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### 2023-07-10 the tragedy of beatrice foods

Occasionally, research into the history of telephony takes you into some strange places. There are conspiracy theories, of course, and there are people who insist on their version of events so incessantly that details of dates and places can become heated arguments. There is also the basic nature of the internet: the internet has a health of historical information but it is scattered across many sources of varying quality. Part of the role of the historian has always been assessing the credibility of sources, but this is particularly difficult in fields like technology history where so much information comes from archived AOL customer homepages (perhaps the best sources there are) and Usenet discussions (rarely correct about anything).

And then there is the Beatrice Foods Company.

I first discovered this oddity of the internet sometime last year, but I was reminded of it on a recent trip in Canada (I will probably write something about this, but the objective was mostly to hike on mountains, and urban^rural exploration of an AT&T microwave relay site was only incidental). In Canada, at least in eastern British Columbia, Beatrice is a major dairy brand. Like A&W (charming slogan: "American Food"), Canadian Beatrice had the good sense to become completely independent its American parent in 1978. It did not have quite the success that A&W did but after a series of acquisitions the Beatrice brand name (and its charmingly '80s futurist logo) remains commonplace under the Canadian division of french dairy conglomerate Lactalis.

Here in these United States, though, the situation is quite different.

The Beatrice Creamery was established in 1894, Wikipedia tells us, named after its home town of Beatrice, Nebraska. This Beatrice, in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, was a runaway success. A 1913 move to Chicago, and ongoing acquisitions of dairies and food processors, made Beatrice a major food company across the nation. Ongoing ambition through the Second World War and post-war expansion made Beatrice, like many large companies of its era, a conglomerate.

At its peak, in perhaps 1980, Beatrice was one of the great institutions of American industry. Consumer brands owned and operated by Beatrice in the '70s and '80s included food brands like Tropicana, Meadow Gold, Shedd's (now Country Crock), and Hunt-Wesson (perhaps best known for their ketchup). Beatrice seemed to find more revenue, though, in non-food consumer brands. After their 1984 acquisition of consumer conglomerate Esmark, the Beatrice empire included Avis car rental, consumer electronics manufacturer Jensen, automotive brand STP, and diversified women's goods manufacturer Playtex. Beatrice introduced their own logo to advertising for their many products, and sponsored auto racing teams. The company seemed unstoppable but, as was the case with many of its peers, Beatrice had achieved impressive growth on the back of escalating debt.

In 1985, Beatrice was struggling to service the debt they had taken on to acquire Esmark. The conglomerate started to break up. Beatrice's effort to save themselves by divesting their entire chemical division (brands include Stahl and STP) and a few odd items like World Dryer (manufacturer of those older hot air hand dryers found in every rest stop bathroom) weren't enough to salvage the company's stock value. Investment firm KKR mounted a leveraged buyout---the largest in US history at the time---in 1986. The purchase price was \$8.7 billion, and KKR's plan was a fire sale.

They sold off Beatrice's bottled water division (Arrowhead, Ozarka), back to Coca-Cola under whose license they had operated. They sold Playtex to a group of investors who spun it out. They sold Beatrice's entire dairy division, the historical core of the company, to Borden (another large dairy conglomerate known for having invented condensed milk). A hodgepodge of consumer brands (Samsonite, Culligan, Day-Timer) were combined into a new entity and sold. Tropicana was sold. International operations (besides Canada) were combined and sold to a new conglomerate. Canadian operations, independent for decades, were sold into Canadian ownership. Finally, in 1987, KKR took most of what remained sold it to Conagra.

Up to this point I have basically been summarizing Wikipedia and this is where it ends. Wikipedia reassures us that most Beatrice brands still exist under different ownership, but it leaves hanging an interesting question: what of the Beatrice Foods Company itself? The article offers only a mystery: "The original Beatrice Companies went dormant in the late 1980s, but was revived in 2007."

Today, the Beatrice website (beatriceco.com) presents a strange front. A hero image shows a wide variety of consumer food brands that were once owned by Beatrice, but aren't any more. At first, I thought the website might simply have been carried forward from before divestiture, but no... the banner image contains products that Beatrice hasn't owned since the late '80s, in much newer packaging. The "Contact Us" page lists five offices and phone numbers, several noting the consumer brand that used to operate from that office. What brings me there, though, is "The Porticus Centre:" a reasonably useful (although not especially unique) archive of historic materials on AT&T and the Bell System, besides Beatrice Foods itself, and Borden, who acquired the dairy division.

