

Overcoming Handicaps in Life

Early years

On January 12, 1905, Malissa gave birth to her fifth child—a redheaded boy. The family of Pinkney and Malissa Foy was expanding, which was normal for an agrarian lifestyle of the early twentieth century that was short on automation and therefore long on the need for manual labor.

Just as the automation of farm equipment was nascent in 1905, so also was medical care. Three weeks after the birth of the redheaded boy, Malissa died from pneumonia. Pinkney was overwhelmed with grief. With five children and no mother, he is reported to have held up his newborn son at his wife's funeral and cried out, "Who will help me raise my son?"

Malissa's first cousin Finis and his wife, Sarah, attended the funeral. Finis and Sarah were still grieving a recently stillborn daughter. Though hurting, they were willing to take the young Foy son. On May 9, 1905, they adopted him and named him Oather Dorris. (Dorris was the name of their stillborn daughter.)

Finis and Sarah lived on a thousand-acre farm in Dixon, Mississippi, about one mile from the Foy's. Finis was forty-eight years old and his wife was twenty-four when they adopted Oather. The couple had another child, Annie Laura, who was four and a half years older than Oather. In time, Finis and Sarah had a total of seven children—five sons and two daughters. Oather was the oldest son.

In 1907, Pinkney Foy remarried and sought to get his son back. Finis and Sarah refused. They were the legal parents of two-year-old Oather and were very fond of him. To minimize the conflict with Pinkney, Finis moved his family ten miles east of Dixon to McDonald. In the days before the automobile was ubiquitous, a ten-mile separation was a long distance. Moving to avoid family conflict was something that Oather learned from Finis; Oather would avoid a family conflict by doing the same thing some thirty years later.

Finis was a prolific entrepreneur and kept his farm in Dixon as part of his business operations. He chose McDonald as a place to live because of the recent arrival of the railroad, which would be good for business. During Oather's formative years, Finis farmed in Dixon and owned six small businesses in McDonald (a general store, lumber warehouse, saw mill, grist mill, cotton gin, and dairy farm). Finis became a wealthy man and his business venues provided a wonderful training ground for his children.

Finis was a Scottish Presbyterian. He has been described as a man of biblical dimensions—strong biblical convictions, high standard of ethics, a hard worker, and a crusader for justice. The Ten Commandments set a standard for the family. Public reading of Scripture was a regular family practice.

Finis was an avid student of Scripture. He studied the doctrinal positions of six different denominations, always looking for more understanding of the character and nature of God.

In 1912, Oather entered first grade. School became a miserable experience and McGuffey's Readers became his enemy. He was dyslexic. In those days, this learning difference was not understood. It became apparent that he was unable to read, and his teachers thought he wasn't trying so they punished him by putting him in the dunce corner and spanking him. He was required to repeat the first grade. School became a place of shame and embarrassment. Furthermore, Oather stuttered—a frequent companion to dyslexia. Oather was wrongly labeled as “stupid and dumb.” We know now that dyslexia is not related to intelligence. Nevertheless, Oather was plagued by the “stupid” label and all its stigmas.

Neither Oather's teachers nor his parents knew how to help him. His brother A. D., two years younger, read to him and generally helped him with his schoolwork, so Oather was able to get an education and eventually attend college.

The Power of a Book

In 1915, Will Cooper, Sarah's brother, sent Finis and Sarah the book *Bible Footlights* by William Granger. The book presented another denomination to Finis—the Adventist. This book redirected their lives. In the supplemental reading, Finis found answers to questions that had haunted him for years. Specifically, he gained a more profound understanding of the Sabbath. As a result, Finis and Sarah become Adventists. Immediately he started closing his six businesses on the Sabbath (sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday). This remained his practice for the rest of his life and became Oather's practice as well.

Though Finis had only three years of formal education, he placed a high premium on education and so did the Adventists, who operated their own schools from first grade through college.

In 1919, Finis established a one-room school on the second floor of his general store. Increasingly, Finis focused his time and resources on biblically based education.

