

A Visual History of Wonderbread

By Sam Dwyer
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The story of Wonder Bread begins towards the end of America's Gilded Age; the years after the Civil War when the American economy first grew to dwarf those of the old European powers. Following the precedents set by the steel, oil, sugar, and meatpacking magnates, the pioneers of the American baking industry oversaw a massive period of growth and consolidation. Few were as consistently successful as Indiana resident Alexander Taggart.

By 1898, Taggart had already grown and sold one company, Parrot-Taggart Bakery, to the United States Baking Company, which was itself absorbed into the National Biscuit Company, which was headquartered in New York and comprised of 114 bakeries spread out across the country. In 1905, Taggart sold his concern in Nabisco and started fresh again with the Taggart Baking Company, based in Indianapolis.

This was an ideal time to enter the market—between 1899 and 1919 the value of bread and bakery products produced in Indiana grew 620%. Americans were rapidly growing richer, and they could afford to replace labor-intensive homemade goods with manufactured alternatives. Advertising encouraged them to do it faster. German immigrants were one of the most populous ethnicities in Indiana, and before the First World War, the Taggart Baking Company was advertising their "Puritan Bread" in German-language papers.

550 Nord Meridian Str.
....Schule jetzt eröffnet....

Tag-Schüler sowie auswärtige Schüler
welche hier im College völlige Aufnahme
suchen, können zu jeder Zeit eintreten. Ein
modernes gut ausgerüstetes Institut, voll-
ständig in allen Abtheilungen des Lernens
der Kunst der Musik und den verwandter
Künsten. Katalog frei.

Edward Taylor, Director.

SANTAL - MIDY
Empfohlen von Dr. Posner in Berlin.
Stopft Ausleerungen aus den Urin Organen bei
beiden Geschlechtern in 48 Stunden.
Es ist besser als Geparba, Gubeben oder Gm-
sprühungen und frei von allen schlechten Gerüchen
und anderen Unannehmlichkeiten.
Santal-Midy ist in Kapseln enthalten, auf
welchen der Name Geschrieben ist, ohne
dies hat keine echt.
Verkauft in allen Apotheken.

Das Sterben der Fische
im Aquarium ist meist dem Man-



**TAGGART'S
PURITAN
BREAD**

School days are coming,
And will soon be here,
Are your boys and girls quite ready
For the new school year!
Build them up by honest feeding,
Have their cheeks as roses red,
How to do it! Oh, that's easy!
Feed them Joseph Taggart's bread!

P
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That's the bread for lads and lassies;
Other makes it far surpasses.
Ask for this loaf of your grocer—

The evocation of Puritans connoted far more at the time than it does today. The U.S. economy had experienced recessions both before and after the war; from 1920-21 the economy contracted by a brutal 38.1%, and the national unemployment rate was at 20%. Many German

immigrants in the U.S. had been faced with discrimination during the Great War, and their language was largely driven out of public use, but the experience of persecution didn't instill many desires for tolerance. In Indiana, established German and British Protestants banded together against Catholic immigrants. In the wake of a major scandal in 1925, it was revealed that Klansmen had for years controlled half of the seats in the Indiana state legislature, and that as many as 30% of white males in Indiana were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1921 the Taggart Company had a new wrapping technique that could keep bread fresh for several days, and set about to rebrand the product. The new Taggart bread wouldn't carry religious or ethnic connotations that could hinder its sales, or even falsely identify itself with the work of Puritan mothers – it was going to be better. It was going to be from the mechanized world of the future, a utopian world with factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts... and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propellers sound like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds – a vision outlined in Filippo Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto, published in 1909.

Vice President Elmer Cline was tasked with coming up with a name that would be equal to the bread's ambitions. Famously, inspiration came to him while he was watching a balloon race at the Indianapolis Speedway. Captivated by the sight of hundreds of colorful orbs aloft in the sky, he apocryphally exclaimed to a friend, "What a wonder!" An epiphany that led to the branding of what we know today as Wonder Bread.



The new Wonder Bread didn't suggest hearth and home. On the contrary, the unnaturally vibrant colors of the logo and visual purity of this new, virgin white, 1.5 pound loaf perfectly evoked the otherworldliness of the enormous manufacturing system that was seen as America's future. Collective effort was at the core of the product's mystique, though after the Russian Revolution of 1917, many Americans were hysterically anti-collective. The same year that Wonder Bread was introduced to the American public, the Chinese Communist Party was founded, and five million Russians were dying of famine due to forced collectivization.

While the much-reviled communists starved, many Americans ate Wonder Bread—and in 1925 Taggart sold off his second successful company. For Americans, Wonder Bread promised not only meager sustenance, but also a superior product: one that was consistent, uniformly white and pure, and that miraculously didn't go stale. Wonder Bread enabled Americans to imagine

themselves aloft in splendor, a unique balloon of ego, eating the bread of the future that was surely superior to whatever gruel the collectivists could produce.