One of the oldest news releases on the Beatrice Companies website, dated 2009, announces the merger of Beatrice and The Porticus Centre. Porticus apparently has a long history (in internet terms), as the release mentions its 2003 award from USA Today. This makes Porticus older than the current Beatrice website, which seems to have appeared for the first time in 2008. The press release describes Beatrice as a multi-brand food manufacturer (as far as I can tell, in 2007, there were no food brands operating under the Beatrice name or ownership), but also as an installer of Avaya PBX systems and structured cabling.

Here's the complication: the Beatrice Companies of today may (attempt to) trade on the reputation and brands of the historic Beatrice Companies, but it bears almost no relationship whatsoever to them.

The Porticus Centre, and specifically its "Bell System Memorial" website (bellsystemmemorial.com), dates back to at least 2002 and I am told really to 1997. It was originally maintained by Dave Massey, but for whatever reason he handed the reigns to Ben Jackson in 2005. Around a year later, the website changed into an announcement that it had "changed IP addresses" (I am confused by this language as well), and redirected viewers to a copy hosted by The Porticus Center. By 2007, both Porticus and Beatrice listed one DeWitt Hoopes as their president.

I had hoped to explain exactly how Hoopes, a resident of Phoenix AZ, came to be the President and CEO of a once multi-billion dollar company, but this key detail has stubbornly eluded me. He seems to have had a relationship with several people in the Arizona food industry and at some points has called himself an investor, and I speculate that he may have bought the largely forgotten brand for a bargain. Press releases on Beatrice's website start in 2008, somberly noting the death of the creator of a line of herbal salad dressing. This salad dressing seems to be one of the only food products ever manufactured by Beatrice under Hoopes.

A press release the next year announces that Beatrice's structured cabling business is being divested, to satisfy a decision by the board of directors to eliminate Beatrice's non-food ventures. Beatrice still advertises structured cabling today and so it's not clear if this sale actually happened. The release does raise an obvious question: who is on the board of directors? Not easy to answer, as most corporate entities related to Beatrice went defunct in the '80s. An active Arizona foreign entity registration gives an address in Chicago, but the Illinois Beatrice company is long defunct. A few active Wyoming corporations with Beatrice in their names clearly related (listing the same Chicago address) but list only Hoopes as director and incorporator.

What do we know about DeWitt Hoopes? The website of his personal business, DeWitt Hoopes LLC, gives the headline "Mac & Linux Programming and Service." He recommends Ubuntu, which apparently can make the internet up to three times faster. Hoopes' background seems to explain Beatrice's odd focus on technology products, and the decision to divest from technology was apparently reversed as later press releases show Beatrice doubling down.

A 2011 release, two years after Beatrice announced the end of its structured cabling business, tells us that it has selected Anixter as its structured cabling supplier. Anixter is a major electrical supply house and this situation seems not dissimilar to my announcing that I have selected The Home Depot as my new structured cabling supplier, and this theory of making your shopping trip into a press release seems backed by a quote from Hoopes: "With our previous vendor, we just were not getting the support and pricing that Beatrice needed, and it was only getting worse." Take that, Graybar. The same year, Beatrice announced that the Porticus Centre and its Avaya PBX business were being moved from Beatrice Consumer Products, Inc. to Beatrice Technologies, Inc. Both are incorporated in Wyoming, but oddly, Beatrice Technologies was made inactive on account of overdue tax filings. None list any directors other than Hoopes.

I must offer the disclaimer that, while I cannot locate a good-standing corporate registration for Beatrice Companies, Inc., it is possible that one exists. Because of the many states involved, researching corporations in the US can be tricky, and the fact that Beatrice's once great history leads to inactive foreign filings in nearly every US state with dates ranging from the 1930s to the 1980s only makes it more difficult. What I can tell you is this: Beatrice seems to exist in and do business almost exclusively in Arizona, where it has only a foreign entity registration (but one in good standing). Most Beatrice entities seem to have been incorporated in Wyoming, although many are now inactive. All give the same address, in Chicago, which is the type of address that appears on many dozens of business registrations (the building contains at least a couple of law firms, the suite number on the corporate filings likely belongs to a registered agent or incorporation service). A surprising number of these corporate entities show filing dates of 2017, well after they are mentioned in Beatrice press releases. That may very well just be a quirk of Wyoming's online entity search, but it's certainly odd.

