

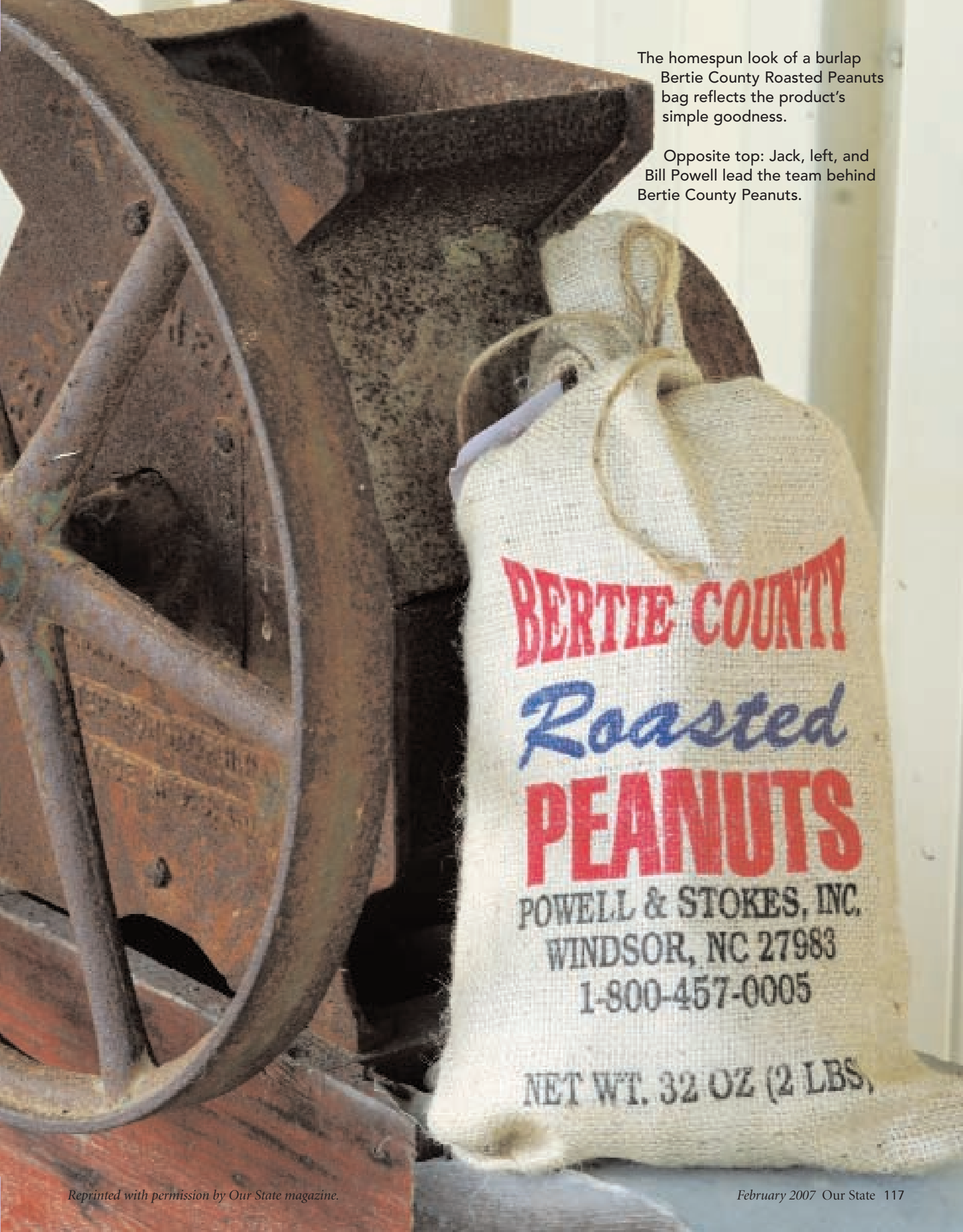


# GOING NUTS



What started as an off-season side project at Powell & Stokes farm supply company has become a business in itself — Bertie County Peanuts.

*By Katherine Kopp*



The homespun look of a burlap Bertie County Roasted Peanuts bag reflects the product's simple goodness.

Opposite top: Jack, left, and Bill Powell lead the team behind Bertie County Peanuts.

**A** cavernous old building on U.S. Highway 13 in Windsor houses Powell & Stokes, a farm supply business founded in 1915 by brothers-in-law Luther Powell and Jonathan Stokes. One important chapter in the story of the business is the Bertie County Peanut Company.

Powell & Stokes's founders ran the family business for the first few decades. Then, in the late 1940s, Luther Powell's sons, Jack and

LuWhit, returned to Bertie County after serving in World War II and took up the reins. Now a third generation, brothers Jack Powell Jr. and Bill Powell, spend each day swapping stories with and serving local farmers and other customers who stop in for fertilizer, feed, and supplies. Old photos, signs, plaques, and framed newspaper clippings line the walls inside, telling the story of Powell & Stokes through the years.

