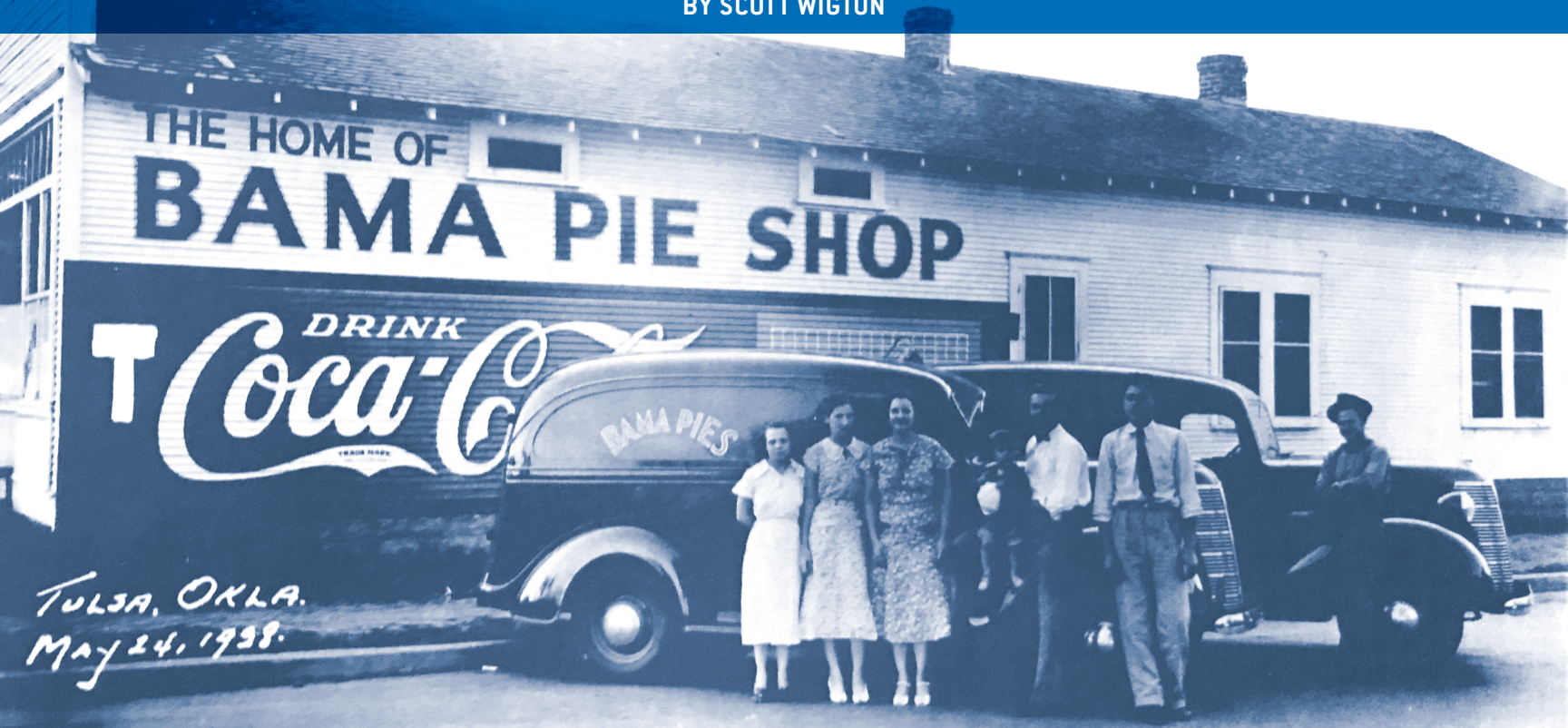


American pie

THROUGH ITS 80 YEARS, BAMA PIES HAS GONE FROM UPSTART TO WORLDWIDE SUCCESS.

BY SCOTT WIGTON



DECADES AGO, A SCRAPPY TEXAS WOMAN named **Cornelia Alabama Marshall** began baking pies to support her struggling family. Word got out, and lines formed down the street outside the small Dallas store where she worked.

People loved her pies. And they still love them today, even if they don't always realize they're eating a Bama Pie (or one of the company's other products).

Eighty years later, Cornelia's granddaughter, **Paula Marshall**, is running the company, which under her leadership has grown from a respectable \$30 million in sales in 1984 to a pie powerhouse with over \$350 million in sales last year.

