A FAMILY'S FORTUNES

A "pre-history" of Bashas'

By Rob Johnson

Seventy years is a long time by anybody's measure. Few are those who truly can remember what was going on in the world way back in 1932.

Charles Lindberg had made the first transatlantic flight just five years prior. In '32, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to do the same thing. The Depression was in full swing. Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced his "New Deal." The Summer Olympics were in Los Angeles (for the first time). The following year, *King Kong* (the first one) would hit theaters.

And in a dusty little resort and farming community 25 miles south of Phoenix, a couple of brothers got it into their heads to open a grocery store. Seventy years and nearly 130 stores later, the legacy of their vision is alive and well. *Very* well.

Today, Bashas' is a thriving, growing grocery chain consisting of 127 stores and employing 10,500 people. We almost take our success for granted, as though this is how it's always been. In 1932, though, the success this company now enjoys was far from a sure thing. In fact, opening that first store constituted quite a gamble—a gamble whose stakes were a family's financial ruin or salvation.

That decisive moment—the opening of the first Bashas' store—was the climax of a story that began years earlier. *Many* years earlier. What follows is a little bit of our company's "pre-history."

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Although we date our founding to 1932, when the name "Bashas'" first appeared on a building, the history of the Basha family's fortunes in America actually began in the previous century—1884, to be exact. It is the 48-year span from 1884 to 1932 that lays the foundation for that first Bashas' store.

For the Basha family, it was an era marked by risk and reward, disaster and triumph, hardship and resourcefulness. It was an era that shows just how much effort it takes to realize the American Dream.

Mainly, it is an era marked by two main characters: Najeeb and Najeeby Basha, a couple whose eight children included Ike and Eddie Basha, Sr., the men who one day would open that first store.

Let's begin at the beginning: Lebanon, 1884. A young, newly married man named Tanuis Basha, a shoemaker, was hearing fabulous tales of a country where opportunities were limitless. He decided to head for New York and establish himself, then send for his family. In New York, he began an import and export wholesale store and enjoyed modest success—enough that he could send for his son, Najeeb, two years later.

Najeeb, then only 16, joined his father in New York in 1886. Soon, the entire Basha family also moved to America.

Years passed. The small Lebanese community in New York was a tight-knit group. The men would gather in the evenings for "sahras," hours-long get-togethers that included card games and socializing. Their wives would be nearby, serving food and catching up with one another. Najeeb Basha, now a bit older, became good friends with a more senior gentleman named Habeeb Srour, who himself had emigrated from Lebanon not long before. Habeeb hosted many of these sahras, and he had a teenaged daughter, Najeeby, who helped serve the food. Najeeby and Najeeb fell in love, and married in 1901.

It was a perfect match between two industrious, resourceful people with a mind for business. Najeeb was learning much from his father, and gradually took over the business as his father's health failed. Najeeby, whose father's business had never done as well as Najeeb's father's, had spent her childhood supplementing her family's income by peddling wares (mainly lace) to wealthy New Yorkers like the Vanderbilts, Tiffanys and Wannamakers.

Najeeb and Najeeby lived in the three-story Basha family home in New York, along with all the other members of the Basha family. It was crowded. Najeeb was gone on business trips a lot, and Najeeby longed for a home of her own. Children came. As the business grew, many needy Lebanese would come to Najeeb for unsecured loans. One tragic day, the business burned down. There was no insurance. What with the loans he'd made and the loss of the business, Najeeb faced financial ruin.

Najeeby was tired of the business stress and the crowded house. She missed her parents (who had returned to Lebanon), and she started thinking about her only relative in America, a sister who had moved to Arizona and who wrote glowing letters to her about all the prosperity in the mining towns. Najeeby had visited her sister years before, and loved what she'd seen. The wide-open spaces of the American West called to her relentlessly, so she pleaded with Najeeb to move.

In 1910, Najeeb complied. He went alone to Congress Junction, Arizona, to join his wife's sister and her husband and arrange a merger with their mercantile business. Shortly thereafter, Najeeby—with children in tow (including a young Ike)—made the five-day train trip west and joined him.

But Najeeb wasn't happy with the business opportunities in Congress Junction, so only a few months after arriving in Arizona, he moved the whole family to Ray and opened his own store. They lived in a small, three-room house rented from the Kennicott Mining Company. The house had a kerosene stove, no running water, and an outhouse—but Najeeby had it all to herself. Eddie Sr. was born in this home.

Although Kennicott eventually built the Basha family a nicer house (on account of their service to the mining community), one day a man with a grudge against Kennicott dumped a bunch of gasoline on a wooden walkway and set it on fire. As the town was built primarily of wood, the whole place went up in smoke—including the Basha family's store. Again. And again, there was no insurance.

Facing poverty, Najeeby sold all the beautifully-tailored clothes she'd brought from New York. Najeeb, feeling the weight of the business disaster, developed diabetes and gradually lost his health, forcing more of the family's responsibilities on Najeeby.

One mile from Ray, in a little town called Sonora, were several Lebanese families. Najeeb moved his family there and built a large brick general merchandise store with borrowed money. There were bulk bins containing groceries, sugar bricks, cinnamon sticks, beans and rice. They also sold ribbons, lace, shirts, dresses, shoes and other clothing.

Life in Sonora was trying. The family lived in a two-bedroom house with a tin roof that resonated during thunderstorms. Scorpions, snakes and centipedes routinely made their way inside. Drunken miners often mistook the family home for a nearby house of prostitution, forcing Najeeby to drive them off.

