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General Mills

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** From Flour Dust to Foundation: The Origins of General Mills
- **Chapter 2** Industrial Triumphs and Tragedies: The Early Milling Years
- **Chapter 3** Gold Medal Flour and the Birth of Iconic Brands
- **Chapter 4** Merger and Expansion: The Creation of General Mills, Inc.
- **Chapter 5** The Rise of Betty Crocker: Building a Household Name
- **Chapter 6** Innovation on the Breakfast Table: Wheaties, Cheerios, and More
- **Chapter 7** Bisquick, Convenience, and the Changing American Kitchen
- **Chapter 8** Diversification in the Twentieth Century
- **Chapter 9** Monsters, Toys, and Nerf Balls: Ventures Beyond Food
- **Chapter 10** Acquiring Taste: Pillsbury and Other Landmark Purchases
- **Chapter 11** Organic Beginnings: Embracing Natural and Healthy Foods
- **Chapter 12** Going Global: Expanding Markets Across Six Continents
- **Chapter 13** Navigating Economic Shifts: Surviving and Thriving in Hard Times
- **Chapter 14** Embracing Change: Digital Transformation and Modernization
- **Chapter 15** The Leaders Behind the Legacy: General Mills' Executives
- **Chapter 16** People First: Corporate Culture and Employee Empowerment
- **Chapter 17** Giving Back: Philanthropy and Community Initiatives
- **Chapter 18** Commitment to Sustainability: Goals and Achievements
- **Chapter 19** Supply Chains and Sourcing: From Field to Table
- **Chapter 20** Nutrition and Consumer Trends: Meeting New Demands
- **Chapter 21** The Pet Food Frontier: Blue Buffalo and Beyond
- **Chapter 22** Financials Unpacked: Revenue, Dividends, and Market Performance
- **Chapter 23** Facing Headwinds: Competition and Challenges in the 21st Century
- **Chapter 24** Streamlining for the Future: Divestitures and Reshaping the Portfolio
- **Chapter 25** The Road Ahead: Future Prospects for General Mills

Introduction

General Mills is more than just a name on a cereal box or a pantry staple—it's a living thread in the fabric of American business and culture. From the thunder of flour mills on the banks of the Mississippi River to the hum of modern production lines spanning continents, General Mills' story is one of ingenuity, resilience, and transformation. As a company, it stands among the enduring icons of the S&P 500, having weathered wars, depressions, revolutions in technology, and sweeping changes in consumer habits.

This book traces the journey of General Mills from its genesis in the mid-19th century through its rise to one of the world's largest and most diversified food companies. Its roots in the flour-milling heartland of Minnesota laid a foundation of quality and innovation, out of which grew not only staple brands like Gold Medal and Cheerios but an enduring commitment to nourishing families across generations. Each product launch, every merger and acquisition, and each strategic pivot offers insights into the company's adaptability and vision.

Yet, the story of General Mills is not just one of products or profits. It is a narrative shaped by people—visionary leaders, culinary innovators, dedicated employees, and loyal consumers. The creation of beloved mascots, the invention of instant baking mixes, and even forays into toys and restaurants showcase a restless curiosity and willingness to explore new frontiers. These choices have shaped not only company fortunes but also American lifestyles and global tastes.

But while General Mills has celebrated many triumphs, it has not been immune to adversity. Industrial accidents, fierce market competition, changing regulatory landscapes, and the evolving expectations of a global consumer base have all exerted pressure on the company to rethink, refocus, and renew. The ability to anticipate and respond to challenges has been essential to its enduring relevance.

Today, General Mills stands at another turning point. As preferences shift toward health, sustainability, and social responsibility, the company has undertaken bold commitments to environmental stewardship, inclusivity, and responsible sourcing. Its investments in regenerative agriculture, waste reduction, and climate action reflect a belief that business success and social good must go hand in hand.

Throughout the chapters that follow, we will explore General Mills' storied past, examine the forces shaping its present, and consider its future role in feeding, delighting, and sustaining the world. This is the story of General Mills: a company that has not only adapted to change but often anticipated it, continually striving to earn its place at the table—in American homes and far beyond.

CHAPTER ONE: From Flour Dust to Foundation: The Origins of General Mills

The story of General Mills, a name now synonymous with kitchens and pantries across the globe, begins not with ready-to-eat cereals or convenient baking mixes, but with the raw power of nature and the relentless spirit of American industry. Its roots are firmly planted in the mid-19th century along the banks of the Mississippi River, where the roaring waters of St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, Minnesota, provided the perfect natural engine for the burgeoning flour milling industry. The strategic location, coupled with the vast wheat-growing regions of Minnesota and the Dakotas, laid the groundwork for what would become a global food giant.

In 1856, the Minneapolis Milling Company was incorporated by Illinois congressman Robert Smith. Smith's primary business was leasing power rights to the numerous flour mills that were beginning to spring up along the west side of St. Anthony Falls. This seemingly simple act of harnessing the river's energy was a foundational step in transforming Minneapolis into a milling powerhouse.