Marshall traces the company's success back to her grandmother, whom she calls "Grandma Bama," the great matriarch who not only enabled the whole business with her pie-making proficiency, but also infused an ethos that is baked into the company's formula for success to this day.

"She was absolutely the heart and soul of the company," Marshall says. "The recipes for the pies, and the desire to make only high-quality, good products came from her. She insisted on good ingredients and always making things the right way and training people how to do it. These were the tenets of her business."

Turns out, the apple pie doesn't fall far from the

production line. One can imagine seeing in Paula Marshall what one likely would have seen in her grandmother: a spunky, energetic woman, determined to succeed in business the right way, with a focus that puts quality and people at the top.

"Our philosophy is to make high-quality products, sell them to our customers and to treat people right," Marshall says.

In case anyone should forget, this uncompromising conviction is enshrined on a plaque on the stone façade of Bama's famous Route 66 factory (Pie Land USA) located on the corner of East

11th Street and South Delaware Avenue.

The effect of this philosophy is seen in the fact that the Bama Cos. employ over 900 people and operate factories worldwide. Bama also counts among its clientele two of the world's biggest fast food entities: the No. 1 hamburger restaurant chain and the No. 1 pizza restaurant chain. Bama supplies handheld pies, biscuits and pizza dough to these food giants.

BUILDING A COMPANY; NOT AS EASY AS PIE

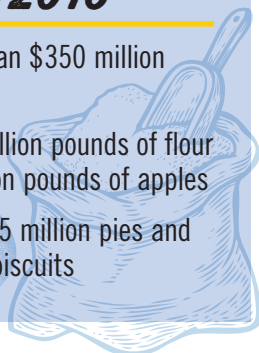
From its early days, the company was a family enterprise that grew organically as Grandma Bama's husband, **Henry**, worked hard to sell his wife's pies as far and wide as possible.

"My parents used to joke that my granddad had two left hands and two left feet and was a complete klutz in the kitchen, but he never met a stranger and he had a knack for sales," Marshall says. "He could sell dirt to farmers."

It was good pies, pure grit and a little bit of luck that kept Bama going through the difficult years of the Great Depression in the 1930s. And, as her children grew older, they took their mother's recipes and their father's sales moxie and fanned out to different cities in the Midwest, starting Bama Pie outlets in each. One of those cities happened to be an oil boomtown called

Bama in 2016

- Had more than \$350 million in sales
- Used 225 million pounds of flour and 15 million pounds of apples
- Produced 445 million pies and 550 million biscuits



Tulsa, where Marshall's parents settled.

Marshall's father, **Paul**, had dropped out of school after eighth grade to work in the family business. According to Marshall, he was nothing if not determined to sell as many of the big, round pies to as many customers as he could find. During World War II, he learned to fly and would deliver pies to air bases around the country. However, the pie business was a grind, with long hours spent overnight in the factory, on the road or in the air.

"My dad, he hated getting up at midnight, working through the night and delivering products the next day," Marshall says. "He wanted to find a better way. He was always looking for the next thing."

One of those "next things" was freezing the pies overnight, which allowed Bama to switch to more normal business hours. The frozen pies became extremely popular with women working in factories during the war who didn't have time to do baking themselves. Paul also landed some large accounts, including Safeway and Bob's Big Boy. Still, it wasn't enough. Marshall remembers her father being gone most of the time, his car crammed with frozen pies as he set out to find even more customers.

Paula Marshall continues her family's storied tradition in the Bama Cos. The family-run business is based in Tulsa, but has an international reach that touches millions each year. The company has garnered several awards over the years, including the recent B Corp certification by the independent B Lab, a nonprofit focused on bettering society through businesses that meet rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.



was complaining because I was tired and it was so early, but he had this machine where you put the pastry in, added fruit in the middle and then you turned the crank and pie came out. He only had an eighth-grade education, but he was a brilliant guy."

It was a huge moment in Bama's history. Now all that was needed for this pie-oneering invention was a customer. As fortune would have it, another up-and-coming business at the time was catering to America's growing demand for tasty food on the go. That com-

"He kept saying he had to find a customer that would sell a million pies," Marshall recalls. "And that's when he started playing around with the concept of a handheld pie product and began to move away from the big, round, frozen pies. My mom would look at him like he was crazy, not believing there would be customer that would sell a million of them."

