By Brian Butko

Portrait of H.J. Heinz c. 1872.

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HEINZ
MUCH MORE THAN
57
VARieties

By Brian Butko
t first, there were hardly any visitors to the Heinz display at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Not that the fair lacked for people: by the end of its six-month run in 1893, more than 27 million had experienced this showcase for technology, commerce, and consumer products. They came away awed by the innovations and architecture, amazed by a midway of carnival rides that included the first Ferris Wheel, and dazzled at night by 120,000 incandescent bulbs powered by George Westinghouse’s alternating current. The Heinz exhibit, however, sat in solitude despite free samples of sauces, relishes, and preserves, elegantly presented from a hand-carved oak display by four women of French, English, German, and Spanish descent.¹
Heinz was but one company among the rows and rows of food manufacturers in the fair’s massive Agricultural Building—itself just one of 200 buildings on 633 acres crisscrossed by canals and lagoons. The first floor of the hall was dominated by foreign companies due to the assumption that imported foreign foods were better and of greater interest to visitors. Few who toured the first floor bothered to then climb the long stairs to see American food makers on the second floor. After all, there were 65,000 other exhibits to walk out and see.

Henry Heinz himself attended the fair’s opening, and seeing only a straggle of visitors to his floor, headed to the nearest print shop. The Heinz exhibit was already handing out souvenir pickle charms to the few who came by, so he printed small “baggage checks” on brass-colored cardboard with the promise that presenting it at the Heinz exhibit earned the bearer a free souvenir. Henry had workers hand them out and boys scatter them across the grounds.

It didn’t take long for people to start finding the second floor of the Agricultural Building to get their free souvenir. The charms could hang from a lady’s brooch or a man’s pocket watch. Police were called to control the crowds and support beams were added below. Foreign food exhibitors, watching customers rush past to get to the second floor, filed a complaint, while American companies gave Heinz a lovingly inscribed silver cup.

Heinz gave away a million pickle charms at the fair. The New York Times reported on the medals that Heinz won for its condiments—not to mention the sagging floor—fulfilling H.J.’s belief that the best way to advertise your products and promote your name was by letting the public do it for you. It was an unexpected journey for H.J. Heinz, from bankruptcy to toast of the fair. The company still gives out nearly a million pins a year, but now mostly by mail upon request. They figure more than 100 million have been given away. Somewhere, maybe in a dresser drawer, you probably have one too. That’s an amazing feat when you consider how difficult it is to get the public to buy a product, let alone like the company too.

H.J. Heinz built his company based on moral lessons his family embraced. He enshrined his favorite mottos on signs and in stained glass windows of his impressive factory. The most-quoted one explains his basic philosophy: “To do a common thing uncommonly well brings success.” But his favorite, which was posted in offices and
hallways, better explains his rise from adversity: “Do the best you can, where you are, with what you have today.”

That food factory, a marvel of modern amenities, was not started until 1890. His popular catch-phrase—57 Varieties—was not dreamed up until 1896. Yet it was his vision in the previous decades that led him to those achievements. H.J.’s mother, especially, taught him a genuine respect for every person, and lived by her favorite principle: “Always remember to place yourself in the other person’s shoes.”

The History Center has just opened a major exhibition that traces the history of H.J. Heinz and the global food company he started in his mother’s garden. It features artifacts and photos from the History Center’s collections that illustrate the ever-changing variety of Heinz’s early products that both mirrored and shaped our tastes and eating habits. It also explores H.J. himself and his motivations that brought both success and innovation.

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German immigrants Anna Schmitt and John Henry Heinz married in 1843. Six years later, they settled in Sharpsburg, a few miles up the Allegheny River from downtown Pittsburgh. Families there all tended gardens, but the Heinz family’s was prosperous enough to feed their children (soon to be eight) plus leave extra for selling. In 1852, at age eight, first-born son Henry John, or H.J., began peddling the surplus door-to-door in baskets. Two years later his parents gave him his own 3/4 of an acre and he began using a wheelbarrow to deliver. By 12, he’d enlarged to three-and-a-half acres plus bought a horse and cart to sell to merchants too.

His specialty was horseradish, a pungent root used to season food. As biographer Robert C. Alberts explained, “Freshly grated horseradish made dull food palatable and good food—such as beef and raw oysters—better.” H.J. had long helped his mother harvest, scrub, scrape, grate, and bottle horseradish in vinegar. The job, rough on knuckles and the eyes, created a market for prepared horseradish; however, these were bottled in green and brown glass, allowing for fillers such as coal tar dyes, boiled dried apples, turnips, leaves, or wood fiber. Heinz wanted clear glass to show he had the whitest, purest roots. His success at selling proved not only that customers were willing to pay for convenience, but that a superior product would sell on its own merit if properly packaged and promoted.