As Oather progressed through school, his reading problem and his stuttering plagued him. He demonstrated many good personal traits, however. He was tenacious, hardworking, and teachable. And he was a great problem solver. But he could not read, so books defeated him.

By age sixteen, Oather knew little success in life. His birth mother died, his birth father rejected him, he could not read, and he stuttered. He was filled with shame and generally struggled in life. His future looked bleak. His parents didn't know how to help him, but the Lord did.

Finis and Sarah had a houseguest—a door-to-door book salesman, who sold the book that meant so much to Finis and Sarah—*Bible Footlights*. The salesman stayed for some time. Each evening he regaled the family with stories of his experiences. Oather was so intrigued that he wanted to try selling books. If he couldn't read books, perhaps he could at least sell them.

Oather began to talk with his parents about selling books door-to-door for the summer. This meant that he would be gone all summer living on his own and supporting himself out of his

earnings. His mother opposed the idea; she had no confidence that Oather could succeed at selling books. He had succeeded at few things in life. Why would this work? But Oather would not be denied. He continued to talk about it.

Finally his mother asked how much seed money he needed. He said \$30. She gave it to him but believed that he would be home within two weeks, or as soon as the money ran out. She was wrong. He didn't return until the fall. He didn't make a profit, but he paid his expenses, which was good enough for his first effort at selling. More importantly, he discovered that he was skilled at selling and enjoyed it. Oather had finally experienced victory over books and his stuttering—although he could not read, he could talk well enough to sell books.

The key to this pivotal moment in Oather's life was his parents. Unlike most parents who live in fear of disabilities and handicaps, Sarah and Finis had faith in the providence and goodness of God. They didn't deny the reality of Oather's condition, but they didn't fall into the trap of fear and paralysis. The Lord used their faith to set up the circumstances that gave Oather encouragement and direction in life. Mastering stuttering and learning he had a gift for sales were two critical elements that enabled Oather to move forward in life. Oather gained this victory because of his parents' faith.

In 1922 at age sixty-five, Finis had an opportunity to help build a new school in Talowah, Mississippi. This school would be larger and more comprehensive in scope than his one-room school. Finis closed his one-room school; he also sold his six businesses, the house in McDonald, and the farm in Dixon. He relocated to Talowah to help build an Adventist academy. He would spend the rest of his life—fourteen more years—in Christian education.

College Years

In 1924, Oather entered Southern College (seventeen miles northeast of Chattanooga, Tennessee). He wanted to become a physician but could not handle the reading. His brother, A. D., was on a different degree path and therefore not available to help him with his classes. Though Oather struggled with reading, he did well in math, science, and woodworking.

To pay for his education, Oather worked during the summers selling *Bible Footlights*. He also started multiple businesses in his dorm room: he cut hair, cleaned and pressed suits, repaired jewelry, and facilitated loans at a local pawnshop. His business skills enabled him to pay for his education and to discover how to succeed in life even though he could not read.

Oather was able to get enough help with his reading to graduate from Southern College on May 10, 1928. A bonus to his education was meeting fellow student Anna Ruth King, one year his junior. On August 4, 1928, Oather and Anna Ruth (she was called Ruth) began a marriage that would yield four children and last for sixty-one years. Not only would they be marriage partners, they would also be business partners. And Ruth would read to Oather.

One day Ruth was reading a biography of Thomas Edison to Oather. She read the following quote, "There is a better way. Find it." Oather stopped her—he wanted to ponder the quote. He modified it slightly. His version was "there is a better way, let's find it." This became one of his favorite quotes.

Years of Struggle

Because of his success in selling books, Oather's first job out of college was as an assistant manager for Southern Publishing Association—the publisher of *Bible Footlights*. He was assigned to the Atlanta branch office in an administrative capacity, where he experienced the dysfunctionality of nepotism. The branch manager's son and daughter were employed at the same office as Oather, but they didn't work. Instead it was expected that Oather would do his work and theirs as well. Oather lasted one year before he quit.

Out of work and newly married, in 1929, Oather and Ruth moved to his parents' home in Talowah. Wanting to help his son, Finis encouraged him to use his sales skills to sell his brother's stump puller. Ruth could do housework and cooking. Oather and Ruth declined.

