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Robust ad campaigns helped Kellogg's Corn Flakes become known as a convenient, ready-to-eat breakfast in the early 20th century.

Story highlights

The Kellogg brothers developed flake cereals for people with indigestion

Their breakfast legacy touches nutrition, convenience, advertising -- and mass-manufactured food

Editor's Note: Dr. Howard Markel, the George E. Wantz distinguished professor of the history of medicine at the University of Michigan, is the author of ["The Kelloggs: The Battling Brothers of Battle Creek."](#)

(CNN) — This morning, more than 350 million people devoured a bowl of Kellogg's Corn Flakes. All told, more than 128 billion bowls of Corn Flakes are consumed each year. While perusing the cereal box, peering over the bowl and gripping a spoonful of the stuff, few of these sleepy diners know that two men created those famously crispy, golden flakes of corn. John Harvey Kellogg, one of America's most famous physicians, and Will Keith Kellogg, John's longtime lackey and whipping boy, were brothers from the Michigan hamlet of Battle Creek. Together, they introduced and mass-marketed the concept of "wellness."

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The Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium urged "wellness" through controlled diets and therapies such as artificial sunlight treatment, shown around 1924.



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Will marched across the street and founded the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company, the original name of the Kellogg Company, which today enjoys more than \$14 billion a year in net sales of breakfast cereals, snacks and other manufactured foods in 180 nations around the globe.

Flaked cereals were initially developed by the Kellogg brothers as a health food for "invalids with poor digestion." Dr. Kellogg specialized in treating people with chronic flatulence, constipation, indigestion, all from consuming of the then-typical American diet of greasy fried foods, salted or cured meats, creamed vegetables, spicy pickles and condiments, and too much caffeine and alcohol. No wonder Walt Whitman once called stomachaches "the great American evil."

Will's genius was to recognize that there were far many more people looking for a nutritious and convenient breakfast, so he substituted tasty corn for the bland wheat originally used, added some salt and sugar against the doctor's prescription, and came up with Corn Flakes.

The dawn of 'processed food'

Will was a serious student of the "science" of business, whether he was publishing his brother's books and magazines, selling the foods and health products John invented, running the Battle Creek Sanitarium or manufacturing cereal. He methodically analyzed, applied and adopted efficiency techniques and business systems espoused by the best commercial gurus of the day.

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Physician John Harvey Kellogg, shown at age 86, championed "biologic living" to millions, including famous figures who came to "the San."

For nearly a quarter of a century, while John enacted one scene after another of fraternal dominance, the quiet, stolid Will was doing far more than merely taking orders. He was preparing to become a renowned captain of industry. Just as Henry Ford was figuring out the economies of scale to sell the millions of automobiles rolling off his vaunted assembly line, Will Kellogg revolutionized the administration of the modern medical center and, later, the mass production and marketing of "processed food."



Will tirelessly persuaded American grocers to carry his products and consumers to relish his cereals. Heralding breakfast as "the most important meal of the day," Will made the hectic mornings of beleaguered mothers and fathers so much easier by providing a quick, convenient, healthy, nutritious breakfast they could simply pour out of a box and into a bowl. He was an early adopter of the newly created field of mass advertising and invested millions of dollars in a never-ending barrage of colorful and attractive ads, slogans and jingles, cartoon characters and, when radio and later television took the nation by storm, entertaining shows and commercials. He was quick to recognize and target youngsters as the demographic group most likely to hunger for his products, as they hunted for the prizes he cleverly placed in his cereal boxes.

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W.K. Kellogg, shown in 1940, was a successful industrialist who "revolutionized mass production of food," starting with Corn Flakes.

Will Kellogg, of course, benefited by creating his business at the dawn of the 20th century, when huge corporations and nationally known brands began to dominate the American landscape. He became the "Corn Flake King" during the synchronous rise of urban populations, better living and nutritional conditions, and a national system of transportation, first by rail and later by highways, which allowed for the rapid delivery of raw grain into his factories and cases of cereal out of them. He capitalized on the widespread distribution of his food products, thanks to the development and rise of self-serve grocery stores, supermarkets and, perhaps most important, clean, safe, fresh pasteurized milk -- the essential accoutrement of any bowl of cereal.



Yet there was far more to Will Kellogg's genius than mere timing or the willingness to adopt new business methods. As he labored to process whole grains into ready-to-eat cereals, he refused to be satisfied with the status quo. The boss' charge was to always improve on what the company produced. He developed ever-more-sophisticated means of packaging to keep his cereals fresh and toasty, whether on the grocery shelf or in the kitchen cabinet.

From the start of his manufacturing career, Will announced himself to the American public with a facsimile of his signature on every box of the "original" Kellogg's Corn Flakes. It was initially devised as a means of thwarting the dozens of copycat companies stealing ideas and sales from his cereal business.

Above Will's signature was the solemn promise that the box's contents were tasty, crisp, nutritious and, most important, genuine. This pledge, backed by better and better means of quality control, was essential to building a longstanding, trustworthy and profitable relationship with the American public. Today, an artist's rendition of Will's signature -- the familiar red script "Kellogg's" -- appears on virtually every product his company manufactures. It is a scribble

almost as famous as another iconic American scrawl, "Walt Disney."

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The most-consumed breakfasts in history

In essence, Will Kellogg inaugurated an entirely new industry centered on the transformation of foods from their natural state into cooked, shaped, chemically manipulated, mass-manufactured products. During his lifetime, his name appeared on billions of boxes of Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies, All-Bran, Bran Krumbles, Pep, Corn-Soya Shreds and similar products. After his death in 1951, his company pushed glucose-loaded concoctions such as Kellogg's Sugar Frosted Flakes, Sugar Smacks, Froot Loops, Cocoa Krispies, Pop Tarts and a long list of other processed foods.

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effectively ended with his funeral. Will died a little more than eight years later, and despite their differences, he is buried only a few dozen feet away from his older brother in Battle Creek's Oak Hill cemetery.

The company he founded remains a multinational behemoth of food production. The charitable foundation he endowed with the mountain of money he made on Corn Flakes is one of the largest in the world and continues to work for the welfare of children, families and communities. When uttering the name "Kellogg" today, it is, undoubtedly, Will's industry we recall. As Bing Crosby crooned in the opening refrain of a song he recorded in 1968, "What's more American than Corn Flakes?"

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