

Paul Frank Beich (1864-1937)

Paul Frank Beich was born in Wehlau, East Prussia (now part of Russia) on May 22, 1864. He was the son of August and Hulda Beich. Paul received his early education from a kindergarten and a private elementary school, and later attended secondary school at Culm, West Prussia for seven years. At 18 years-old, he finished a three-year **apprenticeship** to learn **mercantile** trading. That same year, 1882, Paul decided to **immigrate** to the United States, first arriving in New York City and ending up in Bloomington in that same year. Paul bravely moved across the world, settling in McLean County with very little English language skills and no family by his side. He originally came to Bloomington visit his aunt, Mrs. William Schroeder, who lived on West Olive Street. That short visit ended up resulting in a permanent move and Paul Beich ended up spending the vast majority of his life in Bloomington.

After arriving in Bloomington, Paul found employment first with S.A. Maxwell & Co., a wallpaper and furniture company. He didn't care for the wallpaper business and quit after just two weeks. Next, he worked for a **confectionary** company, Bruce & Brown. It was with Bruce & Brown that Paul was introduced to candy sales and proved his natural **ability** to succeed in the business. Paul's supervisor at Bruce & Brown decided to send him on a trial trip to El Paso, Illinois to practice selling candy. The town was preparing for a fair, thus vendors were looking for a candy supplier. The supervisor encouraged Paul to not get discouraged if he ended up failing to make a single sale, as the market in El Paso had historically been difficult for the company and Paul spoke very little English. According to family history, Paul was so excited for the opportunity that he found it difficult to sleep. He ended up arriving at the train station an hour early and arrived in El Paso by seven in the morning. Due to arriving so early, **persistence** with businesses, and his **systematic** approach, Paul performed a "clean sweep" by **securing** all vendors before his **competition**. This event was pivotal for Paul as he was able to prove himself as naturally gifted in sales, in particular the selling of candy.

After making an impression and learning the business in the small candy world of Central Illinois, Beich pursued a new opportunity in St. Louis. In 1884, he moved on to working in traveling sales for O.H. Peckham Candy Manufacturing Company where he remained until 1891. During this period of employment, he learned the finer details of the candy making business and gained more experience in sales. As a salesman for Peckham, Beich was assigned territory covering the entire state of Illinois. It was also during this time that Paul Beich took the step to become a United States citizen in 1887.

Although he was employed in St. Louis, he maintained a residence in Bloomington. While living in Bloomington was more accessible to his sales territory in Illinois, it was also **convenient** to remain close to his future wife, Kittie (Catherine M.) Gerken. Kittie was the daughter of William A. Gerken, a wealthy and prominent businessman in McLean County. William held a business stake in the Bruce & Brown company and took an interest in Paul when Paul started his career with that company. They maintained a relationship, and it was through William that Paul met Kittie. Paul and Kittie were married on September 4, 1888 at the home of William Gerken at 209 E. Grove Street (which William later gifted to Kittie and Paul).

Beich spent a few years of learning the candy business and building his business relationships. In 1893, he purchased the confectionary business J.W. Gray & Co. Paul moved the company to 107 East Front Street and eventually expanded to 109-111 East Front Street. Paul would also go on to buy a stake in the Bloomington Caramel Company in January 1899 and the

two operations eventually consolidated and became known as the Paul F. Beich Company in 1905.

The Bloomington Caramel Company, first known as the Lancaster Caramel Company was owned by Milton Hershey out of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Hershey had a branch of this factory in Chicago, but it outgrew the building's capacity. Beich, aware of the candy business in the state and aware that Hershey was a major player in the field, convinced Hershey to open another branch in Bloomington. Beich later convinced Hershey to come to Bloomington by promising a local supply of fresh milk – a **staple** ingredient for the Hershey caramels. The location, access to milk, and Paul Beich's assistance made the decision to move operations to Bloomington easy for Hershey. The factory eventually provided **seasonal employment** for about 200 workers from the local community. Many of these workers were women and girls (the minimum age was 14).

During this time, the 1890s, Milton Hershey became less interested in the manufacturing of caramel and more interested in the chocolate industry. Paul jumped at the opportunity to purchase the Lancaster Caramel Company. In 1899, Paul and Otto Buffe agreed to become joint managers of the caramel factory, share the profits, and were given the option to buy the factory from Hershey after a year.

By 1905, Paul bought out Buffe's stake in the caramel company and knew he needed to consolidate both the factory on Front Street and the caramel plant. The Front Street factory was running out of space, and he needed to expand to be able to continue to safely produce products. The success of both businesses allowed him to fund an addition onto the caramel factory, costing \$50,000 (over \$1.5 million in 2022). By May 1907, the operations from the Front Street factory were moved into the caramel plant at corner of South Lumber and West Grove Streets. The factory, now known as the Paul F. Beich Candy Company, was one of the largest in the county. The new addition covered "an entire block from Front to Grove streets." *The Pantagraph* reported on the cleanliness of the plant in an article from August 1908 commenting that the condition of the building made it "a most desirable place especially for girls to work." The business continued to expand and just a year later, in 1909, Paul announced another addition to the factory. The new addition made the Paul F. Beich Company "the largest candy factory west of the **Allegheny Mountains**, and with one or two anywhere in the country as large or larger." By 1911, Paul opened a Chicago branch of his company.

