Our Story
How it All Began and Who Was Involved
Pioneer of the Grocery Industry: William Thomas (W.T.) Harris
Written in part by Beverly Tatum, granddaughter of W.T. Harris

William Thomas (W.T.) Harris, co-founder of Harris Teeter, was born in 1909 and raised on a cotton farm in southern Georgia. One of 12 children, he loved his home but, at the age of 22, decided it was time to discover what else the world had to offer. Little did the world know that this humble man with a knack for storytelling would soon revolutionize the grocery shopping experience. W.T. left his family’s farm during the Great Depression and first ventured to Rock Hill, SC where he worked several jobs, including a big-rig truck driver and a clerk at a five-and-dime shop. He met his future wife, LaVerne, an accounting office manager, and they soon married. His childhood on a farm, experiences in trucking and retail store work, along with a new wife with accounting expertise, set him on a path to success. After marrying, the young couple decided to move to Charlotte, NC for better job opportunities. That’s where W.T. officially began his storied career as a grocery man and community advocate.

Upon moving to Charlotte, W.T. landed his first job with an A&P grocery store. He approached the store’s management team with an offer they could not refuse. “Let me work for you for a week,” he said. “If I don’t increase your sales by 10 percent you can fire me,” he added.

W.T. Harris did increase store sales and rose through the ranks to store manager. During his time at A&P, he formulated ideas about how he believed the grocery industry could be better run – cleaner stores, wider aisles, friendly and knowledgeable associates and brand names at lower prices. After two years, and with a plan in mind, W.T. decided to go into business for himself. Impressed with his business plan, First Union bank agreed to loan him $500 to open his first store.

Even though the country was still going through the Great Depression, 1936 was a big year for the Harris family. LaVerne and W.T. had their second child – a baby boy named Donald Thomas – and W.T. opened his first store on Central Avenue. The store was founded on three principles: high-quality products, clean stores and superior customer service.

According to his granddaughter, W.T. would inspect all of the fruit and produce purchased for his stores. He had a first-hand and in-depth knowledge of produce, which often came in handy when dealing with farmers. A pecan farmer once tried to trick W.T. into buying his Schley pecans, a very expensive variety grown in southern Georgia. W.T. happened to know exactly what a Schley pecan should look like and calmly told the farmer that he knew that those pecans were not Schley but another variety. W.T. would buy a handful of pecans from this shocked gentleman but not at the high price the farmer asked. His knowledge saved him from an unsavory salesman.

Focusing on freshness, in peach season, W.T. would drive into South Carolina to bring back bushels of peaches for the stores. He even sold fresh flowers from his mother-in-law’s garden, giving her the profits from the flowers. He made arrangements with corn growers and others to always bring in the best local products. After two years at the original Harris Food Store Central Avenue location, Harris built and moved down the road to a larger building that is now known as Store #201 where he continued to find ways to differentiate himself from the competition. Store #201 was not only the first full self-service supermarket in Charlotte, it was also the first air-conditioned grocery store and was the first to stay open until 9pm on Friday nights. This allowed working men and women to grocery shop in the evenings. Sales soared as people could come by after getting their weekly paychecks and buy groceries. Later, he expanded the store to include a full-service drugstore called Harris Drugs.

In later years, he sold these drugstores to Mr. Eckerd, and they became Eckerd drugstores.

“If he talked about the business to his family, it was always about customer service. His vision was to be the best in customer service and to offer the best quality products.”

Beverly Tatum, W.T.’s granddaughter

The first Harris Food Store on Central Avenue in 1936. Left to Right: Fred Metler, Paul McIntosh and W.T. Harris

photo provided by Beverly Tatum
Harris Teeter was a business begun by a man of principles and still is a company that lives by those principles.

Beverly Tatum, W.T.’s granddaughter

“He would be so proud if he could see how Harris Teeter is being run today.”

