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It once was a family, but today, Hoovers are far removed from company

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Their name is prominently displayed on vacuum cleaners all over the world, but most Hoover family heirs never built, sold or designed anything for the Hoover Co.

Like other families, they grew exponentially since the times W.H. "Boss" Hoover ran the show in North Canton. Three of his children had children of their own. They had children, and so on.

Today, generations are scattered from Florida to New York and seemingly everywhere in between.

"We were not a very close family," said Thomas Hoover, the 82-year-old grandson of "Boss," who lives in Hills and Dales. "It's kind of strange, I guess. We were never a cohesive unit."

Elizabeth "Lacey" Hoover, a great-granddaughter, grew up in Florida and lives in Miami. She's proud of her family heritage, but added that it's difficult to put into words.

"It's a very personal thing," said the 53-year-old chairman of the nonprofit Herbert W. Hoover Foundation board. "It's daunting to have a family name that's used as a verb."

In some parts of Europe, people "Hoover" their rugs rather than vacuuming them.

Lacey has taken up some Florida environmental causes championed by her father, H.W. Hoover Jr. — deposed as Hoover Co. president in 1966. Lacey said she has told her 17-year-old son, Colton Chase, what it means to be a Hoover.

"The name can probably open some doors to you, but you should always do the right thing," she said.

A retired obstetrician, Thomas recalls walks with his grandfather "Boss" along Maple Street in North Canton, still home to a Hoover plant. However, he said he doesn't remember the family ever gathering en masse for Thanksgiving, a Christmas party or reunion.

Thomas didn't work at the business.

He never wanted to.

“It never came up; never was discussed,” he said.

The company began its transformation from a family-owned business in 1943 when its stock first was offered on the market. Still, descendants of “Boss” continued to own stock, work at, and run the company. Joseph, a grandson, rose to vice president; he was the last lineal Hoover descendant on the payroll when he retired in the 1980s.

The family hold on the business slipped further in 1985 when Chicago Pacific Corp. offered more than a half-billion dollars to buy all outstanding shares of Hoover stock.

In the midst of the takeover bid, a couple of crazy kids devised a plan to save the company — and keep it in the Hoover family for generations to come.

Their names: Michael Hoover and John Hoover.

Both are great grandsons of “Boss,” who have since moved on to other careers. Michael works for U.S. Trust, an investment management firm in New York. John is part of a group that bought the Highlander golf driving range in Fairlawn; he’s also developing a two-club golf course in Macedonia, near his Hudson home in northern Summit County.

At the time, Michael was 31 and his cousin John was 32. Neither had ever worked at the Hoover Co. John was practicing law in Washington, D.C.

Their plan was relatively simple. The company had little debt. The Hoover family, John said, owned 30 percent of the stock. The cousins believed the family could leverage the other 70 percent of the business to raise money needed to buy out non-family stockholders. That would take the company private again.

It’s essentially the same thing that’s occurring now, on a larger scale. Ripplewood Holdings is in the process of buying Maytag, which now owns Hoover. Maytag purchased the Hoover Co. from Chicago Pacific in 1989.

“It’s something I wish we had done,” John said.

Michael Hoover could not be reached for comment, but John said he and his cousin put their ideas on paper. John said they spoke to Joseph Hoover about the idea and sent the plan to Merle Rawson, then president and chief executive. Both Rawson and Joseph have died.

John said there was little interest in the proposal, and the task of contacting as many as 100 descendants was enormous. “I don’t think the older generation of Hoovers was interested in leaving their money in,” he added.

Maximilian Hoover, a 32-year-old energy consultant with Good Energy in New York, has heard tales about his great-great grandfather, who he also refers to as “Boss.”

“Like any family we had our stories ... legends,” he said.

Family donations make up a large part of the collection at the Hoover Historical Center. The museum on E. Maple Street in North Canton traces the Hoover Co. from the time W. H. Hoover started a tannery business in 1875 until the business incorporated as a vacuum cleaner company in 1908.

Ann Haines, operations coordinator of the museum for Walsh University, said museum records of the Hoover family tree get increasingly murky as new generations are born.

Only two Hoover descendants still live in the Stark County area. Thomas, the retired physician, and Lawrence, a former vice president at Ohio Power and American Electric Power. Both serve on the Hoover Foundation Board, fulfilling similar nonprofit purposes as the other foundation, which Lacey chairs.

The separate foundations were created from a split when some Hoover family members sued others in the years after the company was sold to Chicago Pacific.

Lawrence Hoover was a member of the company board of directors when Chicago Pacific purchased Hoover. He said he’s not sure what his ancestors would think of the current company.

“But they were all pragmatic people,” he said.

Fifty years ago, Lawrence Hoover’s grandfather, Frank, a former company president, published the book “Fabulous Dustpan: The Story of the Hoover.” In it, he describes how Hoover adapted to change, from tannery to making horse saddles and automobile leather, then finally on to vacuum cleaners.

At times, the book is almost prophetic. In the preface, Frank Hoover wrote: “Corporations are like individuals. They are born, they grow; and, unless there is continued transfusion of new ideas to adjust to new times, they die.”

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