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The Oscar Mayer Enterprise. Chicago, IL

Oscar F. Mayer was the founder of the Oscar Mayer meat products company. Mayer was born in Bavaria on March 29, 1859 and Emigrated to Detroit, Michigan in 1873 at the age of 14 to work as a butcher's apprentice.

Oscar moved to Chicago in 1876 when he was 17 to work for Kohlhammer's Market and then worked six years for the Philip Armour & Company meatpackers at the Union Stock Yards. By 1883 his brother Gottfried Mayer had moved to Chicago from Nurnberg, Germany where he had established himself as a "wurstmacher" or sausage-maker and ham curer. Oscar had saved enough money to lease a failing business, the Kolling Meat Market, in a German neighborhood on the near north side.





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From their first week in operation, the business was very popular due to Gottfried's skill in producing the products that Germans in Chicago remembered from back home. Their jealous landlord refused to renew their lease in 1888 because he wanted to take over the business himself. But without the Mayer brothers, his store failed in a year. A third Mayer brother, Max, came over from Germany about 1888 to join the company as a bookkeeper when they built a new two-story building two blocks from the first location and lived in apartments over the store.

Mayer products were very popular with Chicago's growing German-American immigrant community in the 1890s. They sold "Old World" sausages, Westphalian hams, brockwurst, liverwurst, bacon, and wieners--later called hot dogs by Americans not of German heritage. The company was first called Oscar Mayer and Brother and then Oscar Mayer & Company. In 1893, they were sponsors of the German display at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. They also sponsored German polka bands. The German market in Chicago was important. According to the census of 1900, one in four residents of Chicago, about 470,000 people, were either born in Germany or had at least one parent who was born there. The next largest immigrant group was the Irish and they also liked the Mayer products.





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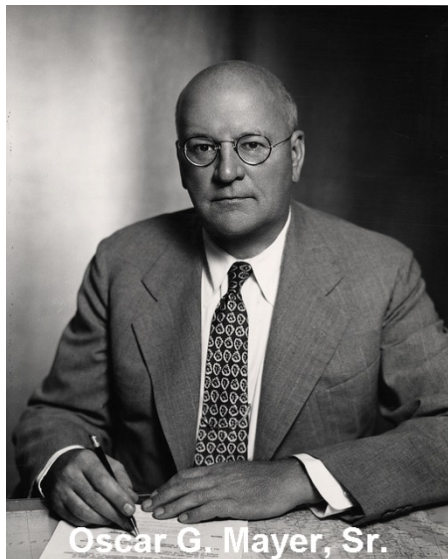
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At the start of the twentieth century, Oscar Mayer had a work force of 43 people including eight wagon drivers who made deliveries to 280 stores all over Chicago and suburbs as well as in Wisconsin. The standard practice for meat sellers in 1904 was to rely on sales people and remain anonymous as to the packer or retailer. The idea of retail brand names in food and consumer advertising was still fairly new in the early 1900s. As in the case of Charles R. Walgreen who started branding his drug stores 100 years ago, Oscar Mayer put his brand name on retail meat products in 1904.

The Mayers were very concerned with quality control. In 1906 they became one of the first companies to volunteer for participation in a new federal meat inspection program to certify the purity and quality of products. Naturally, the company advertised that they were government-inspected as a distinctive selling point. Just after World War I, Oscar Mayer & Company made its first large expansion with the purchase of a processing plant in Madison, Wisconsin.



In 1909, Oscar's only son, Oscar G. Mayer, graduated from Harvard University and joined the family business. One year at a time, Mayer launched many innovations to set his brand names apart from the competition. Newspaper display ads started talking about Oscar Mayer "Approved Brands" in 1917 and in 1924 Mayer introduced sliced bacon and special packaging that was patented. In 1928, Oscar F. Mayer became Chairman of the Board and his son Oscar G. Mayer was made president. In 1929, the company introduced yellow band weiners.

A yellow paper band was a great gimmick because most wieners at that time were sold in bulk and with no packaging other than a display box. Mayer employees applied individual yellow paper bands by hand that carried the company name and the U.S. government inspection stamp.

