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J.L. KRAFT 1874-1953

On Tuesday, November 18, 2003, the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque in Fort Erie to commemorate J.L. Kraft. The bilingual text reads as follows:

J.L. KRAFT 1874-1953

Cheese maker James Lewis Kraft was born on a dairy farm near Stevensville in 1874. He was educated locally and worked nearby at Ferguson's general store. In 1903, Kraft went to Buffalo then Chicago where he set up his own wholesale cheese business. Four of his brothers joined the company in 1909, opening a cheese factory in 1914. Kraft developed a revolutionary process, patented in 1916, for pasteurising cheese so that it would resist spoiling and could be shipped long distances. The company grew quickly, expanding into Canada in 1919. Over the years, Kraft introduced many innovative products and used progressive marketing techniques to make his company one of North America's leading food producers. Kraft also supported the Baptist Church and was a strong proponent of religious education for young people.

J.L. KRAFT 1874-1953

Le fromager James Lewis Kraft est né sur une ferme laitière près de Stevensville, en 1874. Il a fait ses études localement et a travaillé à proximité, au magasin général Ferguson. En 1903, M. Kraft se rendit à Buffalo, puis à Chicago où il créa sa propre affaire de fromage en gros. Quatre de ses frères vinrent le rejoindre en 1909 et ils ouvrirent une fromagerie en 1914. M. Kraft créa un processus révolutionnaire de pasteurisation du fromage, breveté en 1916, empêchant le fromage de se gâter et permettant ainsi son expédition sur de grandes distances. La société prit rapidement de l'expansion et s'implanta au Canada en 1919. Au fil des ans, M. Kraft introduisit de nombreux produits novateurs et utilisa des techniques de marketing progressives, faisant de sa société un des premiers fabricants d'aliments en Amérique du Nord. Supporter de l'église baptiste, M. Kraft était un fervent adepte de l'éducation religieuse des jeunes.

Historical background

Beginnings

Cheese maker James Lewis Kraft was born, the second of 11 children, to George Krafft¹ and Minerva Tripp on the Krafft family farm southeast of Stevensville in Welland County, Ontario, on December 11, 1874.² His grandfather, Francis Krafft, was born in Germany in 1807 or 1808.³ Francis later migrated to Pennsylvania and eventually came to Upper Canada (Ontario) where his son, George, was born in 1843 or 1844. Francis was a farmer whose property was valued at \$2,500. In 1861, he was cultivating 65 of his 85 acres in Bertie Township.⁴ By 1900, George Krafft, James' father, had opened a dairy in Fort Erie selling milk and cream from the family farm and elsewhere.

J.L. Kraft was educated at S.S. No. 9 on Airline Street in Stevensville. He worked as a clerk in Richard Ferguson's general store in Fort Erie during 1901 and 1902, earning \$500 per year.⁵ In 1902, his initiative took him to Buffalo where he worked as secretary and treasurer of the Shefford Cheese Company.⁶ The following year, Kraft went to Chicago where, with \$65 in capital, he rented a horse and wagon and established his own business of buying cheese wholesale and selling it to local grocers.⁷ The following year he wrote to a friend: "...I haven't got a comparatively large business now, but I know what I can do and in less than five years I am honest in saying I expect to have one of the best wholesale cheese businesses in this City."⁸ James was as good as his word although the first years were tough. According to company tradition, in 1907 when his business was faltering Kraft decided to "make God a partner" in his enterprises.⁹ His wholesale cheese business in Chicago improved and in the next few years he brought his brothers Charles Herbert, Frederick, Norman and John Henry into the business.¹⁰

¹ The tombstone of James' parents, George and Minerva, reads "Krafft". Photo of the grave site, background material, James Lewis Kraft, Ontario Heritage Foundation.

² Sources suggest different locations for James' birthplace, including Stevensville and Fort Erie. Home birthing was common in the 19th century and likely James was born at home. At the time the family lived on the west portion of lot 8, concession 10, Bertie Township, Welland County, Ontario. The farm was southeast of Stevensville and a few kilometres west of Fort Erie. See Map of the counties of Lincoln and Welland (H. R. Page, 1880); www.digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/SearchMapframes.php.

³ Canada, National Archives, Census of 1871 and 1881, Bertie Township, Welland County.

⁴ Canada, Agricultural Census of 1861, Bertie Township, Welland County. Other farms in Bertie Township varied in value from \$800 to \$6,000 depending upon acreage.

⁵ Canada, National Archives, Census of 1901, Bertie Township, Welland County.

⁶ *The Buffalo Directory* (Buffalo: Courier Company, 1903).

⁷ Jane Davies and Joan Lyons Felstead, eds. *Many Voices: A Collective History of Greater Fort Erie*. (Ridgeway: Fort Erie Museum Board, 1996), p. 364. Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

⁸ J. L. Kraft to Wilfred ?, *Chicago*, August 2, 1904, Town of Fort Erie LACAC background material provided to the Ontario Heritage Foundation in 2000, OHF. <http://www.kraftfoods.com>.

