

### House of Plenty: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Luby's Cafeterias

Carol Dawson, Carol Johnston



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Scarred by the deaths of his mother and sisters and the failure of his father's business, a young man dreamed of making enough money to retire early and retreat into the secure world that his childhood tragedies had torn from him. But Harry Luby refused to be a robber baron. Turning totally against the tide of avaricious capitalism, he determined to make a fortune by doing good. Starting with that unlikely, even naive, ambition in 1911, Harry Luby founded a cafeteria empire that by the 1980s had revenues second only to McDonald's. So successfully did Luby and his heirs satisfy the tastes of America that Luby's became the country's largest cafeteria chain, creating more millionaires per capita among its employees than any other corporation of its size. Even more surprising, the company stayed true to Harry Luby's vision for eight decades, making money by treating its customers and employees exceptionally well.

Written with the sweep and drama of a novel, *House of Plenty* tells the engrossing story of Luby's founding and phenomenal growth, its long run as America's favorite family restaurant during the post-World War II decades, its financial failure during the greed-driven 1990s when non-family leadership jettisoned the company's proven business model, and its recent struggle back to solvency. Carol Dawson and Carol Johnston draw on insider stories and company records to recapture the forces that propelled the company to its greatest heights, including its unprecedented practices of allowing store managers to keep 40 percent of net profits and issuing stock to all employees, which allowed thousands of Luby's workers to achieve the American dream of honestly earned prosperity. The authors also plumb the depths of the Luby's drama, including a hushed-up theft that split the family for decades; the 1991 mass shooting at the Killeen Luby's, which splattered the company's good name across headlines nationwide; and the rapacious over-expansion that more than doubled the company's size in nine years (1987-1996), pushed it into bankruptcy, and drove president and CEO John Edward Curtis Jr. to violent suicide.

Disproving F. Scott Fitzgerald's adage that "there are no second acts in American lives," House of Plenty tells the epic story of an iconic American institution that has risen, fallen, and found redemption—with no curtain call in sight.

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