Oather and Ruth were broke; so he planted cotton and began to sell books—the latter was his “fall-back” work throughout his life. But their efforts were not immediately successful. Because of the dearth of finances and Ruth becoming pregnant, she temporarily moved home to live with her parents.

In 1929, the stock market crashed, compounding the young couple's financial challenges. It became imperative for Oather to find work. In 1930, Oather received an offer to work in the maintenance department of Pishgah Industrial Institute. Oather and Ruth moved to Candler, North Carolina. Their pay was \$25 per month plus housing. Though their finances were meager, they still saved. On April 7, 1930, their first child, a daughter they named Winifred (Wyn), was born.

About the same time, Finis lost everything. His efforts to build the school in Talowah drained his assets. Nevertheless he continued to do what he could. He started a few businesses and farmed to provide for his family while he continued to work on the school.

The Great Depression took its toll on many people and banks. Though Oather's income was modest, Ruth and he managed to save several hundred dollars. But in 1931, they lost it when their bank failed. They were broke again.

From 1931 to 1933, Oather had several jobs—all in North Carolina. At different times he sold cars, managed a sanatorium, and served as a caretaker for a large farm. None of these ventures worked out well.

On Christmas Day 1932, Ruth gave birth to their first son, Ellsworth. Oather lacked the funds to pay the doctor. So the doctor accepted a cow as payment.

In early 1933, Oather was looking for work. He noticed a man delivering Virginia Dare snack cakes to stores and it entered his mind that he could sell snacks—after all, he could sell books. Oather found out that the home office of Becker's Bakery was in Spartanburg, South Carolina. He traveled there and applied for a distributorship. Oather convinced the sales manager to give him a territory and was promised the Chattanooga operation. The current distributor had been unable to make that territory profitable. Oather and Ruth moved to Chattanooga with their

two young children and a Whippet automobile that he had acquired during his short stint selling cars.

By the end of 1933, Oather had turned around the failing Chattanooga distributorship and made enough money to pay off his debts. Oather and Ruth were debt-free, but not for long.

Becoming a Business Owner

Oather was an ambitious energetic man with a young family. Soon he mastered the food distribution business and looked for ways to expand the business. One option was to expand his product line. There was a local bakery that produced oatmeal, raisin, and vanilla cookies under the name Jack's Cookies. The product offering was different from the Virginia Dare snack cakes. Oather contacted Becker's Bakery and got permission to sell Jack's Cookies in addition to Virginia Dare snack cakes.

Every Monday morning Oather removed the backseat from his Willis Whippet and turned the family car into a delivery vehicle to sell Virginia Dare snack cakes and Jack's Cookies. On Friday, he would put the backseat in the car and it would serve as a family vehicle for the weekend.

In 1934, the bakery that produced Jack's Cookies experienced financial trouble and the owner decided to sell. Oather wanted to buy the business, but Ruth opposed the idea. For the first time in their six-year marriage, Oather and Ruth were debt-free and able to pay their bills. This was very satisfying to Ruth. But Oather was the consummate salesman and eventually he persuaded her that the acquisition was a good idea.

Oather purchased Jack's Cookies of Chattanooga for \$5,000 in owner-financed debt plus \$4,000 in assumed vendor debt. To make the down payment, he borrowed money from a car dealer using his Whippet as collateral. This meant that he didn't have a car, but he was willing to use public transportation to deliver his products. He also convinced Becker's Bakery that buying Jack's Cookies was not a conflict of interest and that he would continue to sell Virginia Dare snack cakes, which he did.

To keep Jack's Cookies in business, Oather had to work deals with vendors. Immediately, he used his sales skills to work with his creditors. Ruth was business manager and faithfully honored the creditor payment arrangements that Oather negotiated. Oather demonstrated operational skills by streamlining and automating manufacturing. The company did well under the couple's leadership.