⁹ Biographical file, p. 6, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

¹⁰ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

In 1909, the J.L. Kraft & Bros. Company was incorporated with James as president.¹¹ The following year, James married Pauline Elizabeth Platt of Chicago and they had one daughter. James became an American citizen in 1911.

By 1911, the new company was advertising on billboards and Chicago's elevated trains. It also reached out to retail grocers with direct mailing campaigns.¹² J.L. Kraft & Bros. Company expanded into cheese production in 1914, opening its first cheese factory in Stockton, Illinois and distributing 30 varieties of cheese packaged under the Kraft and Elkhorn labels.¹³

Process cheese

In the early 1900s, the marketing of cheese was difficult because the quality of the product varied widely and it was difficult to ship it any distance without spoiling, particularly in the summer. James Kraft was aware of these challenges and began experimenting to produce a cheese that would resist spoilage, travel well and appeal to American palates.¹⁴ His vision of developing hygienic and sanitary food products was shared by other industrial mass producers including Heinz, Borden, Campbell, and Kellogg.¹⁵ Through trial and error, Kraft discovered that cheese, like milk, could be pasteurised and would remain palatable if stirred at a high speed or homogenized during the heating process. Earlier efforts to pasteurise cheese had resulted in the cheese separating into solids and oils, rendering it unfit for use. The pasteurisation process gave Kraft a cheese that, when carefully packaged, was resistant to spoiling, had a long shelf life, did not require refrigeration, and could be shipped great distances.¹⁶ His innovative process produced a mild tasting product that was different from the sharp cheddars then on the market. In 1915, Kraft, produced \$5,000 of his new pasteurised cheese in key opening tins, with most of the product going to India and East Asia. The following year sales rose to \$150,000.¹⁷ He patented process cheese in the United States in 1916.

¹¹ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois. "James Lewis Kraft is dead in Chicago," *New York Times*, February 17, 1953, p. 34.

¹² <http://www.kraftfoods.com>

¹³ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois; <http://www.kraftfoods.com>

¹⁴ James Lewis Kraft, of Chicago, Illinois, "Process of sterilizing cheese and an improved product produced by such process," patent # 1,186,524, issued June 6, 1916; <http://www.uspto.gov/main/patents.htm>

¹⁵ As one student of food has written: "Industrialization bred impurity, corruption and adulteration. But in the industrial era, more industrialization was the only admissible solution. In the late nineteenth century food science became obsessed with purity and the course of developments in the food industries was directed towards products that would be uniform, predictable and safe. All the old priorities of traditional cuisines were supplanted: pleasure, individuality, cultural identity. Far-sighted food producers realized that purity legislation, by driving up unit costs, would favour economies of scale and bring more business to the heavily capitalized reaches of the industry. Hygiene was a selling-point which would enhance any brand." Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Food: a history* (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 234-44.

¹⁶ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

¹⁷ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

When the United States entered the First World War, Kraft's new cheese was given the same opportunity that the American Civil War gave Gail Borden's canned milk enterprise. Kraft expanded his business during the war by supplying American forces with six million pounds of tinned cheese.¹⁸ After the war, Kraft began marketing his cheese in five-pound foil wrapped cheese loaves packed in wooden boxes.

The Canadian connection

Kraft entered the Canadian market in 1919 by introducing Kraft and Elkhorn brand cheeses to the Canadian public.¹⁹ In 1920, Kraft purchased the A. F. MacLaren Imperial Cheese company, established in Stratford, Ontario in 1891 by Alexander F. MacLaren. It became the Kraft-MacLaren Cheese Company, using the former firm's production plant in Montreal. James' youngest brother, John Henry, became president of the Canadian business, a post he retained into the Second World War.²⁰ James Kraft also obtained a Canadian patent for his process cheese and took over the Canada Cream Cheese trademark that MacLaren had registered in 1903.²¹ As well, in 1920, advertisements showing the Kraft trademark began to appear in Canadian newspapers.²² In 1923, James registered the Canadian trademark for Kraft Canadian Pasteurized Cheese.²³ By 1926, the Kraft Canadian organization was making 25 million five-pound boxes per year at its plant in New Westminster, British Columbia.²⁴ An identical process of aggressive marketing and saturation advertising, coupled with the purchase and absorption of competing firms, eventually gave Kraft the same strong presence in the Canadian market that it enjoyed in the United States.

