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One Hundred Years of Corn Flakes History, Marketing and Spray-on Vitamins at Kellogg's Cereal City

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

My kids don't normally get to eat Froot Loops, but here they are, shoving in handfuls as fast as they can when they're supposed to be stringing them onto a necklace. Forget the sign that reads "not meant to be eaten." My two and four year old kids can't read, and apparently, neither can their father. His large hands are scooping them in his mouth just as quickly. "Lunch!" he proclaims.

Part museum, part slick playhouse, this Battle Creek, Mich edifice dedicated to cereal is a quirky, yet fun place to learn about a century of Americana. Plus it's the perfect stop on a six hour drive between Chicago and Detroit. The kids tire themselves out in a ball pit disguised as a container of milk, while weary parents rest on oversized Froot Loop chairs.

On the surface, this monument to breakfast food seems bizarre. After all, there's a 20 foot high box of cereal outside, and a 250 pound Lego version of Tony the Tiger inside. But dig a little deeper and you'll uncover the history of domestic and international marketing, the modern industrial revolution, corporate branding, a brotherly feud and mass produced health food.

The story starts in 1894, when brothers Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Will Keith Kellogg ran the Battle Creek Sanitarium and Health Spa. J.H. was superintendent, and younger brother W.K. was the business man. A Seventh-Day Adventist organization, the "San" (as it was known) promoted healthful living to its patients - no meat, no coffee, no alcohol, no smoking. And they were big on enemas.

The brothers worked together creating new foods. In fact, J.H. is credited with patenting the process of making peanut butter. While trying to make a bread substitute in 1896, the brothers cooked a batch of wheat, but then left the kitchen for the night. The next morning the dough was stale. They put it through rollers anyway, expecting long sheets of dough. Instead they got flakes, which they toasted and served to hungry patients. It was a hit. They continued to experiment with the flaking process, which soon led to corn flakes, apparently tastier than the flaked wheat cereal they called Granose.

The brothers began selling their corn flake product soon after. The infighting began when W.K. wanted to add sugar to the cereal. He did so, and started the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company in 1906, selling Kellogg's Corn Flakes. And so began a series of trademark infringement lawsuits between the brothers. W.K. won that battle in 1921.

While the history is fascinating to adults, my son Zachary was more interested in the truck exhibit. It tells the simple story of the cereal's distribution line. As Zachary moved the wooden truck from the factory to the distribution center, the cereal was transferred

along with it. He had to switch trucks at the distribution center, which went next to the grocery store. He then had to change to a car, which takes the groceries home. At two years old, Zachary didn't quite follow the concept, but an older kid would have gotten it.

Kellogg's Cereal City (oddly not owned or run by Kellogg's, but rather by the non-profit Heritage Center Foundation) opened in 1998, when actual factory tours were no longer offered. Here, we took a faux factory tour, complete with the factory's presumed sounds, smells and tastes.

Starting with a video, we learned the secret recipe for corn flakes. Start with 2,000 pounds of corn grits, and add 90 pounds of flavoring. Cook it at 260 degrees for 20 minutes, with 20 pounds of steam pressure. The wet grits are now dried and tempered. Next they're off to the flaking mills, where they're rolled between two 2,000 pound rollers, turning into brown flakes (one flake per corn kernel). After toasting them for one minute at 500 degrees, they're golden brown, and then sprayed with vitamins.

In the meantime, 1,000 cardboard boxes are made per minute, date stamped and filled with a heat-sealed wax liner. In 24 hours, a Kellogg's factory makes 5.5 million packages of assorted cereal, often in the country in which they're sold (Miel Pops in Spain, Rice Bubbles in Australia, Froot Ring in Korea).

The hands-on tour was a hit with the kids, who especially liked the quality assurance tasting at the end. The warm corn flakes tumbled into paper cones, and we had to make sure they passed the taste test.

While we didn't get to see the Froot Loops produced, I was slightly disgusted to learn that the mixture of grains, sugar, salt and food color goes through an extruder, producing ropes of dough. After cutting them into pellets to dry, the pellets expand and puff to several times their size when exposed to high pressure and temperature. Later, they're sprayed with flavor coating and syrup, then dried. Yum!

This did, however, prepare us for the "Extruded, Exploded or Flaked" game in another room. My husband Mark and I tested our new-found knowledge of cereal production by quizzing each other. "All Bran?" I asked. Mark yelled "Extruded!" Bingo. "Rice Krispies?" I continued. "Exploded!"

At Cereal City we got explanations for some of those burning breakfast time questions that arise when pouring cereal from a box. Why do Rice Krispies make noise when doused with milk? During toasting, the oven's hot air expands the rice kernel, forming air pockets. The milk breaks down the structure in those pockets, making crackling noises.

Ever wonder why the bag inside the cereal box has no zipper lining? After a few uses, food dust and crumbs prevent it from resealing. Aha!

While we didn't spend much time watching television or movies at Cereal City, there were several opportunities. We could take a trip down commercial lane, watching shows

originally sponsored by Kellogg's, or watch advertisements from different countries. There's even a theater show featuring W.K. Kellogg's innovative marketing techniques – branding, advertising and promotions.

Advertising techniques that are common now, like billboard advertising, using celebrities to sell products, allowing consumers to sample foods and offering value-added toys or entertainment to the package, were novel when Kellogg's began using them during the last century.

The company was the first to use corrugated cereal cartons that were not only stronger, but made the boxes more attractive. And as for healthful living, Kellogg's was the first company to fortify cereal with vitamins B and D, using the spray method.

My kids still don't get to eat Froot Loops at home, and I don't remember which product Tony the Tiger is hawking, but we did find Cereal City surprisingly educational...and fun too.

Deborah Abrams Kaplan is a California-based travel writer.

If You Go:

Kellogg's Cereal City USA - 171 W. Michigan Avenue, Battle Creek, Michigan.
(800) 970-7020. <http://www.kelloggscerealcity.com/Default.aspx>

Breakfast with Tony the Tiger and other characters is on most summer Saturdays and monthly through winter.

More information:

Battle Creek/Calhoun County Visitor & Convention Bureau, (800) 397-2240.
www.Battlecreekvisitors.org

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