### Home grown

Back in the 1960s and early '70s, Jack Sr. began frying up what he called "blister-fried peanuts" in a popcorn popper in the store, while his sons took over the day-to-day running of Powell & Stokes. "It was just something he enjoyed doing," says Jack Jr. of his father's peanut cooking. "He developed a recipe where he would briefly

boil the shelled peanuts, then fry them in hot oil while they were still wet. That created the blister-fried nuts."

Local demand for these uniquely cooked peanuts grew over the years, and in 1994, Jack Jr. and Bill founded Bertie County Peanuts, which now accounts for 15 to 20 percent of the farm supply company's overall revenue each year. "Farming is shrinking, and the peanut business is growing," says Jack. "It's good for us to have some different things going on." While Jack and Bill run the daily operations of Powell & Stokes, some of their children assist them with sales and marketing for Bertie County Peanuts, bringing a fourth generation into the family business.

Jack says the company was founded for two reasons: the first, "to give us something to do between November and February or March," he says, grinning. "Before we had the peanut business, we had nothing to do between when the crops were harvested in the fall and planting in the spring. We'd just sit around with our employees looking at each other, trying to figure out what we were going to do to keep busy."

The second reason was to create a product that Bertie County could be proud of, Jack says. "Back in the late 1980s, I was on a commission that looked at ways Bertie County could advance itself," he says. Jack and Bill came up with the idea of packaging peanuts, a major crop in northeastern North Carolina, under the Bertie County name. The two refined their father's recipe for blister-fried peanuts, purchased a state-of-the-art cooker, and began selling under the Bertie County Peanuts label. It's an idea that has resonated with the community.

"Local people come in and stock up when they're going away," Jack says. "People love to take Bertie County Peanuts as gifts to others and say, 'This is where I'm from.'"

If you have a handful of peanuts, you may want to pop 'em out of the shell by hand. But for a large quantity, an antique peanut sheller would do the trick nicely.



## Only the best

Powell & Stokes uses only peanuts graded “super extra-large” for its products, a grade of nuts that comprises just two percent of the nation’s overall peanut crop. “An acre of peanuts yields around 3,500 pounds,” Jack says. “So a typical acre would yield only about 70 pounds of this grade of peanut.”

Bertie County Peanuts cooks about 60,000 to 80,000 pounds of peanuts each year, with about a dozen employees responsible for the cooking. “We’ve moved four times over the years as we’ve expanded,” says Jack. “We started out in a room in the back of the store, then moved to an old house down the road, and then to a converted filling station. Now we’re cooking peanuts in a warehouse out on the bypass.”

The blister-fried nuts are the company’s best seller, but the product line has expanded over the years. Bertie County Peanuts now produces chocolate-covered peanuts, butterscotch peanuts, and “Red-Hot Hexlena” nuts. The line also includes pecans, cashews, and snack mixes containing nuts.

Ideas for new products are inspired by suggestions from family members and local farmers, Jack notes. “The local farmers are also our best tasters. We can put out samples of something new, and they’ll give us their honest opinions.”

Bertie County Peanuts’s newest product is a peanut butter, simply made with pure peanuts and nothing else. Like the company’s other products, it is only available at the farm supply business in Windsor, a few stores in the area, and through the company’s mail-order catalog or over the Internet.

“About 80 percent of our business is mail order, with about 20 percent sold locally,” Jack says. He and his brother go to a few trade shows in the state each year, introducing Bertie County Peanuts to new customers. “A lot of our business is word of mouth,” he adds. “People sample our peanuts somewhere, or a friend gives them a jar, and then they contact us to order more.”

The company plans to develop



Powell & Stokes’s storehouses hold nuts waiting to be processed and packaged as Bertie County Peanuts.

another hot nut product in response to customer demand. “I’d say the hot peanut we make now is a six or seven on a scale of 10 [being the hottest],” Jack says. “But no matter how hot and spicy something is, some people want it to be even hotter, so we’re planning to make a hot nut that is about a 10 or 11.”

Jack and Bill are also developing several trail mixes named for local rivers to market to kayakers and canoeists who explore the region’s waterways. “We’ll have a Roanoke River Ration, a Cashie River Ration, and a Chowan River Ration,” says Jack.

As Powell & Stokes comes within sight of its 100th anniversary, the Powell brothers press forward with new ideas every day. And one thing is certain — they’ll continue to “go nuts” over their own Bertie County Peanuts. 🐿️

*Katherine Kopp divides her time between Edenton and Chapel Hill.*

## to know more

To find out more about Bertie County Peanuts, visit the company’s website at [www.pnuts.net](http://www.pnuts.net).