

**“This Can’t Be Yogurt!!”
The Market Place Story**

“This is a story that should inspire all men and encourage their wives to go shopping, because you never know what can come of it,” says Georgia Hickingbotham.

It’s almost legendary now — the story of the taste that inspired a brand new concept in the frozen yogurt industry. The hero of the tale, of course, Georgia’s husband, Frank Hickingbotham — Founder, Chairman of the Board, and Chief Executive Officer of TCBY Enterprises, Inc. Members of the TCBY “family” know him simply as “Mr. H.”

“I used to do my seasonal shopping at Neiman-Marcus and would make a day of it,” Georgia says. “Eventually, I had to take a break, so I would go out to the atrium, where they served frozen yogurt, and order my favorite flavor, Peach. Frank often met me for lunch, and I would ask him to please try the yogurt, and he would say, “Yogurt? Yuck! I hate yogurt. Finally, he agreed to take a bite. And with that, history was made. He said, “This can’t be yogurt.”

The great taste that melted Mr. H.’s aversion to yogurt was created by dairy genius Daniel Brackeen. The Hickingbothams found him at his manufacturing facility in Dallas and arranged to purchase and distribute his product. Then Mr. H. asked Georgia, “If we find the proper location, will you decorate a little store?” She agreed and immediately went to work on what she describes as “a labor of love”.

“Thinking of frozen yogurt brought to mind a happy, healthy, good-for-you atmosphere — wicker, plants and flowers, slow-turning fans,” says Georgia. “We wanted to make the store a respite, where people could feel, even in winter, that spring was someday going to happen. The only resistance I got from Frank was when I insisted on having fresh flowers in the stores. He said, “I don’t know if we’re going to sell enough frozen yogurt to buy fresh flowers.” The TCBY team coordinates this image throughout the System, staying true to the vision Mrs. H. implemented as she sat on a saw horse in the fall of 1981, sketching her plans on a brown paper bag “for an out-of-work carpenter with plenty of time on his hands.” The result was, of course, the first “This Can’t Be Yogurt!!” store — later renamed “The Country’s Best Yogurt” — in the Market Place shopping center on Rodney Parham Road in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Total sales on the first day — September 23, 1981 — came to \$153.69, reaching \$2,466.46 by the end of the week. The following week, that figure doubled. The excitement generated by the store’s success brought an unexpected — and somewhat bizarre — challenge.

“We caught people actually going through our trash can,” says Mr. H., “trying to find out what we were doing, where we got our supplies, and where we got our frozen yogurt. We could hear them outside as we worked in the back of the store. Later, it didn’t make any difference, but at that time, we were very concerned with preventing someone from duplicating what we were doing.”

Most of the original Market Place team members were part-timers, though Herren Hickingbotham, who was then managing the Market Place store, started out full-time. Mr. H.’s younger son, Todd, worked his way up from manager of the third store to his present position as President of Riverport Equipment and Distribution Company, a subsidiary of TCBY Enterprises, Inc.

By the end of the first year, “This Can’t Be Yogurt!!” had seven corporate stores. People were still inquiring about franchising. “And we kept saying no,” says Herren Hickingbotham, now President and Chief Operating Officer of TCBY Enterprises, Inc. “The business plan was not developed to the point where we were ready to talk about franchising. That didn’t come until a feasibility study was conducted in the spring of 1982 by a national consulting firm.” The results, which showed that no one was franchising frozen yogurt nationally or regionally, provided the impetus Mr. H. needed. In 1982 the Company began franchising. By 1984, 100 shops were open, moving rapidly to 400 shops by 1986 and 800 by 1987. There are now approximately 3,000 TCBY® locations in operation worldwide, and the TCBY® brand is franchised in over 60 countries.

It’s been 15 years of explosive growth for TCBY, surpassing the original “family’s” wildest dreams. And no one is more surprised than Frank Hickingbotham. “The TCBY was built on a great taste, a simple idea, and a clean, wholesome environment where people can gather and enjoy themselves. At the heart of our success are people who are very caring and concerned about the customer, about service. I knew the basic ingredients for success were there; the difference is that none of us ever expected it to grow as big as it did.”

The TCBY pioneers formed a lasting bond best expressed by Georgia Hickingbotham: “People who came in later view TCBY as a large publicly traded corporation, but I know it as it was in the beginning, and that’s special.” Many thanks to the original author of “The Market Place Story” — Letha Mills.