Bringing Kraft to market

Kraft's innovative process for pasteurising cheese was only part of the recipe that helped him to succeed. In 1924, the company hired its first home economist and set up a test kitchen to develop new recipes and test new products.²⁵ J.L. Kraft also firmly believed in mass advertising, brand recognition and consumer loyalty. From the beginning, Kraft invested in product advertising and quickly adopted new media as they appeared. By the 1920s, his initial use of billboards had evolved into nationwide newspaper advertisements, including full-page spreads. Kraft used his advertisements in the mid-1920s to tell consumers that Kraft goods were not

¹⁸ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois; <http://www.kraftfoods.com>

¹⁹ Full page ad with illustration showing eight varieties of cheese in blue and yellow labelled tins, *Canadian Grocer*, Vol. 50, December 12, 1919, outside front cover.

²⁰ *Toronto Star*, March 5, 1941, p. 12.

²¹ Canada patent for process cheese issued to James L. Kraft on September 21, 1920, Canada Patent registration number CA 204097, <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca>; Canada Cream Cheese trademark registered for cheese in wrappers and jars by A. F. MacLaren Imperial Cheese Company Ltd., Toronto in 1903, assigned to Kraft-MacLaren Cheese Company Ltd., November 1, 1920, Canadian Trademark registration # 8729.

²² *Toronto Star*, April 22, 1920, p. 17.

²³ Canada Trademark registration number TMDA034288, <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca>

²⁴ *Industrial Canada*, Vol. 28, # 9, January 1928, p. 178.

²⁵ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

generic forms of cheese that anybody could manufacture, but trademarked products produced by his company.²⁶ In 1933, the company began sponsoring the Kraft Music Hall, the weekly radio program. The Kraft Music Hall was used to launch new products and helped make some of them overnight national successes.²⁷ In 1947, Kraft Foods inaugurated the Kraft Television Theatre on the newly emerging medium that would transform communication in the second half of the 20th century.²⁸

Innovative products

In 1928, Kraft purchased a major rival, Phenix Corporation, which produced Philadelphia Brand Cream Cheese. The same year, Kraft introduced what would become a North American favourite, Velveeta process cheese.²⁹ By 1929, Kraft had bought out more than 50 subsidiaries and had operations in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany.³⁰ Over the next two decades, J.L. Kraft & Bros. Company, which became Kraft Foods Company by 1945, developed products of its own and acquired recipes from its competitors, bringing a wide range of successful food products to market, including Miracle Whip salad dressing (1933), Kraft Macaroni and Cheese Dinner (1937), Parkay Margarine (1937), Kraft Deluxe Process Cheese Slices (1949), and Cheez Whiz (1952).³¹ In 1953, James Lewis Kraft died of pneumonia and a pre-existing heart condition. He was buried in Memorial Park Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois.

James Lewis Kraft, the man

James was a member of the North Shore Baptist Church in Chicago and developed a keen and active interest in the teaching of religion. He established a men's Sunday school at the church and by 1909 was Sunday school superintendent, a post he held for 40 years.³² He also served as president and treasurer of the International Council of Religious Education and in the 1940s actively supported the Council's Crusade for Christian Education, which provided religious training to young people.³³ He was a trustee of the Baptist Theological Seminary and received the Gutenberg Award of the Chicago Bible Society in 1952. Kraft and fellow parishioner C. J. Howel each provided \$50,000 to help fund the building of Baptist churches in underprivileged areas.³⁴

²⁶ *Toronto Star*, October 8, 1925, p. 4.

²⁷ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

²⁸ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

²⁹ <http://www.kraftfoods.com>

³⁰ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

³¹ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois; <http://www.kraftfoods.com>

³² Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois; *New York Times*, February 17, 1953, p. 34.

³³ *Toronto Star*, February 9, 1940, p. 3; Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

³⁴ "James Lewis Kraft is dead in Chicago," *New York Times*, February 17, 1953, p. 34.

In 1951, Kraft was presented with the American Schools and Colleges Association's Horatio Alger Award, a tribute to his long and successful career.³⁵

Kraft collected carved Chinese jade and he travelled across the United States digging for American jade. In 1945, he donated a one and a quarter ton boulder of jade uncovered in Wyoming to the Chicago Museum of Natural History. Two years later, he published a memoir of his collecting experiences, *Adventure in Jade*. He also collected aboriginal artifacts, fossil fish, antique glass and Egyptian artifacts.³⁶

The Kraft legacy

After growing up on a dairy farm outside of Stevensville, Ontario, James Lewis Kraft went on to revolutionize cheese production and consumption by inventing process cheese. Through vigorous marketing, Kraft grew his company into one of the leading producers of cheese in North America. The corporation became Kraft Inc. in 1976 and was acquired by Philip Morris Companies Inc. in 1988. The following year, Kraft Inc. and General Foods Corporation were united as Kraft General Foods, becoming the largest food company in the United States. Nabisco cereal products were acquired in 1993 and in 1995 Kraft General Foods was reorganized into a single operating company, Kraft Foods Inc. In 2000, the company acquired Nabisco and the following year offered shares for public sale.³⁷

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³⁵ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

³⁶ Biographical file, Kraft Archives, Kraft Foods Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois.

³⁷ <http://www.kraftfoods.com>