

High Flyers on the Small Screen

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SEX! Scandal! Crime! Money! Good guys and bad guys and plenty of conflict between them! No wonder television seems like a natural for family business. "Dallas," "Dynasty," even "Bonanza" found huge audiences and held them for years. When network executives want a more highbrow approach, they can focus on real-life families with lots of glamor—the Kennedys and Rockefellers of the world—and create a product that crosses Oprah with the PBS documentary on the Civil War.

On television, families, wealth, and fame sell. But amid all the drama and human interest, can television illuminate our understanding of family business?

It can if you know where to look. This January, the popular "Biography" series on the Arts & Entertainment cable network presented its Family Business Week, featuring profiles on consecutive nights of three brand-name corporate dynasties—the du Ponts, Kelloggs, and Coors—and one readily recognized circus act—the Flying Wallendas. It also included a double-length feature on the Gambino crime family, which was "admittedly a stretch," according to executive producer Carol Anne Dolan.

The shows were frequently entertaining, weaving history, great visuals, and behind-the-scenes revelations into good storytelling. Not surprisingly, as one who works with family companies, I took a professional interest in what these shows reveal about success and continuity in these businesses. Four of the programs portray in fascinating detail the strengths and weaknesses of leadership at each of the three stages in the evolution of a family

business—the controlling-owner, sibling partnership, and cousin consortium stages. The series also has much to say about the high price of wealth and fame (or should I say notoriety).

KARL WALLENDAS DREAM

"The dead are buried; the show goes on!" Those are allegedly Karl Wallenda's words the day in 1959 his nephew Gunther fell 60 feet to his death from the high wire. And the show did go on. Despite repeated disasters, the decline of circuses, and the proliferation of competitors, the Wallendas found ways to stay on the wire. Whether it was a good idea or not is unclear.

The Wallendas portray in stark tones the power and the danger of a charismatic founder. The program, pieced together from old footage of the Hungarian family, begins with a well-written and heartbreaking summary of Karl's early years in a circus family with an abusive father and an adoring mother. His premature responsibility for hustling the family's income (at age 6), coupled with the adulation he could generate with daring "sky walking" acts, convincingly set up his later obsession with fame and patriarchal control.

From the time he was discovered by John Ringling in 1928 and brought to America, he lived only to perpetuate the act. The family was primarily a resource pool—wife, children, siblings, nephews and nieces, and ultimately grandchildren. "Life is on the wire," he is quoted as saying, "the rest is just waiting." As a result, when accidents killed or crippled rela-

tives, Karl brushed his responsibility aside (“I don’t feel guilty”) and immediately focused on replacing the now missing part and getting back to work.

Ironically, but predictably, when Karl himself died in 1978, falling from the wire (at age 73), the family went to hell in a hand basket. The grandchildren have been battling in court ever since for the family name, fame, and fortune. An overly narcissistic controlling owner often creates an enterprise that has no future.

This show does offer the single most compelling live moment of the entire week. While the family was being filmed for a television documentary in 1968, a serious fall during practice led to a discussion of whether or not to continue. The cameras caught Karl’s wife, Helen, and some others expressing their weary reluctance, while Karl alternately seduces and bullies them into going on. The emotional intensity, as the family clearly forgets they are being recorded, shows how real life is frequently more dramatic than the most polished script.

THE KELLOGGS’ PARTNERSHIP

The Kellogg story is a remarkable picture of a sibling partnership dramatically changing over time. John Kellogg, the older brother and a physician, believed fanatically in health, exercise, cleanliness, and vegetarianism—a visionary ideologue. He presided over the world’s largest and most glamorous health spas in Battle Creek, Michigan, and brought in his younger brother, Will, to take care of business operations.

Corn Flakes were “invented” in the brothers’ continual search for appealing health foods for the patients. But Dr. John wanted nothing to do with commercializing the recipe. Will, on the other hand, saw the business opportunity in making cereal flakes from grain.

The show gives a wonderful sense of America around the turn of the century, full of fads and characters. There is some fascinating case material on the nature of entrepreneurship, especially in the competition between the Kellogg brothers and the man who “stole” their ideas for his own profit, Charles W. Post. But when

the show turns to the family dynamics, there are significant gaps.

For example, the film captures very well the common situation of the domineering eldest sibling who treats the younger sibling as a trusted go-fer. Will, who began as an apprentice and personal assistant to his brother, bears it with remarkable humility and buried resentment until the day it all blows up. The talents and interests of the brothers didn’t overlap. Sibling partnerships flourish under such circumstances, but falter when complementarity turns to destructive conflict. What finally gave Will the courage to break away from his brother and begin his own commercial cereal company, which he built into an industry giant? What led to such a powerful estrangement between the brothers? Was Will’s success and ultimate “coming of age” too much of a challenge for the older brother to bear?

The rich opportunity to learn about the real psychological dynamics in the entrepreneurial sibling partnership is mostly missed here, and the project suffers for it.

THE DU PONT COUSINS GET THEIR SHOT

This program presents a true dynasty, the du Ponts of Delaware—brashly introduced as “America’s richest family.” The first half of the show covers two centuries of family history and introduces the themes that run throughout du Ponts’ legacy: the hungry immigrant family just off the boat helping themselves to food from the unattended home of a poor farmer, but leaving a generous French coin in payment (beginning a tradition of wealthy presumption mixed with philanthropy); a personal friendship with Thomas Jefferson, leading to the company’s rise as the world’s premier manufacturer of gunpowder (beginning an uneasy alliance as a munitions supplier to government); and the rather odd tradition of cousins marrying each other generation after generation.