Oscar F. Mayer was interested in politics but was usually too busy running his own business to take too much time for campaigns. He was an Illinois delegate to the



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Democratic National Conventions of 1920 and 1928. His son Oscar G. Mayer was born in Chicago in 1888 and lived in Evanston. Oscar G. Mayer also was elected as a trustee of the University of Illinois from 1935 to 1941.

In 1936, Oscar F. Mayer came up with another classic advertising gimmick at the suggestion of his nephew. It was a custom-made vehicle that looked like a giant wiener on a truck body with wheels and it was and is today called the Wienermobile. It became a rolling billboard for Oscar Mayer to be driven in parades and around Chicago and suburbs. There are several similar vehicles in the US and other countries that visit schools and youth camps. Due to TV commercials over more than fifty years that featured the vehicle, the Wienermobile is one of the most recognized custom vehicles in the country and an icon of American pop culture. It has been worth millions of dollars in brand name awareness advertising to the company, far in excess of its cost to operate and maintain.





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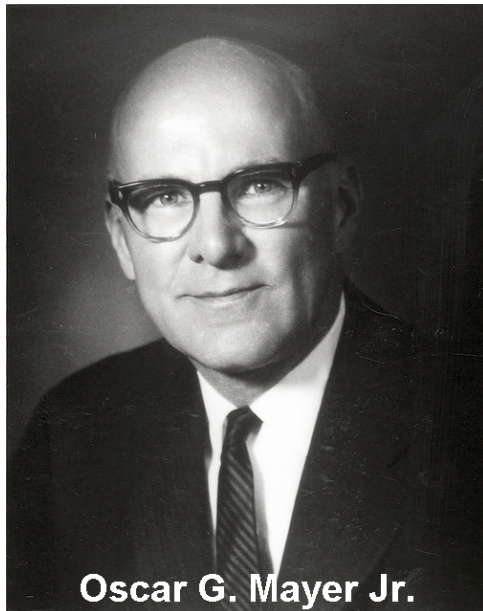
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For about 36 years between 1940 and 1976, a little person dressed as a chef by the name of "Little Oscar," was the goodwill ambassador for the company who travelled with the Wienermobile. He was played by George Molchan, who had auditioned on the recommendation of one of his friends who played a "Munchkin" in the 1939 film, The Wizard of Oz. George would pass out plastic "wiener whistles" to kids at each stop the Wienermobile made. In 2005, Mr. Molchan died at age 82 in Merrville, Indiana.



Oscar F. Mayer died on March 11, 1955 just a few weeks before his 96th birthday. He is buried at Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago. After his death, his son and grandson remained active with the company and the corporate headquarters moved from Chicago to Madison, Wisconsin to be closer to the main plants. Under both Oscar G. Mayer, and Oscar G. Mayer, Jr., the company continued to innovate with special vacuum sealed packaging in the 1950s and other ways to guarantee freshness. In 1971, the Oscar Mayer packaged meats were first to print "use by" dates on products.



Oscar G. Mayer Jr.

Starting in 1963, Oscar Mayer & Company used a jingle that many generations of children have memorized. "I wish I were an Oscar Mayer Wiener" is the longest continuously used commercial jingle in the history of American advertising. Another famous jingle taught children how to spell "baloney" as "balogna" with a first name of O-S-C-A-R and a last name of M-A-Y-E-R.

In 1981 Oscar Mayer & Company was acquired by General Foods, a company founded in the 1920s by Marjorie Merriweather Post of Springfield, Illinois. In 1989, Mayer was again merged with the company founded by Chicagoan James L. Kraft, Kraft Foods. Oscar Mayer meat products, Post cereals, and Kraft



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Foods, all have deep founder and family roots in Illinois with Oscar F. Mayer, Charles W. Post, and James L. Kraft. Kraft Foods Division became part of the Altria Group parent company in 2003.

Today there are many things in Illinois named for Oscar F. Mayer including The Oscar F. Mayer School at 2250 N. Clinton in Chicago.





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