Jack's Cookies' three products—oatmeal, raisin, and vanilla cookies—sold for one cent each. Oather demonstrated marketing prowess by developing an oatmeal sandwich cookie that could be sold for five cents each. The Jack's oatmeal cookie was a hard cookie; however, the cookie used for the oatmeal sandwich was a soft cookie and it proved to be a big success.

As the company grew, so did Ruth and Oather's family. In 1934, Beth McKee was born. She lived seventy-six years.

In 1935, Jack's Cookies outgrew its facility and moved to a larger facility on Dodds Avenue in Chattanooga. Oather wanted to expand and invited his father-in-law, Symon King, to join him in the business. Symon was a very conservative man who built his assets slowly over time. He liked the small, stable, and profitable bakery company and became a 50 percent partner with Oather. But it was soon apparent that the partnership was a big mistake.

Symon and Oather had different business philosophies. Oather wanted to expand the business. To do so, the company would have to borrow money to buy equipment. Symon opposed this; he was satisfied with a small profitable business and didn't want to take on any more risk in the midst of the Great Depression. Oather found himself unequally yoked with his father-in-law. Their business philosophies were incompatible and Oather began looking for a solution.

As Oather pondered his options, two events took place. First, his father Finis died in 1936 at the age of seventy-nine. He was buried in Dixon. The last fourteen years of his life had been dedicated to developing Christian education in Talowah. His effort survived just a few years after his death, but served as inspiration for the Bass Memorial Academy, which opened a few miles south of Talowah in 1961. Oather was deeply bonded to his adopted father and very grateful for all he had learned from this godly man. The second key event was the purchase of Carson's Cookie Company in Spring Hope, North Carolina. Oather sent his brother A. D. and brother-in-law Aubrey King to run the new venture.

Failures and New Starts

After a period of grieving for his father, Oather focused his energy on a solution to the problem with his father-in-law. After much angst, he told his wife that they must separate from her father. She initially opposed it, but after much soul searching, she agreed that there was no other solution. With Ruth's support, Oather and Symon agreed to split. Oather took \$4,500 (half of the cash) and Carson's Cookie Company, plus retained a small interest in the Chattanooga business. Symon retained all other assets of Jack's Cookies in Chattanooga and the other half of the cash.

By 1937, Oather and Ruth were in Charlotte to start Jack's Cookies of Charlotte. In the midst of the move and starting the new business, their fourth child, John, was born. He was nicknamed "Jack" in honor of Jack's Cookies.

The Carson Cookie Company was closed and the assets move to Charlotte in preparation for the start of production by the end of January 1937. Oather used most of his capital to purchase baking equipment for the new operation. Oather hired a truck and driver to deliver the oven—manufactured in Cincinnati—to Charlotte. It was wintertime and, while en route, the truck hit a patch of ice and turned over, severely damaging the new oven. There was no insurance. Oather spent his remaining cash getting the oven repaired. Startup for the new plant, originally scheduled by the end January, was delayed until March.

Again, Oather and Ruth were in North Carolina and broke. From January to March, Ruth sold vanilla cookies, manufactured by Jack's Cookies in Chattanooga, door-to-door for grocery money.

When the new operation started, salesmen would bring in proceeds from morning sales to buy ingredients for the next day's production. It was a hand-to-mouth existence, but they made it. Jack's Cookies in Charlotte was in business, and Oather and Ruth were in control. In 1941, Robert Hendershot was hired as sales manager and became a longtime loyal employee.

The company grew. With the growth, the company needed a new facility. Up to then, Oather and Ruth had always leased facilities. For the first time, they had an opportunity to build and own a baking plant.

World War II was over in 1945. The war also ended the Great Depression. The demand for construction materials soared, causing the cost of the new Jack's Cookie plant to soar from an estimated \$100,000 to nearly \$300,000. Unable to finance it himself, Oather went to the banks seeking a loan. All of them turned him down because the title to his property was clouded with a railroad right-of-way. The project was already under way; Oather was running out of money and couldn't get a loan. He was at risk to lose everything. But intensive legal work revealed that the railroad did not have the right-of-way. This cleared up the title issue and enabled Oather and Ruth to obtain a \$450,000 loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC, predecessor to the SBA) to complete the new plant. In March 1947, Jack's Cookie Company of Charlotte opened its new plant.