Meanwhile, he also helped at his father’s brickyard, creating a lifelong fascination with the earthen product. In 1854, 10-year-old H.J. helped make the brick for a new house and then helped his dad build the family home. As another biographer explained, the house “was like a part of his own flesh and blood.” It was later moved to the Heinz plant, and then to Greenfield Village near Detroit. A letter inside what is now a house museum explains how much it meant to him, “how he was aware of, and loved, each separate brick.”

His parents hoped H.J. would become a minister but it was apparent he was destined for business and sales. At 15 he became his father’s bookkeeper and assistant at the brickyard; when he turned 21, he bought a half-interest. Brickworks normally closed for the winter, but H.J. installed heating equipment so they could stay open and build up inventory for the spring rush.

In 1868 he partnered in another brickyard with L. Clarence Noble. Later that year, H.J.’s father took an extended trip back to Europe to visit relatives. H.J. surprised him while he was away by building a new, larger family home—brick, of course—and paying for it by collecting debts his father had written off as uncollectible.

The old homestead was converted for food production, and 25 acres were planted just in horseradish. In 1869, the 25-year-old H.J. married Sarah Sloan Young, or Sallie, and most importantly, decided to concentrate on growing and bottling food. He again partnered with L.C. Noble to create the Anchor Brand, starting, naturally, with horseradish.

They added celery sauce, pickled cucumbers, sauerkraut, and vinegar to the Anchor line. Soon Heinz and Noble took over the house next door. In 1872, L.C.’s brother E.J. joined as a partner, and the business became
Heinz, Noble & Company. They leased a four-story factory in downtown Pittsburgh for office, store, and warehouse. By 1875, their business was wildly successful, especially notable since packaged condiments were mostly imported from Europe. The firm grew to include 160 acres in and around Sharpsburg, a business office and vinegar factory in St. Louis, and a branch distributing warehouse in Chicago.

The coordination of agriculture played a key role, from the quality of produce to transporting and processing it. The company needed cucumbers for pickles, tomatoes for ketchup, cabbage for sauerkraut, apples for vinegar, and fruits for jellies and preserves. The largest commitment was made in 1875 to take the output of 800 acres of cucumbers and cabbage in Illinois at a set rate.

Heinz, Noble & Company had become one of the country’s largest makers of processed, preserved, and packaged foods. Despite such success, they were short of capital and overextended. At first, the company seemed to buck the depression that had taken hold across the U.S., but money was short everywhere. Then came a phenomenal harvest of cucumbers in Illinois, bringing with it skyrocketing costs to pay for and process it all. Their ability to meet their contracts crumbled and the Pittsburgh plant was closed by the landlord’s warrant, and then H.J. himself was arrested on charges of fraud filed by creditors. Released on bail, the next day the sheriff placed a levy on the family’s personal belongings and arrested him again. Heinz filed voluntary bankruptcy.

That Christmas, H.J. and Sallie had no money for presents for firstborn daughter Irene (1871) or son Clarence Noble (1873, named in honor of their business partner). Within a few weeks they even lacked money for food and begged to buy on credit. H.J.’s parents’ furniture and house were advertised for sheriff’s sale. As word of their problems spread, neighbors, friends, even relatives turned on them. H.J. wrote that Christmas Day, “I had not a true friend in the world…. A man is nowhere without money…. I feel sad and constantly worried.” Locals whom he owed harassed him and accused the family of having and hiding money. Perhaps worst of all, the Noble brothers blamed H.J. for the failure—and told employees so. This was surely H.J.’s lowest point.

Still, the Heinz name meant good food products, and the family all knew how to cultivate and preserve. H.J. still had his talent for selling and publicity but could not enter into a partnership until the bankruptcy had been discharged. Family members pooled what little they had left, including his mother, brother John, cousin Frederick, and wife Sallie, who sold property she jointly owned. In February 1876, F. & J. Heinz Company was launched with 32-year-old H.J. as manager at $125 a month. H.J. could not be a partner, yet without a doubt he was the guiding force of the enterprise. Neither did he ignore what had happened: H.J. carried a notebook marked “M.O.” listing his Moral Obligations to all creditors.

It was a rough road to restore the business, let alone respectability. No one would loan them money. The distrust, and even hostility, caused H.J. physical and mental strain. They pinched pennies to buy back equipment of the bankrupt company. Once they had prided themselves on the impressive teams that pulled

**Heinz insisted on clear glass. His success at selling proved not only that customers were willing to pay for convenience, but that a superior product would sell on its own merit if properly packaged and promoted.**
Though the Industrial Revolution is associated with machinery, it was the expansion of the railroad and refrigerated cars that provided much more access to fresh foods and raised health standards.