One watershed event ensured family dominance of the DuPont Company into a new century. The firm operated in the 19th century under the guidance of a few good leaders and a

number of befuddled scientists. By 1902, however, it looked as if family management had run its course. The founder's nephew, who was supposed to carry the firm into its second century, had been killed in one of the frequent gunpowder explosions. The best talent of the younger generation had moved into other fields, or was not ready for leadership. The only way to avoid bankruptcy was to sell the company to its prime competitor.

At the last minute, young Alfred I. du Pont was able to create an unlikely cousin consortium that scraped together an alternative bid. The offer involved little cash and, for the senior generation, was remarkably high risk. Nevertheless, the seniors seem to have decided, "What the hell—they're family. Let's give the kids a shot!" The shot hit the mark, and the multimillionaire du Pont descendants are undoubtedly grateful.

As the du Pont story unfolds, we get a picture of the complexities of family systems at this stage. Cousins form alliances and break them up, sometimes for business reasons, and sometimes for the most personal ones. The ebb and flow of leadership across family branches and through generations, and the eventual backing away of the family from executive roles in the operating companies, are suggested but not explored in any depth.

THE COORS COPE WITH SHOCKS

This show is the most successful blend of family, business, and history in the series, and it nicely illustrates the evolution of one family enterprise through all three of the generational stages. It begins with Adolph Coors, a 15-year-old orphan stowaway who arrived in New York in 1868 with 17 cents in his pocket. By 1872 he was making beer in Golden, Colorado, and at age 33 he bought out his partner and Coors Brewery was on its way.

The impact of the founder is powerful here, as with the Wallendas, but in a slightly less compulsive and destructive form. Adolph and his son, Adolph Jr., managed the company through the anti-German sentiments of World War I and the decade of Prohibition. His diver-

sification plan during those years was creative and strategically inspired, transforming a traditional brewery technology to make such eclectic products as "near beer" (non-alcoholic), malted milk, and porcelain containers.

The story continues with fascinating anecdotes about the various sibling and cousin partnerships that led the family and the company through the following decades. The family had to cope with nearly continual shocks—some of their own making (such as extremist politics and prejudices) and some in the normal course of competitive business. Their fierce work ethic, and a "business-first and family-second" attitude, left numerous casualties in their wake, but the company survived. The theme of a conservative, patriarchal leadership with strong family collaboration comes through clearly. The show shines a powerful light on this reclusive family, from a straightforward but not unkind point of view.

The viewer is left with big questions, such as why Peter and Jeff, the current-generation saviors of the company, don't appear on film. But overall this is a satisfying and thought-provoking hour, worth viewing several times.

If you sit through the whole week, or watch all the videos, some general themes jump off the screen. First, all of these stories are really about the American Dream. Four of these families took a powerful European culture and transplanted it to the United States, where it flourished in a variety of unexpected ways.

These are immigrant fables. The flamboyant charisma of the Hungarian Wallendas, the stern Germanic fundamentalism of the Coors, the French aristocratic style of the du Ponts, and the Sicilian *omertà* of the Gambino's provide incredible energy to these dynasties. Each of these is a classically American story—brains, capital, opportunity, and luck—but as a group they also remind us that the American Dream is frequently born somewhere else and only lived out here. That lesson also reminds us that the du Ponts and Coors of the next century are probably knocking around the barrios and ethnic ghettos of today—if we're lucky.

CAUTIONARY TALES

The shows are full of cautionary tales, especially about the dangers of high public visibility. A Coors is kidnapped; du Ponts are accused of war profiteering and, later, murder; the senior Kellogg, who hosted the *élite*, gets a reputation as a quack; the broken and destroyed Wallendas try desperately to satisfy the public's ever-increasing appetite for thrills. There is at least one moment in each film when the question of privacy is raised. It could be that most of these family members would still say that wealth and status are worth it, but you can't miss hearing—in the comments of offspring Holly or Bob Coors, or the nearly dazed remembrances of the surviving Wallendas—that the costs are very high.

Romance and sex are prominently featured in these stories; this is, after all, television. There is also a strong dose of repression, as in the unintentionally hilarious description of John Kellogg's 40-year celibate marriage. But the consequences for the business of these issues remain largely unexamined. For example, several of the families have key figures who give the series narrator opportunities to play the game, "Who's Gay and Who's Just Shy?" The isolation and anxiety of such individuals usually sends powerful ripples through a family's power structure and can cause destructive dissonance.

There are plenty of affairs, too. Joe Coors disappears from the story and from public life when he moves to California with "another woman" after 40 years of marriage. The pain of his ex-wife shows through her smiles and provides some of the most touching moments of the entire week. The story is made less tragic by the impression that her own life has finally opened up and taken off since her husband departed.

In general, however, these kiss-and-tell themes are presented from the perspective of the males in the families. A family friend explains the exclusion of women from the early generations of the Coors firm with the bland, "[they] didn't think women were smart enough for business." (A daughter from the youngest generation of Coors has now joined the firm.)

Implicitly, the programs reveal much about the traditional status of women in these companies. All week they appear mostly as mistresses, victims, and troublemakers. Mothers get brief mentions—that's about it. It's too bad that none of the programs do much with this topic. The one common theme that all family business viewers can relate to is that each of these families almost lost it all at one time or another. Somewhere along the road, every one of them ran into bankruptcy, or competitive defeats, or divorce, suicide, and public humiliation. These businesses have lasted through generations because their owners were resilient. They ultimately succeeded because they bounced back from disaster. They had the courage to learn from their mistakes and go on. That message may bring hope to others in dark moments. ■

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