In 1948, Oather was forty-three years old. Since graduating from college twenty years prior, Oather's journey had been very challenging. As a result, he developed stomach ulcers that required surgery. He decided to retire and needed someone run his operation. Oather entered into a three-year lease-purchase agreement with Herman Lay. Two years into the agreement, Herman wanted out, and for good reason. Under Herman's leadership, the company did poorly. Sales were declining and the debt was increasing.

In 1950, Oather came out of his two-year retirement to run the company once again. He was able to improve the sales and stop the negative cash flow, but the debt was too great. In December 1950, he sold a 51 percent interest in Jack's Cookies of Charlotte to Rex Callicut, John Barton, and Leon Bishop. They paid \$100,000 for their interest and assumed responsibility for all the debt, including the RFC loan. Oather became the sales manager and Ruth continued to work in purchasing.

Callicut owned bakeries in other southern states selling Jack's Cookies. Leon Bishop, the brother of Wilber Bishop from whom Oather purchased the Jack's Cookies bakery in Chattanooga, was in the baking business selling Jack's Cookies in Tampa. In all, there were several independent companies selling Jack's Cookies. Callicut and Bishop were angry that Oather was selling in their territory, plus Oather's distributors were not picking up out-of-date product. Recognizing the weak financial condition of Oather's operation, they considered a lawsuit as a means of eliminating Jack's Cookies of Charlotte. But since they attended the same church as Oather, they decided to offer to buy controlling interest in Oather's company instead of suing him.

Now in control, the trio began to change the products and policies of Jack's Cookies of Charlotte. Oather resisted the changes, but as minority owner he could do little to stop them.

The final straw was when Leon Bishop wanted to change the oatmeal sandwich cookie that Oather developed from a soft cookie to a hard cookie. Oather resigned in early 1951.

A Call for Help

In April 1951, Oather received a call from his brother-in-law Cecil King. Cecil was ill and needed help running the Chattanooga bakery. Furthermore, Cecil's sales manager and a number of key salesmen had left unexpectedly. Cecil was in desperate need of help.

What an interesting turn of events. The original bakery in Chattanooga that Oather had sold to his father-in-law was now King Bakery, run by his brother-in-law Cecil, who had bought the bakery from his father during the war years. Now Cecil needed Oather's help.

In May, Oather returned to work as an employee of King Bakery. Ruth remained in Charlotte working in an administrative position for Jack's Cookies of Charlotte. In July, Wyn married John Stevens in Charlotte. Beth and Ellsworth were in college at Collegedale. Jack remained in Charlotte with his mother until December. Once again North Carolina did not work out for Oather and Ruth but they would land on their feet in Chattanooga.

By July, Cecil was too ill to run the bakery and Oather was made general manager. Oather focused on three objectives—expanding territories and products, and adding private label business.

The impediments to Oather's plans were the large pies and layered cakes that accounted for 50 percent of King Bakery's \$187,000 annual revenue. Large pies were eliminated first and replaced by the oatmeal sandwich cookies—a proven product with an excellent shelf life much longer than the pies'.

Within a year, King Bakery was doing well. Ruth returned from Charlotte and went to work at King Bakery in January 1952.

Cecil's health continued to decline and he decided to sell the business. In July 1952, Oather purchased King Bakery for \$53,000. He made a down payment of \$1,000 and monthly payments with interest. Oather became the owner when he paid 51 percent of the purchase price.

During the transition time, Ruth and Oather ran the business together. Ruth was always the perfect complement to Oather. While he was bold and aggressive, she was conservative, detailed, and courteous. He had sales and marketing skills plus an eye for operational efficiency. She managed the administration with a firm but fair hand and was always seeking the best for the employees.

Growth and Expansion

In 1954, sales were \$580,000. Ellsworth was made a vice president when he was twenty-one years old but he was not paid accordingly for four years. Eventually he ran the business.