The size of the plant had to be large enough to not only contain the **extensive** manufacturing process, but also store all of the ingredients needed for candy making. Over 1,000 barrels of sugar had to be stored in a large concrete warehouse away from the factory that remained sealed and fireproof. By 1910, the company had sales in every state, a sales and delivery operation out of Chicago, and exported products to other countries – they were even working on translating their price lists from English to Spanish for customers in Mexico, Central, and South America. Before World War I, the company made shipments to Canada, Norway, Egypt, Australia, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, in addition to their business in Central and South America. Additionally, the growing factory needed to make space for all of the candy-making equipment used by Paul's workers. New machinery in the early 1900s allowed for faster production of candy that was formerly made by hand. For example, a machine that cut and wrapped caramels sped up production to 2,000 pounds or 160,000 caramels ready to be sold per day.

Paul worked to keep **morale** high amongst his employees by hosting several events to show appreciation for the workers as well as foster a sense of community. He would host an annual company picnic in Miller Park. At the 1917 picnic, there was a baseball game, potato sack race, ball throwing contest, a 50-yard dash, and dancing with music played by an orchestra. In 1934,

Paul had a softball field with bleachers constructed next to the candy plant for workers to be able to play organized games.

By 1929, The Paul F. Beich Candy Company had 650 employees on the payroll with 400 in Bloomington, 200 in Chicago, and 50 traveling salesmen. By 1936, another 100 employees would be added to the ever-expanding Bloomington plant. The Bloomington plant and **annexes** totaled over 200,000 square feet, while the Chicago branch totaling about 65,000 square feet. Also by the end of the 1920s, the company produced “No less than 700 separate and distinct varieties of confectionary.” The company imported some of the finest ingredients from around the world in order to make their world-famous candies. The company also needed large amounts of corn syrup, as the company was one of the largest users of Midwest-grown corn products. The **import** and **export** activity of Paul’s company made it into a major global entity. Paul F. Beich candy was tasted all over the world, and ingredients from all over the world went into the recipes.

But Paul’s life was not just about candy. He was also active in professional organizations surrounding candy making and business. He served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Manufacturer’s Association and became the president in 1927, chairman of the advisory board from 1928 to 1929, and continued as a member of the board until his death in 1937. He was also an active member of the National Confectioners’ Association. He served on other business-related boards as well.

Paul Beich was also active in the Bloomington community outside of the candy business. Early in his career, he was an active member in the Bloomington Business Men’s Association and was noted by *The Pantagraph* as being on one of the first leaders and later became the president. He also represented Bloomington as a National Counselor for the Chamber of Commerce of the United States headquartered in Washington, D.C. Additionally, he served as a director on the Brokaw Hospital board, was a trustee on the board of Illinois Wesleyan University, and was a founder and director of the German-American Bank (renamed the American State Bank, during **World War I** due to anti-German **sentiment**).

Paul’s service to his community and country were evident during the first World War. He was the chairman of the McLean County Chapter of the American Red Cross during World War I and a few years following. The Beich plant would go on to lend their services during the **second World War** and devoted about 80% of their production to meet wartime demands of goods including sweets for **ration** kits. Paul F. Beich’s life was not exclusively about business. He was a man dedicated to his family, community, and country.

Paul and Kittie had four children, two of whom died in infancy (1890 and 1891 respectively). Those two infants are buried in the Gerken family plot at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. After losing their first two children, the Beichs welcomed a son, Otto G. Beich, into their family. Almost two years later, they had another son, Albert Beich. Both sons would go on to hold leadership roles in the company.

Paul Beich was active in the operations of the company until shortly before his death in 1937. His son Otto became president in 1928 and later chairman of the board in 1945. Paul and Kittie’s second son, Albert, was Vice-President, a board member, and the manager of Chicago operations from 1928 until his death in 1948.

Paul died on September 9, 1937, in an apartment in Chicago while under a doctor’s care. He had previously gone to a **sanitarium** in Michigan for an “ailment with which he had long suffered” before heading to Chicago for care. He passed away with his wife and sons, Otto and Albert, at his bedside. His body was taken back to Bloomington to Beck Memorial Home

(located on the site of the house where the family once lived at 209 E. Grove Street). Paul was entombed in the mausoleum at Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum, located at 1105 S. Morris Avenue in Bloomington, Illinois. His wife Kittie is entombed next to him in the **mausoleum**, and other members of the Beich family, including his son Otto, are buried at Park Hill Cemetery as well. Throughout his life, Paul was said to live by a few simple rules: “Be honest, work hard, and use good common sense.” Paul chose to make Bloomington his home and it is through his honesty, hard work, and common sense that he made a lasting impact in the community that can be felt even today.