

General Mills — from 'A' to 'X,' from Gold Medal to Cheerioats

Editor's note:

With this article we continue a series of historical stories on grain operations in the Twin Ports.

As you stand alongside the Mississippi River where it surges through downtown Minneapolis, you can feel a sense of urgency. The water rushes past with an energy and determination that is beguiling to the bystander. It was along these same waters in 1856 that

Washburn founded the Minneapolis Milling Company, channeling the flow of the Mississippi River to provide electrical power to mill operators along the river's west bank.

In 1866, Mr. Washburn built his first mill along the river. In 1874, he added an even larger, six-story structure. Elevator "A" became the largest flour mill west of Buffalo, its size and cost opening Washburn up for ridicule. Critics dubbed the new mill "Washburn's Folly."

Extracting the wheat was a crude process of pulverizing the kernel with large stones and then screening the chaff from the wheat. The noise was deafening, the workplace hot and, on any given day, the air inside the mill, thick with dust, was stifling. A mill full of grain dust can be as volatile as a keg of dynamite with the fuse lit. On May 2, 1878, Washburn's Mill "A" exploded, the blast so powerful that it leveled every structure surrounding the mill in a tragically spectacular disaster that killed 18 workers.

The growth of the business continued unabated nonetheless. Mr. Washburn partnered with John Crosby, and in 1879 the Washburn Crosby Company filed pa-

pers of incorporation. The devastated mill was quickly rebuilt and expanded upon; large blocks hewn from native limestone encased the inner workings. On the inside, steel rollers replaced the grinding stones, and a newly devised middlings purifier enhanced the milling process, turning hard spring wheat into fine flour.

A year later, in 1880, workers at the Washburn Crosby mill packed and loaded barrels of their finest flour for a trip to Cincinnati to compete in the first International Millers Exhibition. Messrs. Washburn and Crosby were overwhelmed with the success of their product, "Superlative," literally sweeping the competition by winning gold, silver and bronze medals. The owners capitalized on this success by changing the name of "Superlative" to "Gold Medal" flour. More than a century

later, Gold Medal flour continues to be "the No. 1 flour brand in America."

The coming decades would see continued growth and expansion, beginning in 1888 with the leadership of James Stroud Bell. One of the cornerstones of Mr. Bell's reign was the construction of a large flour mill at Buffalo, New York, helping establish that city as a regional milling center. On the consumer side, James Stroud Bell developed a growing market using Gold Medal Flour. In 1921, *Betty Crocker* was created to help field a deluge of inquiries about recipes during a promotional campaign. The campaign went away, but Betty Crocker has remained, now perhaps the longest tenured (and most famous) General Mills "employee." That same year, Washburn Crosby entered the packaged food sector



Elevator A was built in 1908. Its steel tanks were added in 1977 and the Port Authority-financed

The Port's Past
General Mills
By Patrick Lapinski

with the introduction of a breakfast cereal called *Wheaties*.

James Ford Bell succeeded his father as president of Washburn Crosby in 1925. Cut from the same cloth as his predecessor, James Ford Bell's leadership unified regional millers into one large enterprise in 1928, creating General Mills, Inc. Within the year, General Mills became the largest flour miller in the world. Mr. Bell guided General Mills through the Great Depression with sound management and creative marketing. During the James Ford Bell era, General Mills introduced several additional products, such as Bisquick, Kix, and Cheerios (now Cheerios).

In 1943, General Mills made its formal appearance in the Twin Ports following the purchase of the Consolidated Elevator Company of Duluth, with Elevator D and Annex G becoming the base of its terminal operations at Duluth.

The third generation of leadership at General Mills emphasized the value of research in bringing new products to market. The scope and breadth of the innovation is astounding. From the first flight

box data recorder to atmospheric research balloons to a mini-sub that would reach the remains of the Titanic on the ocean floor, General Mills's researchers forged new ground not only for the company but also for society as a whole.

In Duluth, General Mills has continued to expand upon its terminal operation in the harbor, first in 1977 when it added nearly a million bushels of capacity to its elevator and again in 1989 with the Port Authority's construction of an agricultural commodities bagging plant.

Also in 1989, General Mills assumed operational control of the Great Northern Elevator's "S" and "X" in Superior, continuing to operate that facility as an import/export terminal.

Today, General Mills is one of the largest companies in the food processing industry, employing more than 10,000 people worldwide. As a multi-national company, General Mills is committed to growth through market innovation, strategic alliances and partnerships, and reliance upon a strong product brand identity.

General Mills Duluth-Superior Elevator Timeline

- 1943 General Mills, Inc., purchases the Consolidated Elevator Company of Duluth. Purchase includes Elevators D, G, E, F, H and I.
- 1944 Elevator "D" renamed "A," and Elevator Annex "G" renamed "B."
- 1945 General Mills sells Elevators E, F, H and I to Norris Grain Co.
- 1977 Steel tanks added to Duluth elevator, expanding capacity by nearly 1 million bushels.
- 1985 Port Authority constructs new bagging plant at Elevator A for operation by General Mills.
- 1989 General Mills assumes active management of the Great Northern Elevator "S" and annexes, and Elevator "X" at Superior, from ADM.

Elevator construction chronology

Elevator "A" constructed in 1908 (ceramic tile and brick).

Elevator "S" constructed in 1900 (steel).

Elevator "S" Annex 1 constructed in 1909 (reinforced concrete).

Elevator "S" Annex 2 constructed in 1928 (reinforced concrete).

Elevator "S" Annex 3 constructed in 1930 (reinforced concrete).

Elevator "X" constructed in 1947 (reinforced concrete).

Elevator "A" steel tanks constructed in 1977 (steel).

Elevator "A" bagging plant constructed in 1985 (wood frame and sheet metal).



bagging plant was completed in 1985.