

Looking Back

Part of Our Complete Breakfast

Millions of Americans see it every morning, but very few pay a moment's notice to the flowing red signature gracing their cereal boxes. This spring marks the sesquicentennial of the birth of the man behind that signature.

Will Keith "W.K." Kellogg was born on April 7, 1860 in Battle Creek, Michigan, to which his parents had moved because it was where Adventism was coalescing. An outgrowth of the great flourishing of Christian sects in the United States, the Adventist movement overlapped with a mid-century interest in wellness that sought to harmonize religious teachings with faddish science. From the age of twenty, W.K. worked under his brother Dr. John Harvey Kellogg at the Adventists' Battle Creek Sanitarium, where patients were encouraged to exercise and to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and temptations of the flesh. They also had to adopt bizarre new hygiene regimens, and they were subjected to all the latest pseudoscientific treatments, from hydrotherapy to electrotherapy.

Central to the methodology of the sanitarium was vegetarianism. To take the place of meat, the Kelloggs developed several healthy food products in the 1890s, including the world's first corn flakes, which they began selling to the public. W.K. had more commercial and common sense than his brother, and after several disagreements—including over whether to sweeten the cereal—he started his own company.

That fraternal split marked the beginning of a gradual departure from the association of the Kellogg name with a strict devotion to the highest standards of health and nutrition. Today, although the company's original corn flakes remain hugely popular—well over a hundred billion bowls are eaten each year worldwide—they share grocery-store shelf space with such tasty but unwholesome offerings as Frosted Flakes, Froot Loops, and Pop-Tarts, all bearing W.K. Kellogg's autograph.

In fact, in an odd twist of history, one of the most popular health movements of our own time—that centering on organic foods—stands in direct opposition to the philosophy now embodied in the Kellogg Company, since breakfast cereals epitomize the ascendancy of processed foods and convenience over whole foods and inherited food culture. Like the Adventists in Battle Creek, today's organic movement is grounded in a revolt against some of the health vices of contemporary life. But while the former movement was enamored of the latest quirky semi-scientific findings, the latter is wary of an overreaching nutritional science. It is curious to wonder whether the organic philosophy can be balanced with the great plenty brought to us by companies like Kellogg's—and whether today's organic food movement will change the way our great-grandchildren eat breakfast.