

LANCASTER FARMING ANTIQUES CENTER



# The History of Aunt Jemima's Mill

*Branding an American Wheat Product*

Photo provided by Quaker Foods  
The modern-day Aunt Jemima logo.

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Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix was a benchmark in agriculture and in food processing.

The ready-mix, self-rising pancake flour was invented in the late 1880s in St. Louis, Missouri, and was the first packaged mix. The mix was the brainchild of entrepreneurs Charles Rutt and Charles Underwood. Together, they purchased the bankrupt Pearl Milling Company when there was a glut of flour on the market. Rutt was a newspaper editor, and saw opportunity in the bankrupt mill to try something innovative. They believed that if they could come up with a product that made flour worth more than its base value, perhaps they would find fortune.

To understand the Aunt Jemima story, it is necessary to know about the changes that were taking place at the time. For example, during the course of the 19th century, improvements in transportation and agricultural technology had created a global market for American wheat.

The Erie Canal is perhaps the best example of improvements in transit leading to advances in grain production. As soon as financial backing for the inland waterway across New York State was announced in the legislature in 1811, farmers and speculators bought flat land in the rich Genesee Valley, anticipating access to New York City markets.

As soon as the Erie Canal reached that area, milling operations exploded. Rochester, N.Y., became known as The Flour City, and was milling 25,000 bushels of wheat a day. However, the moniker and mills didn't last long. Buffalo, N.Y., just 60 miles west, displaced Rochester as the key milling center once a canal system developed that took advantage of the Great Lakes.

Gradually, the railroad system and improvements in ocean-going vessels created further opportunities for grain production in more western states, which also corresponded with major advances in equipment adoption.

Although people had always been working on new tools to handle the hard work of the grain harvest, progress in this area at the time was stymied by cost, and also, by objections from people who were afraid of losing their jobs. Not until the Civil War created a shortage of farm workers did the expense of reapers become a necessary investment.

Along came roller mills, which began taking the place of millstones to crush grain for flour, helping create the circumstances that led to the first packaged mix. While also a hefty investment for producers, the new roller mills led to a leap in productivity over stone mills. Plus, the sifting systems that were generally part of the roller mills allowed for easier manufacture of white flour, long a highly coveted food.

This, combined with price swings invited by international markets for American wheat, caused the flour glut that made the Pearl Milling Company go bankrupt, and put the mill under the eyes of newspaperman Rutt and his business partner Underwood.

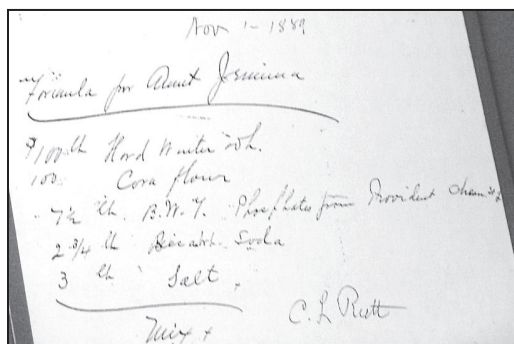
The original recipe for their pancake flour included wheat flour from hard winter wheat, corn flour, salt and leaveners. The name "Aunt Jemima" was taken from a minstrel show song, sung by a character in blackface. These elements did not add up to success, however, for Rutt and Underwood, who sold the formula to R.T. Davis Milling Company in 1890.

This is where the pancake mix began to find its footing. Davis added powdered milk to the recipe, and a real live spokesperson to sell the pancake flour. Nancy Green, known as a great cook and storyteller, was hired to play a real life Aunt Jemima for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Green was an emancipated slave who worked as a cook for a Chicago judge. Inside a flour barrel-shaped booth at the fair, she made pancakes and told stories of her famous pancakes saving her Colonel from marauding Union forces. Her exhibit was so popular that the fair placed extra security to monitor the line waiting to sample her pancakes. By the end of the fair, people and businesses had placed 50,000 orders for Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix.

This particular World's Fair debuted other products that became fixtures in America, too, such as Cracker Jacks, Shredded Wheat, and Wrigley chewing gum.

Nancy Green con-



Rutt's recipe from Nov. 1, 1889, on display at Pate House museum in St. Joseph, Mo.

**"I's in Town Honey!"**

**Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour**

Better this year than ever before. Prepared from Wheat, Corn and Rice. Makes the finest pancakes imaginable. No trouble at all. Only takes a minute to prepare. All grocers sell



**Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour**

Buy a package today and have good old-fashioned, light, digestible pancakes for breakfast tomorrow. You'll be surprised and happy when you see them on the table, smoking hot, delicious and brown.

Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour is unexcelled for waffles and muffins.

**Davis Milling Company,**  
St. Joseph, Mo.

Manufacturers of the celebrated Aunt Jemima's Special Cake and Pastry Flour.

**DAVIS' GOLDEN SHEAF KANSAS HARD WHEAT FLOUR**

All our products guaranteed to please you.



**FREE Aunt Jemima and Her Rag Doll Family**

These delightful dolls are the best found toys for the little folks. They are given away FREE in exchange for the coupons on each package. Every child wants a set of these dolls.

Notice the medal on Aunt Jemima, presented to her during the World's Fair in Chicago for having the highest quality of the best pancakes ever made.

Image courtesy Library of Congress

Shown is an ad for Aunt Jemima pancake flour, from the Nov. 7, 1909, edition of the New-York Tribune.

tinued to play Aunt Jemima, demonstrating the pancake mix at a wide range of events until 1928, when a streetcar hit her. Although the character's associations with and reinforcement of an antebellum south received criticism, the character remains aligned with the product.

Davis Milling Company re-named itself Aunt Jemima Mills in 1913, and Quaker Oats bought the company in 1926.

Aside from the country's eager adoption of a packaged mix that still needed eggs and milk or water to make it complete, one of the most remarkable things about Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix is the

way people latched onto a character as an advocate to guide consumer choices.

Quaker Oats had a similar launch. Its initial advertising campaign was an 1891 railroad tour. Just before the Quaker Oat Special was due to arrive in locales, advance men pasted notices declaring free samples. A person dressed in recognizably Quaker garb — a wide brimmed black hat and simple clothes — gave free half-ounce samples to assembled crowds. This character was chosen by the conglomerate of millers who owned the company because of its associations with honesty.

The ad game worked, and people

began asking grocers for Quaker Oats by name. While the associations of Aunt Jemima were far more complicated, glorifying a time and place where the enslavement of African-Americans was seen as acceptable, the public nonetheless embraced this food character, too.

Perhaps the reason these inventions appealed to the public was that they came in an era when agricultural production occurred at a scale that took grain growing and grain processing out of the public eye. The public imagination still wanted to see the story of food, somehow, and Aunt Jemima and Quaker Oats capitalized on and delivered that desire.