



HISTORY



It started with a challenge—a call to action from a German language weekly paper in the small town of Highland, Illinois. The paper urged the citizenry to hear out a young Swiss immigrant named John Meyenberg. He had come to America to sell his idea of canning as a preservative. At a time when there was only primitive refrigeration, and fresh food spoiled quickly, Meyenberg's idea could prove to be a godsend.

Two days after Christmas, a meeting was called at the new city hall. A group of prominent farmers and businessmen heard Meyenberg outline his plans for what he called a "condensary." He spoke fervently of the process and the potential benefits to the community. And he asked for their financial support—a \$15,000 investment with a promise of a 55 percent profit return the first year.

Convinced that the idea had merit, a committee was formed to sell 150 shares of stock at the formidable price of \$100 each. They were purchased quickly and on the 14th day of February, 1885, the Helvetia Milk Condensing Company was founded. The name "Helvetia" which is Latin for Switzerland, was chosen in recognition of the founders' ancestry.

On the corner of Broadway and Washington streets, Meyenberg and his five-member board of directors found the only vacant building in Highland—a wool factory that had closed 10 years earlier. They signed a lease on the two-story brick building, placed orders for the necessary equipment and began renovations with the aim of opening in early May. But the company was in for a rocky start. Delays in delivery of equipment from the East pushed back the schedule. Nearly a third of the company's assets were wiped out in May by the failure of a local bank. Nevertheless, on June 14, 1885, with modest fanfare, "Highland Evaporated Cream" made its debut as the world's finest unsweetened evaporated milk.



Helvetia purchased its first deliveries of fresh milk that morning and two weeks later was taking in 300 gallons a day from local farmers. The milk was processed through an elaborate system of kettles, vacuum pans, heating chambers and cooling tanks. The equipment was like something out of a science fiction novel- great cone-shaped vats with pipes coming in and out of them, gauges and pumps and thick heavy rivets. It almost looked as though it could fly. On July 8 it nearly did when the plant's steam-powered sterilizer exploded with a force that was felt all over town. After only 29 days of operation, the Helvetia Milk Condensing Company closed down. It took four weeks to make the necessary repairs as

disgruntled farmers wondered what to do with their milk. But when it reopened, the plant had all the business it could handle. By the year's end the fledgling company had 12 employees and a

modest profit of \$1,400. Most of the early customers were from in and around Highland, but soon the company began to gain new and unexpected customers in the South. In late 1885, 10 cases of evaporated milk were donated to the victims of a tragic fire in Galveston, Texas. It was the first donation in what would be a century of commitment to people in need. Later, an El Paso grocer ordered 100 cases after feeding evaporated milk to his ailing infant son. By 1886 physicians in New Orleans also were recommending the product. Much of the milk that was canned in the first six months of 1886 spoiled on merchants' shelves. Some at the plant argued that the sterilization process was the cause. Meyenberg claimed that the cans were being improperly sealed and weren't airtight. One August morning, angered by the criticism that his process was at fault, John Meyenberg packed up his family and left Highland for good.

The task of trying to rescue the troubled company fell to Louis Latzer, a young farmer and one of the company's directors. A man of vision, courage and determination, Latzer reluctantly accepted the presidency of the seemingly doomed company in February 1887. Unlike most of his neighbors, Latzer had a college education and had taken courses in chemistry. He suspected that some, but not all of the milk was spoiling, the problem could be identified and solved. He turned for help to Dr. Werner Schmidt, a Highland physician who had been a chemistry professor in Switzerland. It wasn't easy. Weeks turned into months and eventually years. But the two men persisted—despite the fact that the future of the company remained in grave doubt. They finally traced the spoilage to bacteria that he would eventually be able to eliminate.



Success came for Highland due in large part to John Wilde, who struck out to travel the South and came home with orders for the Highland brand. He was also instrumental in getting the product worldwide exposure at national and international expositions. Wilde and other company officers were responsible for the firm's early visionary efforts to stimulate consumer interest in the merits of evaporated milk for three main uses. The first was as a substitute for fresh milk in areas like the South where there was little refrigeration and in the Western mining areas where fresh milk supplies were scarce. The results were impressive. By 1895 more than half the company's sales were in the West. The second use was as a safe, wholesome and convenient baby food. And third was its use in recipes.



The company's first product was sold in different markets under different brand names including Tulip, Blue Grass, Success, Fin and Our Pet—the popular brand that eventually gave Helvetia a new name. The exact origin of the "Pet" name is lost in history, but one story claims it was coined when a woman shopper went to her grocer wanting her Brand Evaporated Milk and said "Give me that milk...I can't remember the name.. You know, my pet kind of milk". Whatever the origin, the "Our Pet" trademark was registered in 1895, becoming Helvetia's leading brand.

One of the turning points in the company's history came toward the end of the century with the start of the Spanish-American War. To help supply Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and other American fighting troops with a safe and convenient source of milk, the American government bought large quantities of evaporated milk from Helvetia. The troops affectionately called our product the "Tin Cow". The increased demand was met by building a second processing plant in nearby Greenville, Illinois. At war's end, the troops scattered home across the U.S. and many, remembering the quality Highland milk, brought it home to their families.





In WWI the U.S. government again placed huge orders to supply the troops over seas, and Pet's "Tin Cow" went to Europe. But the war also made great demands for the men and materials that the company needed in order to operate. Tin became scarce, and what was available was of poor quality. Lack of coal made rail shipments difficult. Critical labor shortages developed as men went off to fight the Kaiser, and much of the domestic production of milk was diverted overseas. Reluctantly, the company halted shipments to its West Coast distributors so it could maintain its supplies for

the war effort. But to the best of its ability the company continued to provide a vital commodity to the many families who waited back home. When the war ended, Helvetia, like many other suppliers, was faced with a serious problem of oversupply. Several plants were closed as demand decreased.

During the period the nation was coping with the growing hardships of the Depression. Pet provided an important staple to American families and also was able to expand its service to consumers. Erma Proetz was instrumental in the area. Pet's entry into home economics activity was the result of her development of Gardner's first test kitchens. Her original recipes using Pet products were developed and continually refined. Mrs. Proetz's special style continued to make its mark as she created the radio personality, Mary Lee Taylor. Begun just before Thanksgiving 1933 as a twice-weekly 15-minute broadcast, the "Mary Lee Taylor Program" was a how-to show for the American homemaker. It featured Pet recipes and meal plans, promoted cookbooks and offered household hints. Her first recipe was for pumpkin pie filling using PET milk. It was destined to become an American favorite.



During World War II, she offered listeners "recipes especially designed to help mothers give their families the most wholesome diet possible under rationing limitations." At the height of its popularity the show aired on almost 200 radio stations across the nation. When she went off the air after two decades, Mary Lee Taylor had received more than eight million requests for Pet recipes and other homemaking information. Through four long years of World War II, Pet did its part by supplying the GIs overseas, millions in the US, and the victims of war on two continents.



V-J Day brought millions into the street as hostilities ended and a period of post-war prosperity began. For three years, Pet sales grew rapidly, largely because of the baby boom. In fact, more cans of Pet Milk were purchased in 1950 than at any time in the company's 65-year history. And the product was one of the single largest selling items on supermarket shelves. It was during this time that Pet set up its first home economics department and its own test

kitchens. Here, new products were developed and tested, new uses for existing products were researched, and new recipes were developed.

Today Pet Evaporated Milk continues to be a staple in millions of homes. It is used in main dishes, soup and salads, beverages, appetizers, deserts and on cereal. Pet continues to make the highest quality evaporated milk so that all your cooking turns out great. We invite you to use the recipes on this site to create sensational food for you and your family!