

Harold H. Stewart



While the company established by Harold H. (Chick) Stewart ultimately grew to become a manufacturer of a wide range of baking equipment, it was built on the back of a single product — the Stewart Monoflex Bread Cooler.

The founder of Stewart Systems was born in September 1913 in Balmorehea, Texas. After attending Texas Tech University where he studied

electrical engineering, Mr. Stewart began his career in positions with oil companies, working at refineries in the Middle East and South America.

After serving in the Pacific theater during World War II, Mr. Stewart moved home where he married Anne Johnson. In Houston, Mr. Stewart worked as a sales representative for American Monorail and developed a reputation as a problem solver. Before long, he went into business on his own. Stewart Engineering and Equipment Co. was established in 1947 as a crane and hoist distributor in Dallas.

His widow recalled that Mr. Stewart's business was not an instant success. "Like many young entrepreneurs, Stewart went through some financial rough sledding," she wrote in a 1973 recollection marking the 25th anniversary of the business and the 10th of Mr. Stewart's death. "But he bore the load quietly."

While working on a job in Dallas for Mrs Baird's Bakery, Mr. Stewart conceived of the idea for the continuous bread cooler. Bill Mead, then president and chief executive officer at Mead's Bakery of Lubbock, Texas, agreed to be the first customer of this innovative product.

In her recollection, Mrs. Stewart explained the thinking behind the cooler. She wrote, "On Chick's

many visits to bakeries for installation of monorail proofing systems, he saw the serious need of that industry to get its lost floor space back from the bread cooling process, which then was to take the



Mr. Stewart (left) and an associate observe a bridge crane, 1959.

pans of baked bread from the ovens and place them on rolling tray racks and then push them out of the way until the bread cooled.”

The system Mr. Stewart developed received hot loaves of bread directly from the depanner and cooled them as they traveled along a continuous conveyor arranged in tiered loops. In shape, the conveyor resembled an oval racetrack hanging from the

bakery’s ceiling. This method is still the predominant means for cooling bread in large wholesale bakeries. “The energy-efficient, multi-tier, multi-loop, ceiling-mounted design leaves the floor space below free for other use,” the company said.

The system was a great success and fueled considerable expansion by Stewart. Offices were opened in Houston and Tulsa. By the mid-1970s, the company had expanded to over 100 employees with its signature cooler installed in baking plants from coast to coast as well as several markets abroad — England, Brazil, Pakistan, Venezuela, Australia, Israel and Burma (Myanmar).

Bread coolers today manufactured by Stewart and other equipment suppliers still bear and

uncanny resemblance to Chick’s original design.

While the patented bread cooler formed the backbone of the business, Stewart developed several other custom-designed material handling systems for a range of industries.

Mr. Stewart did not live to see the degree to which his bread cooling invention was adopted. He died

suddenly in 1963 at the age of 49. His widow, who was raising two small boys at the time, assumed control of the company, running it successfully for nearly a decade before hiring Don Lummus as president in 1972.

During the 1970s, the company grew rapidly through acquisitions, including the Middleby Marshall Oven Co. of Chicago and the bakery equipment division of International Multifoods Corp.

By the early 1980s, the company was operating three divisions, including the Bakery System Division, serving wholesale baking companies in the United States and abroad. The Crane and Hoist Division offered material handling solutions for general industry.

The company’s Middleby-Marshall Oven Division, which was located in a suburb of Chicago, served customers in the retail, food service and fast food industries. Its ovens were sold to supermarket bakeries, multiple- and single-unit bake shops, airline commissaries, school systems, state and federal institutions such as universities, hospitals and prisons, and in many franchised fast-food outlets.

With Mrs. Stewart’s retirement in 1984, the company was sold to international companies owned by Italians and then by Swiss. A private investor, UCA Group, owns the company today, still operating at the plant in Plano, Texas, and selling bakery proofers and ovens, bread coolers and pan stacking and unstacking systems to customers worldwide.