PIE-IN-THE-SKY INNOVATION LANDS HUGE CUSTOMER

Nevertheless, Paul went to work to develop a machine that could produce a small, handheld pie.

"I'll never forget — he woke up the entire family in the middle of the night to come see this contraption he had made," Marshall recalls. "I

pany was McDonald's, and Paul Marshall saw a huge opportunity.

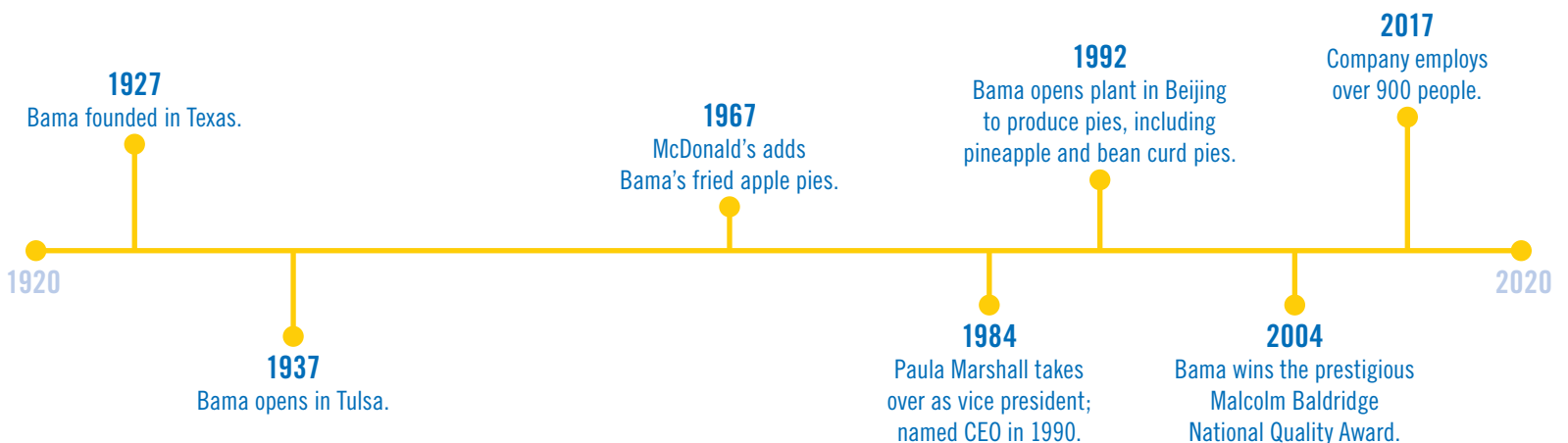
"My dad made a cold call on **Ray Kroc** (McDonald's co-founder), and that was definitely the turning point for us," Marshall says.

Kroc agreed that a 10-cent handheld pie was the perfect complement to McDonald's food-on-the-go model of burgers, fries and shakes. The result was the formation of a longstanding relationship with Bama that has resulted in the sale of countless millions of apple and cherry pies.

By 1969, the Bama bakeries run by other family members had closed, and only the Tulsa factory remained.

"Out of five sisters and two brothers, my

Bama history





Wanda Denton

42 years of Wanda's Bama Pie

Bama Pie has been a fixture in Tulsa for 80 years now. **Wanda Denton** has been a fixture at Bama for over half that time.

She has worked at Bama for 42 years, each day donning her apron, putting on a hairnet and helping churn out millions of pies and other baked goods destined for pastry lovers near and far. "Working at Bama has become like a second home to me," Denton says.

After decades of dedicated labor, she is now a production supervisor, overseeing the manufacture of signature Bama products, including biscuits, cookies, dough and, of course, pies.

On March 17, 1975, just as shag carpet and polyester bell-bottoms were peaking, Denton walked into the famous Pie Land USA factory at East 11th Street and South Delaware Avenue and went to work on the pie production line.

"My husband didn't want me to work, but I thought I'd try it and maybe give it six or seven months — and here I am, all these years later," Denton says.

She would box and stack freshly made apple and cherry pies made for Bama's biggest customer, McDonald's. Back in those days, the pies were fried. Today, they're baked.

What's her most striking memory? Heavenly aromas.