Beverly Tatum, W.T.’s granddaughter
Willis Lee (W.L.) Teeter was born on September 29, 1909, and raised on a rural farm in the Prospect Church community of Mooresville, NC. One of nine children, he left his family farm after graduating from high school and went to work for Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P). Both W.L. and his brother Paul G. (Bill) worked for A&P for many years.

In 1939, W.L. saw an opportunity. The local A&P moved out of its old location on North Main Street in Mooresville to build a bigger store elsewhere, and W.L. saw his chance to lease the old building and go into the grocery industry. A&P agreed to lease the building to the Teeter brothers to open their own grocery store. A&P’s regional manager predicted W.L. and Bill would not last six months running their own store and would be back seeking their old jobs at A&P.

After borrowing $1,700 and stocking the store, the Teeter brothers opened the first Teeter Food Mart on July 15, 1939. It was a family-run operation, no doubt. W.L. was the manager, his brother Bill was the produce manager, and W.L.’s wife, Sylvia Teeter, worked at the store. Three other gentlemen rounded off the list of employees. The first three days’ sales were $804, and by November 1941, sales rose to $2,748 per week.

The original Teeter Food Mart had a dirt basement floor and sold live chickens from a cage on the back porch. There was no credit and customers would bring in their shopping lists and clerks would get the product. Harvey Millsap, store clerk, was often seen jumping over the counter on his way to get a product for customers, and the store offered free home-delivery services to its customers.

Business continued to grow, and in 1946 the Teeters moved from downtown and across the railroad tracks to a new, larger 3,924-square-foot store at 207 South Broad Street. The new location attracted a lot of new trade and, after studying developments in the grocery industry, the Teeters expanded their first “big” store in Mooresville and innovated with semi-self-help service meats and double-deck dairy cases. The Teeters were also leaders in installing the first automatic doors and check-outs in North Carolina. With the growth, Bill’s wife Mildred joined the staff as a bookkeeper. The store continued to grow and underwent several remodels and enlargements.

more about Mr. Teeter...

He waited on the customers himself. He always worked hard. There was nothing he would ask an employee to do that he wouldn’t do.

Lorene Clodfelter, an employee of his from 1945

“From the first, he maintained that the customer was the most important person. He was out to please whomever set foot in the store.”

Sylvia Teeter, W.L.’s wife

From the first, he maintained that the customer was the most important person. He was out to please whomever set foot in the store.

Sylvia Teeter, W.L.’s wife

This Mooresville Ice Cream Company display case, as pictured at the Teeter Food Mart in Mooresville, NC, provided the widest selection of Delux Ice Cream products available in 1954. The Teeters often sampled products for customers; Gail Lowrance offered samples of the locally-produced ice cream to customers in Teeter Food Mart.

photo provided by Cindy Jacobs, Local Historian and Author
As the store grew, Sylvia became an instrumental part of the store operation. Sylvia set up a kitchen in her home with large marble slabs on which she made homemade candy to sell in the store. The family also farmed peanuts, peas, sweet potatoes and other produce which sold in their store.

In July 1953, the Teeters opened their second store in Lincolnton, NC. A large crowd of eager shoppers greeted Manager Roy Guffey and his staff when the store opened. The crowd lined around the building and the staff had to close the store several times as they ran out of shopping carts. They also ran out of cash register tape and finished the day listing grocery purchases on paper grocery bags. They then totaled those purchases by hand in order to move the customers through the store.

Teeter Food Mart continued to expand in North Carolina. In 1957, a third store opened in Newton, a fourth store opened in Cornelius, a fifth store opened in Hickory, and a sixth store opened in Morganton in November 1958.