The full set of corporate entities associated with Beatrice and Hoopes are hard to follow. The customary "About Beatrice" trailer on every press release seems to list a

different set of subsidiaries almost every time, but sometimes omits any details and instead says only "eight business units" or similar. I have also found corporate filings for entities that I have never seen mentioned on the Beatrice website or press releases. The number of business lines attached to Beatrice seems large and ever-changing. A 2013 press release announces that Beatrice Technologies is being reorganize, and as a result will no longer offer residential cabling or computer maintenance.

Perhaps like Beatrice of the '80s, Beatrice of the '00s seemed to have overextended. A series of press releases announces the divestiture of its web design business, its PBX business, and the "physical assets" of the Porticus Centre (this seems to have included various historic documents from Bell companies). It's hard to tell what business ventures were actually operational in that time period. Most of the actual business information I can find online relates to retirement and pension benefits for former Beatrice employees---the acquisition of Beatrice seems to have included a responsibility to service some of these retirement benefits. Beatrice does seem to have owned some sort of wholesale food supply business, perhaps more than one, that may have been serving legacy customers.

In 2016, Beatrice expanded in the food market, announcing its new Gourmet Popcorn brand. A later press release lauds that Beatrice found a retailer to carry the product. It lasted until 2020, when Beatrice Gourmet Popcorn was sold to a small operation called 2Di4. During the same time period, and perhaps today, a subsidiary called Beatrice Distribution seems to have been dealing in commercial cleaning supplies.

Sometime around 2018, Beatrice must have completely reversed its 2008 board's policy on food vs. technology. Although it proudly announced having put two recipes on its website in 2017 and relaunched its salad dressing business in 2018 (it was apparently shuttered again two years later), the future of Beatrice would be Bittium.

Bittium may be familiar to some. A Finnish company, Bittium has several product lines in the vague area of software and technology, but has attracted press for its secure mobile device offering. Frankly, it's just one "encrypted white-label Android phone" offering in a crowded market with a reputation for crime rings and FBI stings, but it's probably one of the more reputable. Beatrice announced in 2019 that it had become a reseller of Bittium's phone and VPN products. Later, Beatrice Technologies entered a partnership and then merged with a Canadian Bittium reseller called DEC (Digitally Encrypted Communications, not Digital Equipment Corporation). Indeed, Bittium is pretty much the only concrete product that Beatrice seems to offer today, although numerous references to structured cabling still hang around.

More recently, well, I'm not sure what happened. The most recent press release from Beatrice, dated 2020, is headed "We Are Witnessing History in The Making The Devolution of Western Culture." It spans five pages, making it the longest press release by far, and calls for a making the ten commandments mandatory study material in universities.

There are other "odd" details. One subsidiary of Beatrice, Beatrice Premier Foods, was renamed to Cuppedia and made independent in 2016. Confusingly, Cuppedia seems to have two completely unrelated online presences. One of them matches the branding of other older (late-2000s) Beatrice websites and is presumably operated by Hoopes. The other is operated by a woman who sometimes styles herself as "HRH Queen Dr. Anna Carter" and claims to hold an exclusive contract for construction supply to Neom, the Saudi city of the future. She also claims to be a minister, have founded a garden club, and, well, evidently to be the queen of something. I leave it to the reader to evaluate the credibility of these various titles.

The connection between the two is, surprisingly, validated by the Beatrice press release announcing the spin-out of Cuppedia. "Our decision to make this change is reflected in our review of Beatrice assets and business structure, and the Beatrice Premier Foods business would be better suited under the direct control of both Ms. Carter and Mr. Ligidakis," Hoopes said. Ligidakis is a Phoenix-area restaurateur who has apparently held various titles at Beatrice, although The Carter-operated Cuppedia doesn't seem to mention him today.