The ability to transport Heinz products quickly from the Pittsburgh plant to grocery stores via refrigerated rail cars boosted consumer access to fresh and safe products.

Like automakers would do decades later, Heinz made products aimed at different price points. Some products did not even have the Heinz name on them. Howard Catsup was named for H.J.’s second son, born 1877.
and Home Made at the bottom. Some products did not even have the Heinz name on them: Howard Catsup (the equivalent of Standard) was named for H.J.’s second son, born in 1877.

A decade after its founding, F. & J. was larger than ever. H.J., overseeing everything, worried that he was working too hard, plus he had a dilemma. His younger brother John was in charge of manufacturing (including gardens and agencies) but did not have nearly the drive of H.J. John’s irregular hours had production constantly falling behind. H.J. wrote that all he got was ingratitude and it “was driving more nails in my coffin than all other cares.” Finally, John withdrew from the company, letting H.J. take over his duties—in addition to everything else H.J. was already doing. A year later, in 1888 with his debts all paid, their mother suggested the firm name change to H.J. Heinz Company. It was then that H.J. was able to launch his most ambitious plans yet.

The thousands of labor strikes and walkouts in the 1880s impressed upon H.J. to find a way to run a business that would eliminate the likelihood of such violence. He had studied the paternalistic ways of German factories and likewise wanted to build a community of workpeople who would be so content with their jobs that they’d never dream of rebelling against the company.

The first step was a new start to ensure that the Pittsburgh offices and manufacturing would be in one place. He chose a site a half-mile up the Allegheny River from downtown Pittsburgh, at the edge of Allegheny City, which had a large German population. The 24 lots already had buildings, including a sawmill, brewery, and church. The new buildings would portray solid architecture—made of glazed pressed brick in Romanesque style. There were eventually 17 red structures around a grassy courtyard.

The plant not only processed food but also made the packaging, from cans to boxes. It incorporated the latest innovations in motors, the most modern stables, and conveniences

~ Emily Ruby, Curator
ABOVE: A postcard shows the Pittsburgh plant and offices, started in 1890. HHC Detre L&A, MSS 57, Box 32, Postcards.

BELOW: Heinz factory workers label cans of food before they are placed in shipping crates. HHC Detre L&A, WPSP 007315.
Baked Beans

Baked beans were a staple of the British diet during World War II. Though many Heinz products could not be found in Britain due to rationing, baked beans—seen as a key source of protein—stayed in production at Heinz’s London factory. The beans, however, were packed in glass with no pieces of pork, reflecting wartime shortages of tin and meat. Even after being bombed by the Germans, the Heinz plant at Harlesden, in North West London, carried on and even pioneered a self-heating can for soup and milk that could be lit with a cigarette in the field. Allied troops carried these cans when they landed at Normandy on D-Day.

For such devotion, baked beans surprisingly were little known in England prior to Heinz introducing them in the early 1900s. In fact, baked beans are a thoroughly American invention. Early colonists learned the art of baking beans in fire pits from American Indians. When beans arrived in England they were an expensive luxury import; in 1928, when Heinz began production in their British factory, prices plummeted and sales soared.

As the British economy struggled to recover after the war, baked beans continued to supply a low cost, healthy food. Popular advertising slogans such as “Beanz Meanz Heinz” in the 1960s and “Heinz Buildz Brits” in the 1990s kept Heinz ranked as the leading brand of baked beans there, a trend that continues. The history of baked beans in the United Kingdom demonstrates that Heinz not only reacts to consumer demand, but also creates demand.

~ Emily Ruby, Curator
products. Thanks to innovations in color printing that could be produced inexpensively, the front boasted bright colored illustrations, while the reverse described the products in a list or even a cryptic puzzle. These early advertisements revealed a consistent theme in Heinz’s marketing strategy: the use of adorable healthy children and wholesome young women conveyed the idea that Heinz foods were also healthy and wholesome.

Heinz never missed the chance for positive publicity. After the Pittsburgh plant was finished in 1898, H.J. opened the factory to tours of the ultra-modern facilities, the first industrialist to do so; soon, any visit to the city had to include the “Heinz pickle works,” from soup-filling to can-making to pickle-bottling. Each tour ended with complimentary samples of Heinz products and a pickle pin to take home. Tens of thousands of school children, senior citizens, church groups, card clubs, and foreign tourists visited the factory each year.