After his sixth store opened, W.L. joined the North Carolina Food Dealers Association where he met W.T. Harris. At the time, W.T. was president of Harris Super Markets, a nine-store chain in Charlotte. W.T. had recently completed a new warehouse on Hawkins Street in Charlotte and he needed warehouse space; Teeter’s Super Markets had outgrown its warehouse space and, according to W.L., a merger with Harris Super Markets would “increase the financial strength of Teeter’s Super Markets, allow it to expand more rapidly and buy more advantageously, and help save operating costs.” These factors led to a vote in November 1959 to merge the nine Harris Super Markets and six Teeter stores to form Harris Teeter Super Markets.

The merger became official with the opening of business on February 1, 1960. W.T. Harris was President, W.L. Teeter Executive Vice-President and Bill Teeter Vice President. The new company became the largest independent grocery organization in the Carolinas. There were already 15 stores in operation. The first “Harris Teeter” store to open under the new banner was in Kannapolis, NC.

Within three years after the merger, 25 stores were in operation. A new, larger warehouse with office facilities was opened. Harris Teeter further expanded its marketing area by purchasing five supermarkets from Tilman’s Grocery of Shelby, NC and two independent grocery stores, one in Charlotte and one in Gastonia.

W.L. retired from Harris Teeter in 1972 and returned to the Will-Via Polled Hereford cattle farm that he started in 1938. He later served a four-year term as a director in the National Polled Hereford Association. He had an active community service life and was a life-long member of Prospect Presbyterian Church where he served as deacon and elder.

He was also active in the Mooresville Kiwanis Club where he served as President in 1965. In addition, he served as Director of Piedmont Bank in Mooresville, which later merged with First Union and is now Wells Fargo.

W.L. Teeter passed away on June 30, 1980, following a lengthy illness. People described him as “a mover and shaker who frequently did laborious work himself rather than entrusting it to others. He felt he should cash in on his own drive and energy,” and he did.

“He was a friend of mine whom I talked with often. I didn’t consider him a threat and he didn’t consider me a threat. We looked at ourselves as two local grocers trying to do business against whoever was out there.”

W.T. Harris, commenting on his relationship with W.L. Teeter before they merged stores

“I worked for him for 32 years and never knew a better man. I’ve seen him shell a lady’s beans for her one day, drive a truck the next. He was all business at work.”

Paul Harwell, an employee of Teeter’s, 1946

W.L. Teeter with his brother Bill Teeter, his first and lifelong business partner

photo from HT Happenings, September 1980
Hugh Ashcraft Jr. was instrumental in bringing Harris, Teeter and Ruddick together. W.T. Harris had known Hugh since he was about 14 through the church, and W.T. had great respect for Hugh’s father. Hugh had mentioned to W.T. about doing some long-term financing. When W.T. made the decision to do that, Hugh was who he called. Hugh worked for R.S. Dickson & Company and through it arranged the deal. Ultimately, Hugh, through R.S. Dickson & Company, worked out the merger of Harris and Teeter. Hugh became the liaison between Harris Teeter and Ruddick and stepped in as president of Harris Teeter when he was needed in 1973. He acted as a stabilizer for the company.
As Alan and Stuart watched the company grow, they noted that Harris Teeter refined the company’s disciplines on a trial and error basis. Both men now give high marks to the caliber of people who work at Harris Teeter, from entry level to the very top level, and admit that it was simply a question of getting the right leader in place before everything would come together. It was a team-building effort to get everyone “walking the same walk and talking the same talk” before Harris Teeter could truly succeed, says Stuart. “You always have to be doing something a little different, a little more, a little better to stay on top, and Harris Teeter is pretty good at that.”

Stuart and Alan Dickson both retired as executive officers of Ruddick in 2002. In 2006, Alan and Stuart retired from their positions as non-executive Chairman of the Board of Directors and non-executive Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors, respectively. Stuart announced his official retirement from the Ruddick Board in 2008, and Alan retired from the Board in 2010.

“It has been fun to watch Harris Teeter’s culture evolve. It is now a very strong culture,” said Alan. “For some of you who have not been at Harris Teeter as long as others, when I think about when we acquired it and I think about the company today, it is night and day – the quality and execution and the people.”