Ellsworth married Sharon Sisson, a classmate at Southern College. During college, he wanted to be a physician or a minister. He never contemplated running his father's business. Having experienced the emotional abandonment of an absent father, he wanted to be home each night with his children. Over time, he realized that being a physician would not provide the home life that he wanted. So he decided to work for the church. Though Oather greatly respected the church, he used his sales skills to persuade his son to work at King Bakery. Ellsworth agreed to work for two years at the bakery and then to reevaluate his future.

Ruth and Oather lived as good examples. They taught and practiced high moral values and a strong work ethic. They valued people and generously supported the Christian community and Christian education.

In 1955, sales were \$1,013,000 despite a fight with the labor union that lasted the first six months of the year. King Bakery was a union shop when Oather returned as sales manager in 1951. The new union contract contained a "closed shop clause," which meant that college students from Southern College and Temple Baptist College who worked at the bakery would have to join the union. *Anyone* working at the bakery would have to join the union. This was unacceptable to Oather and Ruth. After months of negotiating, a contentious strike ensued. Then in January 1955, the union sued King Bakery. This began a six-month legal battle over the "closed shop clause" and whether or not King Bakery had the right to sign a labor agreement with another union. Ruth was the pillar in the fight. She viewed the dispute with the union as a matter of principle. There were times when a compromise was proposed. Oather wanted relief from both the strike, which at times was violent, and the lawsuit. Ruth would never agree to compromise. In the end, the court ruled in favor of King Bakery. The union lost.

Revenue growth from \$187,000 in 1951 to more than a million dollars in 1955 strained the Dodds Street facility. Due to tight cash flow, however, the company struggled to find a way to expand. Southern College offered to use insurance proceeds from a fire that consumed one of their buildings to build a bakery and lease it to King Bakery in return for rent payments and jobs for college students. Initially, Oather and Ruth rejected the idea because of the location, which required additional funds for roadwork and a bridge. After further consideration, they identified a five-acre tract on the other side of the college that would work.

In February 1957, construction began. By the end of the year, a sign went up on the fifty-thousand-square-foot building (half the size of the Charlotte facility) that said "McKee Bakery." John Phillips, the sales manager, objected, noting that it would be confusing for the customers. The decision was made to use the name McKee Baking Company, a division of King Baking Company. For the first time, the McKee name was on a bakery. The Dodds Street location, which had been in operation for more than twenty years, was closed and all the operations moved to the new Collegedale facility.

By 1960, sales were \$2 million and profitable. The company continued to grow. Ellsworth and Jack were committed to careers with the company, so succession planning began.

Branding

The next key event reshaped the future of the company. Oather met with a packaging supplier named Bob Mosher to discuss ways to build sales of the new family pack concept. Mosher advocated the need for brand identity—something that customers would easily recognize and would symbolize the quality of the products. In a brainstorming session, Mosher pulled out a package of socks to illustrate the power of a brand and logo. He asked Oather to list the names of his grandchildren. Oather replied, “Johnny, Kathy, Linda, and Debbie.” Mosher said, “That’s it, your brand should be “Little Debbie!” He asked for a picture of Debbie and had his art department develop some packaging ideas. Oather and Ruth loved it. Within a few weeks, the “Little Debbie” brand and logo were born—named after Ellsworth’s oldest daughter. She was four at the time and her picture on the product line became a rapid success. Soon all the products of McKee Bakery bore the “Little Debbie” logo.

Behind the Success

By 1960, O. D. and Ruth had built a stable successful business. The seminal reason for this success story was the support of Finis and Sarah—O. D.’s parents. Without their faith in Christ and the providence of God, and without their loving support and training, O. D. never would have overcome adoption, dyslexia, and stuttering. He never would have overcome his inability to read and the shame and embarrassment of being labeled stupid. The story of O. D. McKee is more about godly parenting and faith in God than anything else.

But O. D. needed more than his adopted parents—O. D. needed his wife and children. His wife provided the requisite complement to him at home and at work. His children were the vehicles of generational transfer. They captured O. D.’s heart—his philosophy, values, and principles—and continued to build on his legacy.