During World War Two, big, collectivist government did have an impact on the product's growth into an unquestionable American icon. By strongly suggesting that the company to enrich the bread with nutrients otherwise lost in the manufacturing process, the stage was set for Wonder Bread to become an icon of the Atomic Age. Postwar advertisements—"Builds strong bodies 12 ways!"—aligned the bread with the dominant food ideology of the time, nutritionism, which Michael Pollan has defined succinctly as, "the widely shared but unexamined assumption is that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient."

In 1965, the artist, Sister, and anti-war activist Corita Kent, searching for the divine, probed the tension between the collective and individual by matching the promises of Wonder Bread with a quote from Camus:

"We shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say this hope lies in a nation; others in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, received, nourished by millions of solitary individuals."



The size of the “wonder” in Kent’s print amounts to a question: is there wonder here? Is the body of Christ present in this substance?” Apparently, the answer she found was no—in 1968 Kent left the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to devote herself to anti-war activism and her art.

Wonder Bread’s advertisers had their own answer; following the general trend of the era, Wonder Bread advertisements changed their target audience and began to cater to younger women, with the slogan “BOY TRAP Helps catch boys...!” Though not the body of Christ, for women the pathway through Wonder Bread to a transcendental consummation of flesh was made clear.



BOY TRAP

A pretty girl knows how to succeed with boys without half trying. But she's got a lot going for her—marvelous new cosmetics, smashing fashions, and Wonder Bread. Wonder Bread? Wonder Bread! Wonder's the neatest way to trap a boy since...well, since apples. Try tempting him with his favorite Wonder sandwich. He'll bite. And—ZAP!—you've got him.

WONDER
AMERICA'S BREAD
helps build strong bodies & strong imaginations.
Helps catch boys...!

The placement of the sandwich in front of the mouth of the woman is typical of the era's high-Freudian, sexually charged style. The subliminal cues appeal to both genders in different ways. Men, who theoretically would want to kiss this woman, have to first eat through the sandwich she is offering in order to enjoy her other treats and delights. Women who want to share their treats are encouraged to add an additional armament to their roster. The third slice of bread is to encourage people to eat more bread.

The same year that Corita left the convent, the conglomerate International Telephone and Telegraph purchased the Wonder Bread brand. This chapter of the bread's past is frequently omitted from the histories written by the brand about itself, with good reason – throughout the sixties and seventies, ITT was the real-life version of the cartoonishly nefarious corporation.

Under ITT's corporate umbrella, Wonder Bread was nestled into a brand portfolio that included the German fighter plane manufacturer Focke-Wulf. Though Focke-Wulf built weapons that had killed Americans in World War II, ITT was able to successfully sue the US Government for \$27 million after the war, as restitution for the destruction of its German arms factories. ITT also owned 70% of the Chilean Telephone Company, through which funds were funneled to support the 1973 coup d'état that ended the nation's communist leanings, and brought the dictator Pinochet to power.

These distractions didn't benefit the stewardship of Wonder Bread. In 1983, ITT sold the Wonder Bread brand to human and pet food company Ralston-Purina (now known as the Nestlé Purina PetCare Company). Ten years later, the company was sold to Interstate Bakeries, and a Moody's analyst wrote, "[Wonder Bread]'s operations face limited growth prospects in a changing competitive environment." Indeed, Interstate Bakeries, which employs 19,000 people, has since filed for bankruptcy twice. Today, the company has \$1.4 billion in debt, and claimed in its bankruptcy filing that it "is not competitive, primarily due to legacy pension and medical benefit obligations and restrictive work rules."

The decline of Wonder Bread consumption throughout the country can be ascribed to changing understandings about what makes a food healthy, but those ideas in turn can be attributed in part to the intransigencies of American corporations and the government. The anti-authoritarian paranoia of the Vietnam era has diffused throughout our culture in ways that are often hard to fathom.

Wonder Bread has attempted to adjust its product for the times, but the newer variants of the product have never captivated the national imagination as much as the original version did. Contemporary ads are soft, gentle, and nonthreatening, but in comparison to the old days seem pale, watered down, defeated and deflated.

The replacement of balloons with bubbles is troubling: balloons are not edible, but bubbles are. They taste like soap. Moreover, a cumulative effect of all these new "healthier" versions of the product is to make the old standard seem even unhealthier.

The implication is that there's something wrong with the original, which, to this day, many Americans continue to eat. Throughout the entire country, our federal government benevolently ensures that the product continues to provide nourishment to impoverished women, infants, and children who might otherwise starve.

The benevolence isn't one-sided. Given the company's dire financial situation, it's fair to suspect that government-encouraged consumption may be the only reason the company is still in business.



The fortunes of the Taggart family are much brighter.

In 1925, Alexander Taggart embarked on a new baking endeavor, Campbell-Taggart, which in 1982 was sold to Anheuser-Busch for \$560 million, a price almost twenty times higher than earnings. The portion of this fortune that has been retained by Alexander Taggart's grandson Michael Taggart has been referred to humorously in the press as "beer money," and was used for a time to assemble a world-class motorcycle collection and private museum in Ojai, California.

This is the bread of American fantasy.