"Oh my! The smells," Denton gasps. "They are amazing! The fresh pies right off the line or out of the oven, you can't beat them. I tell every new employee, 'You'll put on 20 pounds just because of the smells.'"

The Tulsa native and Central High School graduate has seen millions of pies fly off the line and out Bama's doors over the decades. During that time, she has seen her share of change at Bama for the better.

"They've always taken good care of us, but through the years there's been a lot more focus on human safety, food safety and quality," she explains.

She adds that production processes have become much more efficient as productivity and quality has increased. Production waste and scrap, which erode profits and customer confidence, have been cut drastically from decades ago.

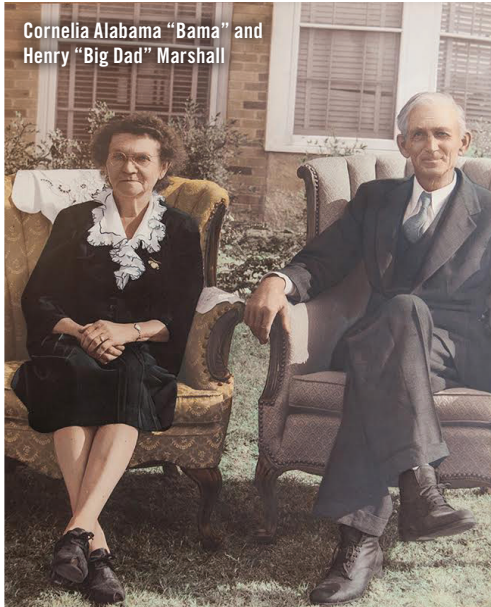
Bama also added a Caring Center for employees that provides counseling and training to help workers overcome any obstacles or problems on the job. The goal is to minimize employee loss in the early stages of employment when turnover can be high.

What has kept Denton at Bama?

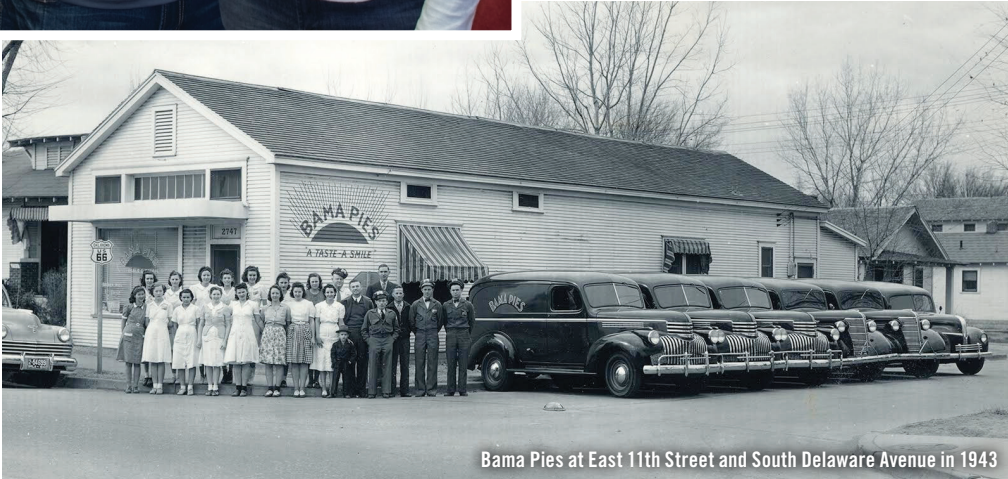
"The people," she says. "They care about you here. They treat you right and respect you. They focus on quality training and safety and have good benefits. They take good care of their people."



Paula Marshall and her son, Jacob Chapman



Cornelia Alabama "Bama" and Henry "Big Dad" Marshall



Bama Pies at East 11th Street and South Delaware Avenue in 1943

A Deming disciple

Probably no single person outside her immediate family has had a greater influence on **Paula Marshall's** business management style than **W. Edwards Deming**.

You might call her a Deming disciple.

Deming, a statistician, engineer and professor, had a profound impact on the way business management is conducted today around the world, and he is often credited with transforming Japan's post-war economy, turning the defeated nation into an economic powerhouse.

Under Deming's tutelage, Marshall transformed Bama's management style and production processes, growing the company, reducing costs and waste, and increasing profitability.