The family grew. Najeeb and Najeeby now had eight children—six girls and two boys. Edna, the oldest, became a great help to her parents, and was the main reason the Basha family moved to the Valley. Although her family's needs dictated that she cease school after only the eighth grade, she was the first to realize that there was no future for the family in Sonora. Najeeby's sister now lived in a fine home in Phoenix, making life in Sonora look awful by comparison. Edna begged her father to follow suit.

The decision was made when, almost unbelievably, a third fire destroyed most of the inventory in the Basha family's Sonora store. Najeeb moved everyone to Chandler. He bought two pieces of property: one on East Boston Street, where he established a store, and another on North Washington Street, where he built a large house and surrounded it with fruit trees. Both buildings were completed in 1920.

Although there was great damage at the Sonora store, it remained open and viable, so Najeeb spent much of his time there keeping it going, leaving the Chandler store for Najeeby to establish. It was tough on the family to be divided, but they made it work. In her husband's absence, Najeeby found herself making more and more business decisions. She excelled at it, and the Chandler store thrived. Locals frequented the store,

as did the area's Native Americans. Najeeby dealt with Pima customers so often that she learned the language.

Curiously, Najeeby never learned to read or write. She devised her own method of bookkeeping, using symbols and numerals to keep track of customers and their credit balances. Ike would "clean up" the credit ledger after school.

Najeeb, accompanied by Edna, continued to make the rough, back-and-forth commute between the two stores. Finally, in 1929, Najeeb sold the Sonora store. The family at last could live together full-time in Chandler, and an era of profound happiness for the entire family ensued. Friends would gather around the Chandler store's pot-bellied stove in winter, or under the ceiling fans in summer. The family enjoyed big meals together every evening after the store closed. Afterward, everyone would listen to the radio or read. Sometimes, they'd walk to the drugstore for an ice cream float.

The children would harvest the fruit from the trees that surrounded their house. Najeeby would direct a large canning operation (heating up the kitchen something awful), and they'd sell the preserves to boost the family's income.

It was at this stage that Eddie Sr. began to show his business savvy. On weekends, with his father's permission, he would fill a wagon with fresh produce from the yard surrounding his home and sell it door-to-door in Chandler.

Unfortunately, this era was short-lived. Najeeb's diabetes became worse. He was bedridden and attended round-the-clock by nurses. After months of suffering, he called in each of his children, kissed them goodbye, and insisted that they be good to their mother. He drank a toast to life with his two boys. On June 7, 1932, he died.

Najeeby, desperately sad at her husband's passing, now carried the responsibility of running the family business. But she wasn't alone. Her children helped her. And the experience she'd gained running the store while Najeeb was in Sonora helped.

Yet again, the family faced grim financial news. The doctor bills from Najeeb's prolonged illness, combined with funeral expenses, were a real setback. Ike and Eddie, who'd now finished school, did their best to help. To augment sales, Ike and Najeeby would pack up the family car with shoes, combs and other merchandise each Sunday and head out to the Pima and Yaqui reservations to sell goods to those who couldn't find transportation to town. This Herculean effort didn't bring in much extra income, but it did help pay the plentiful bills.

Life was hard. Najeeby missed her husband, and the boys missed his guidance. They realized, however, that it was up to them to take the reins and see to the well being of their family. After a tension-breaking family trip to Colorado to visit an aunt, the boys learned that a man named J.G. Boswell had started a substantial cotton and farming company, employing hundreds, on a large piece of property in an area then known as Goodyear, five miles south of Chandler. Boswell leased the property from the

Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, which had established a farming community in the area (one of three in the Valley) in 1917 to grow cotton for the cords in its tires. Goodyear was losing money on the operation, though, and consolidated all farming activity in the far West Valley. (They would later take the community's name with them when they finally sold the property in 1944.) Also on that property was a cluster of houses, built by Goodyear, in which Boswell's company directors lived.

Boswell wanted someone to run a post office/general merchandise store where his employees could cash in the coupons they received as pay. Ike and Eddie investigated this opportunity, and—relying on the business sense they'd seen demonstrated so effectively by their parents—decided that it held potential. It turned out they were right.

And so we arrive at 1932, and the first store graced with the name "Bashas'." That initial store, located at the site of the current corporate offices, has been absorbed over the years into the overall structure of the office building.

Which is appropriate, since it forms the core of what Bashas' stands for, and its heart still beats loudly throughout the company.

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Although what's happened in the 70 years since 1932 has been at least as dramatic as what transpired in the 48 years prior, it was in the foundry of those formative years that the Basha family's steel was tested and hammered into shape. It was then that the vision of a successful family business made its first glimmer. It was then that the family was forced to keep its eyes on that vision and to nurture it, even when it threatened to flicker out.

But the glimmer survived. A Lebanese man had a glimmer of a better life, took an enormous risk, and came to America. His son, accompanied by his wife, had a vision of a better life out west, took an enormous risk, and came to Arizona. Success and failure came in nearly equal measure, and at times, the vision seemed in doubt. Finally, two grandsons of that first Lebanese immigrant saw a last-ditch opportunity to keep their family from ruin, took an enormous risk, and opened a store in 1932. The American Dream at last became real.

And the rest is history. History we'll tell in future issues of *Inside Bashas'*.