This has taken an odd turn, hasn't it? Somehow, in the cultural climate of 2023, it all made more sense to me when I discovered that Hoopes is active in politics, and a very specific subset of them. "Is the Arizona Human Trafficking Council Preventing Child Trafficking, or Facilitating it?," reads the headline of an article written around statements Hoopes made to the Arizona Human Trafficking Council. The council was formed in 2015, offering a bit of political context to those familiar. After an introduction referring to his illustrious family history, Hoopes was to the point: "I am addressing the Council today on behalf of my friend and business colleague Neal David Sutz, who has been trying for over two years to blow the whistle on child sex abuse and trafficking in our state among powerful business leaders and members of the Mormon Church."

And that sort of puts a button on this story. As best I can tell, what remained of Beatrice (I suspect intellectual property with no active product lines, but possibly the active distributing businesses) was purchased by Hoopes, who hoped to use its brand and reputation to promote his various business ventures. This effort seems to have been plagued by his indecision about whether he was running a food company or a technology company---fitting since, it seems, much of the downfall of Beatrice was its over-diversification. After years of Hoopes using the Beatrice Company more or less as a personal homepage, it went in an inevitable direction.

Political conspiracy theories are sort of like dust on the internet. Leave anything untouched for long enough and it is prone to accumulate them. "Of course," I said aloud in a coffee shop. "Of course Beatrice Foods is a QAnon thing now." Deeper corners of the internet fill in the picture further. Hoopes says that "my company" (Beatrice?) launched a conservative social media and video streaming platform called "Inkd Social." As usual for "conservative social media," Inkd seems to have been short lived, perhaps a precursor to the baffling "streaming service" BView still available today that consists of videos embedded from YouTube and Vimeo under Beatrice branding. Inkd is one of two failed conservative social media projects by Hoopes, the other called Right Social. On his own social media, he posts Islamophobic Chick tracts punctuated by strong opinions on the corporate history of AT&T. Oh, yes, the telephone history.

Perhaps I am being unfair. There is no doubt a kernel of truth to Hoopes's claims of human trafficking, as there is no doubt a kernel of truth to his claims of running a multi-brand consumer food business. The tagline of the Beatrice Companies is "a Reputation thru all the Nation," a claim that was true (in a good way) in 1980 and true (in a bad way) in 1987. In the 2000s, Beatrice was simply forgotten. And then DeWitt Hoopes came along, apparently moving his small IT business into Beatrice the way a hermit crab moves into a shell.

I felt like I had to write something about this situation; it has occupied so much of my brain for the last few weeks. But when it came time to put pen to paper (or keyboard to vim, as it were), I really struggled. Where to start? Where to end? What details are even worth mentioning? What actually *is* the story here?

Because there isn't really a story, at least not a remarkable one. Hoopes has a website. Of course there's an archive of historic Bell System documents, why not? Of course John

14:6 is quoted in ten languages under a photo spread of packaged food products, why not? Of course there's a press release about the decline of western society. Of course there's a tangential connection to Neom, and of course there's an unprompted complaint about the customer service at Graybar. It's just another weird website on the internet, just like a million others.

The only thing that makes this one stand out is that, by accident of history, it shares a name and logo with the milk at the Real Canadian Superstore.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from the January 1, 2005 edition of "Food & Teach Newsletter," a publication of Almus Nutrition and Health Sciences, a division of Beatrice Companies that I think once supplied wholesale food to K-12 districts:

The world is in crisis and we are threatened from many sources. The threat is as great from outside our country as it is from within. The threat is from outside ourselves and correspondingly within ourselves. We are afraid of attacks from outside but in responding to our fears, the fear from within can be as dangerous and as immobilizing as from outside.

This comes from Gladys McGarey, a "holistic doctor" who's still writing at the age of 102, so something she's doing must be working. But not for Beatrice any more, the Almus name seems to have been dropped and Beatrice Nutrition & Health Sciences last published "Feed & Teach" in 2015. They're still in the publishing business, though. Beatrice's online store carries four products: books by Gene Hoopes, founding member of the American Legion and great grandfather of DeWitt. Because of course it does. I wonder how the Board of Directors feels about that line of business.