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AT EASTER, MAKERS OF CANDY HOP TO IT

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So OK, it was the Easter Bunny.

Nobody here is arguing that it wasn't the big E.B. prowling around, burying baskets all over the house. We all know that old Bunny-visit drill. He sneaks in and you never hear him. No matter what. Only once a year, and you never hear the guy.

Then you get up really early. Forget breakfast, you start hunting - you and your brothers and your sister. In the hall closet, behind the clothes dryer, under the stairs. Around the attic. Wherever. Until - There it is! - you uncover the whole works and it has your name on it: jelly beans, colored eggs, chocolate, this weird plastic grass, basket, the works.

So OK, it was the Easter Bunny. Nobody here was born yesterday. But did you ever think of this: Where did the E.B. get that stuff?

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Well, see, the big Bunny has friends.

You get the picture. Friends. Rabbits, chickens, traffic cops, firefighters, hens, squirrels, first-grade teachers, swans, bears. He's got friends everywhere, including the candy business.

William and Edith Reily on Stokes Road in Medford are two of them. Then there's the Giambri clan in Clementon and Charles Brooks Oakford Jr. in Merchantville.

Oakford has a really special link with the old E.B.: He's got a wife named Bunny. He also has four daughters: Randy, Penny, Gail and Candy.

"That's C-A-N-D-Y," Oakford said one day not long ago. "I don't mess around." Oakford was standing in one of two huge rooms above his store, Aunt Charlotte's, on Maple Avenue. The aroma of dark, melting chocolate seeped upward from giant vats all over the candy factory. Four hundred or so coconut cream eggs in different sizes, draped in chocolate and beribboned in a pastel sugar concoction, sat on tables ready to be boxed. Another dozen trays of still-uncoated eggs were stacked on a table in a corner.

"It's a happy product. You're making people happy," Oakford said. "Either they're going to give it away, or eat it."

See, he knows all about this Easter bit, because the people at Aunt Charlotte's are old friends of the great E.B.

"I've been in the candy business 45 years, and my father was in it 24 years," Oakford said. He's 65. "I haven't even thought of retiring, I like it so much."

Oakford's father, Charles Brooks Sr., started out selling caramels from the back of a truck when the rest of the world was sliding into the Great Depression.

"My family thought he wouldn't make it, so they didn't want him to use the family name. But he had an Aunt 'Lott' - Charlotte was her name - who didn't mind," Oakford said. "She lived over in Philadelphia."

Aunt Charlotte's, which has been around nearly 70 years, now has 16 employees who work full time, year-round - and another 10 in the busy seasons - melting and mixing chocolates and cream fillings, and filling candy molds for Christmas, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day. And Easter.

The Giambri family candy operation goes back even further than Aunt Charlotte's.

Giambri's Candy opened in South Philadelphia in 1915.

You know that as soon as you walk in the front door on Brand Avenue in Clementon. There in front of you is a portrait of James Giambri, the first of the Giambri candy dynasty, and he's in a business suit. Underneath that picture, in case you're interested, is a great big letter

from a bunch called the Curiosity Corner Kindergarten, thanking David Giambri - he's a nephew of James' - "for letting us come to the candy factory."

"We saw chocolate pretzels, candy firemen, hats and little gingerbread houses. We liked seeing the chocolate in the machines," the letter says. It's signed by Vincent, Nicholas, Brian, David, Mark, Earl, Jamie S., Jamie D., Rachel and Heather.

Right now, the whole operation smells like Easter. This is real E.B. territory. It's even open on Easter Day. David and his brothers Matt and Anthony work full time in the candy factory. Two other brothers, Sal and Joe, help out part time. Their mother, Josephine, will be back soon after recuperating from injuries suffered in a car accident, David Giambri said.

He is 26, and he started in the business when he was a boy, back in 1971.

"I used to sit in the back room and make little bunnies," David Giambri said.

Now he helps run an operation that concocts thousands of coconut cream eggs, and he's hauling around 25-pound bags of coconut, and dollying around extra-fine granulated sugar by the 100-pound bag. But that's not the hard part.

"Working with the family is very hard to do - especially with five brothers . . .," Giambri said. "Everybody tells everybody else what to do."

But he still likes it. "I'm happy doing this. It's seasonal (long days from Christmas to Easter) and then, in the summer, you can take things easy." Just like the great E.B. In Medford, the Reilys operate a smaller outfit. But it smells just as good.

Edith and William Reily buy the basic ingredients, such as chocolate, coconut and corn syrup, from larger factories, as do the Giambris and Oakford and most of the candy makers around here. The Reilys melt down the chocolate in 100-pound-capacity vats.

Then they pour it into molds by hand. Or they pour it into a machine that looks like a water wheel with a chocolate waterfall spilling over a moving belt of cream fillings, such as E.B.'s favorite, coconut cream. Reily, who is 53, always liked candy - "I eat about a pound and a half a day," he said - and he started making it when he was a teenager, "fooling with it, as a hobby . . . on a marble slab in my mother's kitchen."

See, the chocolate melts at low temperatures, less than 100 degrees. That's why it goes-up your hands. And it hardens pretty fast when you set it on a cool surface.

Reily began by working in other people's candy factories. And eight years ago he opened his own.

He had formed a partnership with an old candy maker from Colorado named Paul Biaffa - "he was a kind of grumpy-type person" - and worked part time, at first, in a renovated one-car garage in Medford, making candy bars for civic groups to sell for fund-raising.

Biaffa died, and now Reily sells 30,000 pounds of chocolate a year out of his factory and store on Stokes Road, surrounded by new and antique candy- making equipment, and the constant smell of chocolate. "We grow 22 percent a year, without advertising or anything," he said. He moved out of hearing distance for a minute, patrolling the rows of rabbits in the chocolaty shop. Edith Reily watched him, looking protective. And pleased. She keeps the books, and minds the store, and generally abets Reily's candy making.

"This is his lifelong dream," she said.

Is that an OK dream, or what?

Making candy, day in, day out. And then right in the middle of it, every spring, here comes the big Bunny loaded down with baskets - hippety-hoppety Easter's on its way.

No, no: Make up your own mind. We're not twisting any arms here.

You just think about it, that's all.

In fact, that's it.

Finis. The end.

See you next time. Ta-ta. So long.

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