Marshall was first introduced to Deming and his methods during a seminar in the 1980s as she struggled to fix Bama's problems after taking the helm of the company. Through the years, she continued to absorb his teachings, and, more importantly, to implement them at Bama.

"With Dr. Deming, I wanted to bring in his quality management tools and to really revolutionize the company by putting processes in place that would bring us up to a standard of which we could be proud and our customers, like McDonald's, could be proud," Marshall says.

The key to Deming's business philosophy is that it focuses a business on improving quality rather than focusing on reducing costs. He found that when companies did focus on quality, that products improved and costs came down.

Shortly after taking over at Bama in the mid-1980s, Marshall realized the company needed to focus on quality. When they did so, the improvement was dramatic. Instead of losing up to \$4 million annually in scrap (12 to 17 tons a week) from poor quality, waste was cut to negligible levels.

"It was a great leap forward in quality," Marshall comments.

With that focus, Bama went on to expand, building new plants in China and Europe to service a growing list of customers.

Deming's teachings have allowed Bama to become a company that now sets quality standards, evidenced by its prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2004.

"We've come up from the bottom, and now we're a company that our customers consider a strategic partner that they want their other suppliers to emulate," Marshall says.



W. Edwards Deming

dad was the only one left," Marshall says. "He was the one who had the big vision and saw the future in fast food. He moved away from doing business the old way by getting a great customer who would buy in volume and pay the bills."

PROVING HERSELF AND DOING IT HER WAY

Although landing McDonald's was a transformative event for Bama, rough times lay ahead as the elder Marshall suffered a heart attack. Suddenly, company succession became an issue. However, none of the sons appeared willing or ready to take over. Paula, who had been working in the factory for years and was a college student at the time, ultimately got the nod, if somewhat reluctantly, from her father.

"My dad always said he wanted a boy, a son, running the company, but the problem was that he and my brothers disagreed a lot and my dad kept defaulting to me for things," she explains.

In her early 20s, Marshall was thrown into the fray, understanding the weight of her tasks at hand.

"I knew the seriousness of getting it right, but I also realized I had to do it my way," Marshall says. "I guess I didn't manage to screw too many things up," she says with a laugh.

By the skin of her teeth, Marshall proved her worth and then progressively set about restructuring the company under the auspices of her business mentor, **W. Edwards Deming** (see sidebar).

"I'm such a big Deming zealot, you can't believe it," she says. "I love his philosophy."

When Marshall took the reins in 1984, she began an unrelenting effort to improve the company by doing what her Grandma Bama had always

done: focus on quality products. Bama gradually began diversifying its customer portfolio and building new factories in overseas markets. The corporate culture also began to change.

"My dad, as much as I loved him, he did things differently; it was more fear-based and militaristic," Marshall says. "He did build a great company, but some things needed to be fixed. For example, when he got sick and was in the hospital, no one knew what to do. I had no idea where the formulas were; he used to keep key company information

on napkins or paper towels with these little tick-marks on them.

"He didn't really trust that people wouldn't steal his stuff," she explains. "I think it came from that Depression mindset that he had lived through."



Today his daughter's mindset, shaped by Deming, is helping position the company for continued success in the future.

PASSIONATE ABOUT KEEPING IT IN THE BAMA FAMILY

That future, it appears, is one in which Bama will remain a family-held business. Marshall's adult children are actively engaged with company decision-making.

"I believe the one who works and has sweat equity in the business should have voting power," she comments. "You see too many families that give everyone power, but they're not invested in the business and so they're not passionate about the company."

"We're going to keep the business going with family members who have a passion for what we're doing here," she continues.

Her son, **Jacob Chapman**, has spent time on the factory floor and analyzing the efficiency of some of Bama's manufacturing processes.

"I'm very passionate about it," says Chapman, who also is a college student working on a business degree. "My own perspective is that the business has to stay in the family. We (family members) all have our own perspectives, but it's great we can be in business together."

Bama has hit a few rough patches over the decades, but today the private company — which does not disclose its financials — appears to be in its best shape ever. Marshall seems confident that when she is ready to hand over the reins to a successor, the company will continue to flourish.

"It's about the business prospering and going forward, and that takes passion for the work and passion for the people, and if you have those, you'll be successful," Marshall says. "Then everyone around you will have that same goal, and that will keep the business alive and thriving."

That's a recipe Grandma Bama certainly would be proud of. **TP**