Ruddick Corporation: Tad Dickson

Prior to taking the helm at Ruddick, Tad Dickson worked for American & Efird, focusing his efforts on a variety of areas including U.S. manufacturing, international operations, marketing, inventory management and production scheduling. In 1992, he was promoted to Executive Vice President and then, in 1994, President. Four years later, he was elected President and Principal Executive Officer of Ruddick and named Chief Executive Officer in 2002. Tad Dickson became Chairman of the Board, President and CEO of Ruddick Corporation in 2006.

Although initially employed by American & Efird, Tad was able to gain an understanding for Harris Teeter prior to joining the parent company. “I’d been attending their (Harris Teeter’s) management board meetings for about two years as president of A&E and knew a number of people who worked at the company,” he said. Because of this experience, when he assumed his position at Ruddick, Tad was able to hit the ground running and began to hone a new vision for Harris Teeter.

“One of our objectives was to become the hometown favorite in all of our markets,” he said. Tad’s goal was for Harris Teeter to dominate within its major markets like Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, Winston-Salem and Wilmington. He did not want Harris Teeter to be an average grocer. Instead, he wanted the company to perform at high levels of profitability similar to the leading retailers in the field.

After growing market share in its existing markets, Tad’s next goal was for Harris Teeter to enter new markets where the demographics aligned with those of a Harris Teeter shopper. The company introduced stores to the Washington, DC metro area and began seeing excellent progress.

“I am especially proud of being a part of a management team that has taken Harris Teeter from being an average performer to the upper percentiles of performance. It’s an extremely large industry and, as a small retailer, I think that is a heck of an achievement,” said Tad.

In spite of Harris Teeter’s successes under Tad’s leadership, as the company approached its 50th Anniversary, external factors altered the retail climate and adversely affected the grocery industry. A dramatic economic downturn forced retailers into their most difficult economic environment in decades. Shoppers who before had placed a priority on the quality of the products purchased and the cleanliness of stores began placing a premium on savings.

“We had to figure out ways to take cost out of our business so that we could reinvest those savings into lower and lower prices to be able to compete against discounters,” said Tad.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Harris Teeter adopted a new strategy, remaining committed to its core values – high-quality products, excellence in customer service, and clean, modern stores, while at the same time lowering prices for its shoppers.

What the next 50 years will bring is anyone’s guess, but under Tad Dickson and Ruddick’s strong leadership, Harris Teeter is well poised to compete in a competitive marketplace without losing sight of its original founders’ goals.
Our Story

Fast Facts:

1980 Harris Teeter purchases Hunter Farms
1984 Ruddick buys Food World and merges it with Harris Teeter
1988 Harris Teeter adds 52 stores operating under the name “Big Star”
1993 Harris Teeter buys five “Bruno’s” stores in South Carolina

Early Acquisitions

Harris Teeter’s success is due in part to strategic expansion plans accomplished by a series of mergers and acquisitions in the 1980s. Under the guidance of parent company Ruddick Corporation, Harris Teeter acquired Hunter Dairy. In 1984, Ruddick purchased Food World and merged it with Harris Teeter.

Food World, based in Greensboro, NC, had 52 stores in North Carolina and Virginia when it was purchased. With the merger, Harris Teeter-Food World owned 122 stores and was located in four states: North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina and Virginia. The number of associates working for the company also nearly doubled.

Harris Teeter continued to close unprofitable locations and acquire others, and in 1988 the company purchased Big Star, adding 52 more stores to the chain. Big Star stores were found in cities from Charlotte, NC to Wilmington, NC. According to John Hutchens Jr., purchasing Big Star made Harris Teeter stronger in its existing marketing area.

In 1993, Harris Teeter made its last acquisition and purchased five Bruno’s supermarket locations in South Carolina to increase its presence in the state. Since that time, the company has continued to grow organically, building new stores and entering new markets.

