

# William Howard Flowers Joseph Hampton Flowers



Creating excellent baked foods, building strong brands, providing extraordinary service to customers and offering a workplace that fostered team spirit — those were the goals that brothers William Howard Flowers and Joseph Hampton Flowers set out to accomplish when they opened Flowers Baking Co. in

Thomasville, Ga., in 1919.

More than 85 years later, Flowers has done just that and then some. The company has been transformed from a strong regional baker into a national baked foods company, operating direct-store delivery routes that deliver fresh bread, rolls and snack cakes throughout the United States.

The success of the company may be traced to the foundation set forth by the Flowers brothers.

Born in 1884 in Blakely County, Ga., William Flowers got an early start in the business. Shortly after he and his family moved to Thomasville in early 1909, William began working for an ice manufacturing plant. In 1914, at the age of 30, William and his younger brother Joseph (born in 1895), started Flowers Ice Cream Co., the first ice cream company in the town.

Five years later, on Nov. 4, 1919, the Flowers brothers opened the area's first modern bakery — Flowers Baking Co. At that time, there were no bakeries for more than 200 miles and all baked goods had to be shipped in.

By the 1920s, Howard had assumed responsibility for the bakery, while Joseph was in charge of the ice cream company. During its first 10 years, the bakery flourished and was soon shipping Flowers bread, sweet rolls and cakes by rail to

destinations as far west as Eufaula, Ala., and south into Florida.

During the 1920s, Flowers advertised that its bread was “as sanitary



*Flowers Baking Co. ran a series of ads in the Thomasville Times-Enterprise during the 1920's. This one appeared in 1927.*

as sunshine” and sold for about 9c per loaf. Other advertising catch phrases during the company’s early years included, “Ask for Flowers’ products and get them — you will be delighted,” and “When you eat Flowers’ bread, you eat ‘homemade bread.’”

On June 2, 1934, William died of a heart attack in Tallahassee, Fla. An article in the *Thomasville*

*Times-Enterprise* on that date noted he “approached any proposition of business with an open mind, but his success lay in the fact that he

was able to visualize possibilities and to lay a foundation on which success could be built. ... He gave every operation he undertook a spirit and a capacity that was seemingly boundless.” Following his death, his 20-year-old son, William Howard Flowers Jr., took charge of Flowers Baking Co. At that time, the bakery had 25 employees, 7 wholesale routes and \$90,000 in annual sales.

Joseph Flowers, meanwhile, continued to operate Flowers Ice Cream Co. until he sold it to Foremost Dairies in 1930. Joseph died on Oct. 1, 1948, in Jacksonville, Fla.

An article in the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise* following his death noted that he was “an indomitable worker and an astute business executive” whose friends would remember him for his many acts of generosity and kindness.

During the early years, Flowers focused its attention on the fresh bakery business, growing through strategic acquisitions of bakeries in the Southeast. The company’s strength was notable in its ability to overcome adversity. During the

Depression, Flowers found a way to expand operations, while during World War II, stepped-up demand for baked foods led to the company’s providing of bread to military camps set up throughout the Southeast.

In 1968, the company went public, became Flowers Industries, and began trading over-the-counter stock. Less than a year later, the company was listed on the American Stock Exchange. In 1976, the company diversified its holdings with the purchase of Stillwell Foods, a producer of frozen vegetables. That diversification would continue in the early 1980s, when the company entered the production and sale of cookies and sandwiches, a category it would exit at the end of the decade.

In an effort to transform itself from a regional baker into a national baked foods company, Flowers in the mid-1990s acquired Keebler Foods Co., one of the largest cookie and cracker companies in the United States, and Mrs. Smith’s, the country’s top-selling frozen pie brand. By 1999, Flowers was generating more than \$4 billion in sales through its three business units — Flowers Bakeries, Keebler Foods and Mrs. Smith’s Bakeries.

That would change, though, as the company in 2001 sold its investment in Keebler to the Kellogg Co. Two years later, Flowers sold its Mrs. Smith’s frozen dessert business to The Schwan Food Co.

Today, Flowers operates 34 bread and cake plants and generates more than \$1.55 billion in sales. The company has continued to grow at an impressive rate.