O. D. and Ruth persevered and sacrificed to build an exceptional company—a company that reflected their faith in Christ and the providence of God. They were committed to glorify God in all that they did and to serve people well.

Since 1960, the company has grown dramatically. In addition to the aforementioned factors, there were numerous other keys to the spectacular growth.

1. The establishment of the permanent base of operations in Collegedale.
2. The development of the family pack.
3. Adopting the trade name “Little Debbie.”
4. The establishment of an extensive network of independent distributors.
5. Probably most importantly, the generosity of O. D. and Ruth. They gave 30 percent of the company’s before-tax income to their church and other Christian causes. They were convinced that this was the most important key to their success.

Growth Time Line

- 1962 The name of the company officially changed to McKee Baking Company.
- 1967 McKee Baking Company added plant number 2. It was built in Collegedale—a quarter of a mile from plant number 1.
- 1971 After twenty years of service, Ellsworth became the company president. O. D. remained chairman of the board.
- 1977 Plant number 2 doubled in size.
- 1982 Plant number 3 opened in Gentry, Arkansas, to serve the western USA.
- 1989 Ruth died in 1989 at age eighty-two. O. D. and Ruth were married sixty-one years.
- 1990 Plant number 4 opened in Stuarts Draft, Virginia. This plant served the Northeast and Canada.
- 1992 McKee Baking Company offered fifty-two products. Revenue was \$525 million. The company was the largest bakery in the snack food industry with 54 percent of the market.
- 1995 O. D. died at the age of ninety.
- 1997 A third Collegedale plant was built to support the continued growth.
- 2005 The company reached \$1 billion in revenue and the management of the company was moving into the third generation of McKees.

Lessons Learned

There are many lessons the McKees learned through the years that enabled them to build an excellent enduring company.

1. *Biblical principles provide a sound foundation from which to build organizations.* O. D. and Ruth were highly ethical and they valued people. Ruth was known to be firm but fair. O. D. was known for his philosophy of continuous improvement. He frequently would say, “There is a better way, let’s find it.” They both believed strongly in the providence of God and the importance of honoring the Lord with their firstfruits. They were generous givers and believed that their giving was the single most important key to their success.
2. *Live interdependently.* O. D. and Ruth were lifelong partners in marriage and business. O. D. never could have achieved the success that he enjoyed without Ruth’s help. McKee Baking Company was shaped as much by Ruth as O. D. Their respective skills complemented each other beautifully.
3. *Build generationally but avoid nepotism.* Building generationally is a sound practice if family members are qualified. When family members are not qualified, it becomes nepotism, which is destructive to the culture and morale of an organization. O. D.

experienced the ugliness of nepotism in his first job. Perhaps this experience caused him to be careful not to show any favoritism to his own family. He made sure that his family members were qualified and earned the opportunities and promotions they received.

4. *Partnerships generally don't work.* O. D. entered into a fifty-fifty partnership with his father-in-law in the Chattanooga bakery in the mid-1930s and also sold controlling interest in the Charlotte bakery in the early 1950s. Both situations are examples of unequal yoking in business, and neither worked well. Unequal yoking can happen in a variety of ways. For example, it can be due to different worldviews, philosophies, values, and/or principles. The consequence of unequal yoking is conflict, which is disruptive to organizations, particularly when there is no predetermined way to resolve the conflict.
5. *Never give up.* O. D. made many mistakes and failed many times. But his failures never stopped him. Since age sixteen, he knew that he could sell. And he loved to sell. When situations went badly, he did not hesitate to change directions and look for better opportunities. Twice he lost control of his business because he made huge mistakes. Both times, he exited and effectively started over.
6. *Be humble.* The only way that one can take a “step-back” and start over is by being humble. Humility is a critical value that facilitates the revelation of the will of God in our lives.
7. *Don't sue brothers in Christ.* The three men who bought a 51 percent interest in Jack's Cookies of Charlotte considered using a lawsuit as a business tactic against O. D. But in the end, they decided that, since they were all brothers in Christ, they would offer to buy controlling interest in the company instead of suing. The fact that they considered a lawsuit was inconsistent with Scripture, but in the end they chose a better route.