Harris Teeter is now located in eight states - Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia - and the District of Columbia.
Hunter Farms is a huge part of Harris Teeter’s success. The dairy plant supplies Harris Teeter with nearly all its milk and Harris Teeter brand ice cream.

Harvey B. Hunter founded “Hunter Dairy” in 1917. It was located on Park Road in Charlotte next to the farm owned by the Reverend Billy Graham’s family. Hunter was known throughout Charlotte for delivering milk to homes within a few hours after the cows were milked! He was also ahead of his time when it came to milk-cooling systems. In 1937, Hunter was the first in the Charlotte area to begin pasteurizing milk.

Harris Teeter approached Hunter Farms with a proposition to buy it in the late 1970s. There were plenty of reasons for Harris Teeter to purchase its own dairy operation, “for the control of quality,” says Assistant General Manager of Hunter Farms, Gary Jarmon. Quality control is indeed at the top of the list for Hunter Farms. Another big factor was the ability to control costs.

By 1980, the sale of Hunter Farms to Harris Teeter was complete. With over a decade of experience in dairy production, the company further expanded its operation on April 4, 1990 by purchasing the Borden High Point Plant. This acquisition allowed the company to immediately double its dairy production. In addition, Harris Teeter was now able to begin producing its own brand of ice cream, building upon the company’s commitment to providing shoppers with a large variety of top quality products. On February 16, 2002 the original Hunter plant in Charlotte was closed. Today the entire milk and ice cream operation is run out of the state-of-the-art facility in High Point, NC.

The Hunter Farms plant is now the third largest milk plant in the state of North Carolina. What started out as a small neighborhood business is now bringing in more than $110 million in sales each year!
Leadership Timeline

William Thomas (W.T.) Harris, co-founder of Harris Teeter, was born in 1909 and raised on a cotton farm in southern Georgia. He opened his first Harris Food Store in 1936. Eventually he merged with Teeter, and the rest is history.

Willis Lee (W.L.) Teeter was born in 1909 and raised on a rural farm in Mooresville, NC. In 1939, along with his brother, Bill Teeter, he opened the first Teeter Food Mart. The chain grew to six stores, and in 1960, he merged stores with Mr. Harris.

Roy C. Guffey began his career with Teeter Food Mart. With support from W.L. Teeter and W.T. Harris, he rose through the ranks of the company and eventually became President of Harris Teeter.

Paul P. Moore served as President at Harris Teeter in 1971 and 1972 after a 17-year career at Kroger. When we caught up with him for this book, he was actively enjoying his retirement with his wife in Florida.

Hugh G. Ashcraft Jr. worked for R.S. Dickson & Company (Ruddick) and through it was involved in Harris Food Store expansion plans and eventually the merger between Harris and Teeter. He stepped in as President of Harris Teeter in 1973 after the former president left.

Alex McMillan on W.T. Harris

\[ \text{“Bill (W.T.) had gotten tired of A&P for one reason or another and went to the general manager and said basically, ‘I’m going to resign and start my own store.’ The manager said ‘Bill, you’ll never make it.’ Bill started a store on Central Avenue, and we still have a store on Central Avenue down the street from his original store.”} \]

JoAnn Guffey Canipe, daughter of Roy Guffey

\[ \text{“My father’s work ethic, determination and loyalty led him from weighing potatoes in the produce department at Teeter Food Mart to President of Harris Teeter. Unfortunately, he suffered a stroke in 1970, at the age of 43, and had to resign as president of the company.”} \]

Sylvia Teeter comments about her husband opening his first Teeter Food Mart

\[ \text{“Nobody thought the store would make it, but Willis never worried. If work could make a business go, he would make it go.”} \]

Paul P. Moore

\[ \text{“We entered into a process of essentially taking Harris Teeter’s strengths and building on them. We built on the people and redefined what we wanted to do. As anybody who watches us knows, this is a heck of a competitive business and you’ve got to always redefine yourself.”} \]