It wasn't long before Cadwallader C. Washburn, a prominent Wisconsin businessman, politician, and former U.S. Congressman, recognized the immense potential of the Minneapolis milling operations. Shortly after its founding, Washburn acquired the Minneapolis Milling Company from Robert Smith. A man of considerable ambition and foresight, Washburn brought his brother, William D. Washburn, to Minneapolis to actively manage the developing company, as Cadwallader himself maintained his permanent residence in Wisconsin.

In 1866, the Washburn brothers ventured directly into the milling business, building their own flour mill, the Washburn "B" Mill, at St. Anthony Falls. At the time, this mill was considered remarkably large, with some believing it was too big to ever be profitable. Yet, the Washburn "B" Mill proved to be a significant success, quickly surpassing the capacity of its competitors and demonstrating the brothers' innovative approach to production technology. This success paved the way for even greater expansion.

Just a few years later, in 1874, Cadwallader Washburn built an even larger and more technologically advanced facility: the Washburn "A" Mill. This seven-story stone structure was designed to be the largest and most cutting-edge mill on the Mississippi River, capable of producing an astounding 840 barrels of flour daily, which equated to roughly 165,000 pounds. The sheer scale of this operation underscored Minneapolis's growing importance as a milling center.

A pivotal moment in the company's early trajectory occurred in 1877 when John Crosby, a businessman who had previously been involved in the paper mill and iron foundry industries, partnered with Cadwallader C. Washburn. This partnership led to the company's renaming as Washburn-Crosby Company. Crosby played a crucial role in overseeing the company's expansion, and his partnership solidified the business for years to come.

However, success was not without its shadows. On the evening of May 2, 1878, disaster struck the heart of the Minneapolis milling district. The Washburn "A" Mill, a symbol of industrial progress and the largest mill in the world at the time, was destroyed in a series of three massive flour dust explosions. The explosions, heard ten miles away in St. Paul, launched debris hundreds of feet into the air and ignited a raging fire that engulfed several adjacent mills and city blocks. The tragedy claimed the lives of 18 workers, 14 of whom were on the night shift inside the "A" Mill, and four more in nearby facilities. This devastating event, known as the Great Mill Disaster, significantly impacted Minneapolis's flour productive capacity, destroying approximately one-third to one-half of it.

The cause of the explosion was later confirmed by University of Minnesota professors to be the rapid combustion of flour dust, likely ignited by a spark from two dry millstones rubbing against each other. This incident served as a stark and tragic wake-up call for the entire milling industry, highlighting the deadly potential of accumulated dust.

Despite the immense destruction and loss of life, Cadwallader Washburn's response was immediate and resolute. Even as the fires smoldered, he announced his intention to rebuild the mill. More than just a simple reconstruction, Washburn was determined to revolutionize the industry with an unparalleled commitment to safety and quality. He established a fund to care for the families of those who had lost loved ones and reemployed all the displaced workers to assist in the rebuilding effort.

Washburn, alongside Austrian engineer William de la Barre, implemented groundbreaking technological improvements in the new mill, completed in 1880. De la Barre, drawing inspiration from a mill in Budapest and even acquiring innovations through industrial espionage in Hungary, installed a new ventilation system designed to prevent the dangerous accumulation of flour dust. This innovation was crucial in making the mill safer. Furthermore, the rebuilt "A" Mill replaced old grinding stones with automatic steel rollers, a pioneering advancement that produced higher quality flour. This new gradual reduction process, using porcelain, chilled iron, or steel rollers, enabled the integration of gluten with starch, resulting in superior flour.

The commitment to quality paid off handsomely. In 1880, Washburn-Crosby flours earned gold, silver, and bronze medals at the first International Miller's Exhibition in

Cincinnati, Ohio. This prestigious recognition inspired the creation of the renowned Gold Medal flour brand, which quickly became a top-selling flour in the U.S. The award solidified Washburn-Crosby's reputation as producers of the world's finest flour, a claim that would resonate for decades to come.

By the early 1900s, Washburn-Crosby was the leading flour miller in Minnesota. The success of Gold Medal flour and the company's continuous innovation positioned it as a dominant force in the American flour market. While Minneapolis was no longer the sole flour capital of the world by the 21st century, the influence of these early pioneers remained. The ruins of the original Washburn "A" Mill, now a historic landmark, stand as a testament to this foundational period.

The stage was set for an even grander transformation. In 1928, James Ford Bell, then president of Washburn-Crosby, spearheaded a massive consolidation. On June 20, 1928, Washburn-Crosby merged with three other mills, officially forming General Mills, Inc. Within five months, Bell had orchestrated the consolidation of an impressive 27 companies operating across 16 states, establishing General Mills as the world's largest flour-milling company. This ambitious move marked a new era, transitioning from a regional milling giant to a national, and soon-to-be global, food powerhouse.

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