In 1900, the Heinz Company established a chemistry laboratory to check the quality of produce, accuracy of recipes, cooking procedures, cleanliness of manufacturing process, and uniformity of finished products. The “food technologists” also conducted research to improve nutrition, flavor, and appearance. Until the early 1900s, there were no laws to regulate food manufacturing. H.J. knew it was easier and better business to use pure ingredients that were properly packaged. He and son Howard eventually lobbied for laws to regulate the food industry; they were prime proponents of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

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It was H.J.’s kindness to others that perhaps shaped his actions and company the most. A random line from his diary of February 6, 1884, reads, “It is more pleasant to remember others than to be remembered.” In an interview in 1900, Heinz was asked whether it was prudent business to offer so many services to employees: “I have never given that side of the matter any thought. We are fully repaid when we see our employees enjoying themselves.” The reporter, not believing, pressed him:

Very well then, if you don’t like the sentiment that attaches to the plan, I want you to distinctly understand that it is good business as well. It “pays,” it increases my output. But I don’t want to put it merely on a dollars and cents basis.6

An advisory board of eight to ten men supervised daily operating procedures, yet H.J. still made his own decisions. In 1896, without consulting the committee, H.J. raised the wages of women at the Pittsburgh factory by 12.5 percent.

It was this focus on people, with an eye on the bottom line, that led Heinz in three decades to build one of the country’s largest and most profitable businesses. In that time, Heinz became the largest maker of pickles, ketchup, vinegar, sauerkraut, and horseradish.

Before his death, one last connection remained to his humble beginnings. The family and company had long ago moved from
Starting in the 1950s, traditional restaurants faced increasing competition from the emerging drive-in restaurants and fast food chains. Heinz likewise found itself with a reputation of being behind the times: Once a clear leader in ketchup sales, Heinz now had only a one percent margin over Hunt’s ketchup and Del Monte followed close behind.

In the early ‘60s, Heinz hired the lead advertiser from Proctor & Gamble as well as a new marketing firm in New York. Billboards were replaced by a blitz of TV commercials shot in color and only 30 seconds long. Heinz debuted the “too thick, too rich to run” campaign and a variety of bottle sizes which helped them gain back their shrinking market share of ketchup. To reach a younger demographic they worked with the Beatles’ agent to provide life-size posters of the pop stars when consumers mailed in Heinz labels.

Ketchup bottles for restaurants were given a neckband that stated “Served by Fine Restaurants Everywhere.” In 1968, individual packets debuted, a risky move then but a staple of the fast food industry today. Later came the Vol-Pak, a large sack of ketchup used to refill containers so that a restaurant’s ketchup stays fresh longer. These efforts put Heinz back in the lead, a position it retains a half-century later.

— Emily Ruby, Curator
China and Baby Food

In the early 1900s, Heinz attempted to break into Asian markets by sending Alexander MacWillie there to promote Heinz products. MacWillie came back predicting it would be many years before Heinz made a name for itself in the region.

Jump to the 1980s and the company still lacked a strong presence in the Far East. But in 1984, concern by the Chinese government over the lack of fortified baby foods led to an invitation—due to Heinz’s global dominance in the baby food market—to be the first Western company to produce dry infant cereal in China. A factory, opened in 1986, produced four instant rice and soy cereal products. Heinz, of course, had been producing baby food since the 1930s. It began with concern during the Depression that babies were not receiving enough nutrients in their diets. In response, Heinz introduced strained foods for babies in 1931, just a few years after Gerber became the first company to sell strained packaged baby foods in stores. The first strained food flavors included peas, carrots, mixed vegetables, and spinach packaged in 4.5 ounce enamel-lined cans. Heinz expanded in 1938 with Junior Foods for toddlers. During the baby boom of the 1950s, Heinz produced a complete line of baby food in glass jars, adding screw-on lids a few years later, both industry firsts.

Heinz baby food became one of the company’s top sellers and they heavily advertised and promoted the product, including booklets and filmstrips offering nutritional and parenting advice.

—Emily Ruby, Curator
Heinz employees across the world contributed funds to commission Emil Fuchs to create this memorial to H.J. after his death in 1919. The statue originally stood in the rotunda of the Administration Building at the Heinz factory on the North Side.

Sources


1 Much of the basic history is gleaned from documents in a Pickle Pins folder in the Heinz collection at the History Center (MSS 57).
3 “[T]he gallery floor of the Agricultural Building has sagged where the pickle display of H.J. Heinz Company stood, owing to the vast crowd which constantly thronged their stand to taste their goods or procure a watch charm.” From “Narrow Escape at World’s Fair,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1893, p. 5.