For Ruth and O. D., people were the key to the business. They wanted people to be in the right positions and to enjoy their work. Many times workers sang hymns and other Christian songs as they worked. Technology advancement was never used to eliminate people. McKee Bakery adopted very sound HR policies that included profit sharing, company paid training and education, career paths within the company, health care, bonuses for participating in wellness programs, a company gym, and a tobacco-free environment (before it became a common practice).

History of This Research

A phone call with a client in December of 2010 drew me to research the history of McKee Bakery. He was on a sales call to see a customer. As we talked, he began to share about the morale of his customer. Everyone seemed to love working for the company and they treated vendors so well. Every time he called on someone at the plant, they gave him free product. When I heard that, I knew that the company must be operated based on biblical principles and I knew that there was a man and/or a woman of God behind this success. I asked my client to

identify the company. He was calling on the McKee Baking Company Plant #3 in Gentry, Arkansas.

While on the phone with my client, I asked him to inquire if there was a book about the company and its founders. With my client's help, I was able to find the book *Sweet Success* by C. A. Oliphant. Much of the information in this article was gleaned from this book as well as from the Web site of the McKee Baking Company.

The story of the McKee Baking Company is a story of the faithfulness of God and the obedience of His people. It is the story of overcoming adversity. It is the story of family and faith. May it inspire you to overcome whatever stands in your way so that you can fulfill the purpose of God for your life.

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McKee Baking Company practiced the principles of the Beyond Babel Model. Below is a brief analysis of their key operating philosophies, values, and principles against the salient elements of the Beyond Babel Model.

1. Biblical Worldview	Ruth and O. D. believed strongly in the providence of God, the importance of biblical philosophy, values, and principles. They practiced their beliefs most fully in how they dealt with people. To this day, workers and vendors alike love the company.
2. Equally Yoked Leaders	O. D. learned the hard way the danger of unequal yoking, even with family members. And he learned the danger of nepotism. McKee Bakery was built multi-generationally. People are not promoted because they are McKees. Everyone, including family members, must demonstrate that they are qualified for their work assignments. The third generation of McKees is now running the business under the same worldview as the founders. This practice produces enduring successful companies.
3. Strategic Planning	Ruth and O. D. partnered together to run the business. O. D. did not function independently. From his first bakery, O. D. was always accountable to a board. This practiced facilitated strategic thinking and action.
4. Executional Excellence	Because of the biblical values and principles of the company, particularly the high value placed on people, the company always met its commitments to everyone—customers and vendors. Furthermore, O. D. was committed to continuous improvement.
5. Customer Validation	The growth and profitability of the company testify to the customer satisfaction with the company's product offerings. The company is the largest producer in the snack food market.

The following are some quotes from the McKee Baking Company Web site. These statements illustrate the biblical values and principles embraced by the company.

Company Statements

Family Statement

The McKee family acknowledges the providence of God in our continued success. We plan to remain privately owned, to continue our growth, and to give job security to those who work with us.

Mission Statement

We take pride in working together to provide great-tasting snack foods of outstanding value to delight customers throughout all of North America.

Vision Statement

To be the preeminent privately owned snack-food company in North America where employees:

- Know they are valued.
- Are trusted to make decisions.
- Enjoy their work.
- Strive for personal growth.
- Work together as a team

Source: http://www.mckeefoods.com/About_us/Company_Statements.htm

Guiding Values

People

Recognize the value and contribution of each individual, and demonstrate concern for the health, safety, and well-being of employees and their families.

Integrity

Conduct business ethically, honestly, and fairly, and treat everyone with respect.

Responsibility

Accept responsibility for our actions and act responsibly in our jobs and in our dealings with each other, our customers, and our communities.

Quality

Satisfy our customers with quality products and services, while providing the highest value.

Productivity

Maximize the use of our resources to maintain profitability and to support continued growth.

Innovation

Use creativity, teamwork, and continuous improvement to "find a better way."

Source: http://www.mckeefoods.com/About_us/Guiding_Values.htm