Hugh G. Ashcraft Jr.

\[ \text{“I look back at the thousands of people who have meant so much to the company, and I am so aware that there are so many people who are terribly important to the company — the bag boy, the truck driver, the cashier. These are the people out there on the job who make it click.”} \]

Alex McMillan referring to reshaping the business with the help of store managers.

\[ \text{“The Harris and Teeter families continued to manage and staff the stores after Ruddick bought them, since Ruddick personnel had no supermarket expertise; they soon realized that to be successful supermarket operators, they had to modernize. To help accomplish this goal they brought me from my 17-year management career with the Kroger company on as President.”} \]
J. Alex McMillan III arrived at Harris Teeter via Ruddick, serving as Vice President of Finance and Treasurer after the Harris and Teeter merger. In 1976, he became liaison officer between Ruddick and Harris Teeter. Eventually, he became President of Harris Teeter.

R. Stuart Dickson served as Chairman of the Board for Ruddick from 1968 to 1994. He is the son of Rush Dickson, founder of R.S. Dickson & Company. He is now retired and his son, Thomas (Tad) Dickson is the Chairman of the Board, President and CEO of Ruddick, Harris Teeter’s parent company.

John G. Hutchens Sr. joined Big Bear (Food World) in 1955 and served in management and executive positions until the acquisition of Food World by Ruddick in 1984. At that time he was named President of Harris Teeter-Food World. He was active politically at the state and national level throughout his career.

Robert S. Goodale joined Harris Teeter in 1980 as Vice President in Sales and Merchandising. He later became Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. He was named President in 1985. He left Harris Teeter after eight years of service to become President of Finevest Foods.

Edward S. Dunn Jr. joined Harris Teeter in 1974 as the company’s controller. He moved up serving as Vice President of Finance in 1979; Vice President, Finance and Administration in 1982; Executive Vice President in 1986; and President in 1989. In 1995, Dunn was named North Carolina’s Grocer of the Year.

Fred J. Morganthall II joined Harris Teeter in 1986 as Director of Grocery Merchandising. Since then he has served as Vice President of Merchandising, Vice President of Distribution and Vice President of Operations. In 1994, he was elected to the Harris Teeter Board of Directors. He became President of Harris Teeter in 1997.

“Harris Teeter’s success is built on the foundation of customer service. That tradition began with the Harris and Teeter families and has been strengthened through a combination of efforts between our associates, Harris Teeter management and our parent company, Ruddick Corporation. Going forward, we must work together to find ways to lower our costs and deliver more competitive prices, yet still deliver customer service that sets us apart from other retailers selling food.”

Fred J. Morganthall II

“We take pride in Harris Teeter as an organization, and the growth it has achieved since our involvement. Today it is looked upon nationally as one of the better and more forward-thinking and top-of-the-line supermarkets.”

R. Stuart Dickson

“What makes Harris Teeter a great company is its people. They’ve always been my heroes! Whether they work in distribution centers, stores, or offices – their attitude of consistently doing the right thing and seeking better ways to take care of HT’s customers is unique. They continue to do amazing things; I’ll always be grateful to them for what I learned from them.”

Jane Hutchens, wife of the late John G. Hutchens Sr.

“...we reinvented the way Harris Teeter competed in the marketplace... This reinvention was a risky undertaking, but Harris Teeter associates had the skills and the determination to make it a success – and have they ever!”

Edward S. Dunn on the changing competitive landscape

“John Hutchens always thought that one of the most important lessons he had ever learned occurred early in his career, and he tried to live by this throughout his career. The lesson was that you never needed to raise your voice when speaking with an associate to get your point across, regardless of the situation. Treat everyone with the respect, honesty and fairness that you wish to receive from them and most importantly, never feign ignorance! This was his legacy he lived by both professionally and personally.”

Robert S. Goodale