Charles Alfred Pillsbury Biography

Charles Alfred Pillsbury

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Biography

Charles Alfred Pillsbury (1842-1899), American businessman, built the largest flour-milling company in the world in the late 19th century.

Charles A. Pillsbury was born to a farming family in New Hampshire. After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1864, he spent several years in Montreal engaged in various business ventures. In 1869 he settled in Minneapolis and purchased an interest in a flour mill at the suggestion of his uncle John S. Pillsbury, a leading citizen of the town. In 1870 Charles Pillsbury, his uncle, and father formed a family partnership which became the nucleus of the Pillsbury milling empire.

During the 1870s the Pillsbury interests expanded rapidly. By 1880 the family partnership had acquired four other mills, and in 1881 they built the largest single flour mill in the world. Although Charles Pillsbury initially devoted his efforts to mill management, he later traveled widely in Europe, becoming familiar with market conditions and investigating new milling techniques. He imported the roller process into the United States from Hungary and also was one of the first mill operators to install the middlings purifier. These two innovations permitted the production of fine flour from the hard spring wheat of the region, giving further impetus to the growth of Minneapolis as a flour-milling center.

Disaster struck in 1881, when three mills burned, but the Pillsburys rebuilt the mills, and by 1889 the three main units had a capacity of over 10,000 barrels of flour per day. During the 1880s wheat and flour prices sank to depressed levels, and competition became severe. Because of this and because of their desire to gain a foothold in the British market and utilize the worldwide British marketing facilities, the Pillsburys in 1899 merged with competing mills under the aegis of a British syndicate and became the Pillsbury-Washburn Company Ltd., the largest flour-milling organization in the world.

The Pillsburys retained a large stock interest in the combine, and Charles Pillsbury was made managing director. In this capacity he became an innovator in marketing as well as technology. Bypassing the commission merchants who traditionally sold flour-mill output, he established a national, and eventually an international, marketing organization that made the trade name "Pillsbury's Best" known throughout the world.

A simple, direct, unaffected man of great energy, Pillsbury was highly revered not only in the milling trade but among farmers, whose interests he constantly defended.