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Hormel Foods Corp.

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Introduction

Hormel Foods Corporation stands out as one of America's most enduring and dynamic companies—a business that, over more than a century, has shaped and reflected national trends in food, industry, and corporate citizenship. Founded in 1891 in Austin, Minnesota by George A. Hormel, what began as a modest meat packing operation has grown into a multinational food powerhouse, known around the world for iconic products like SPAM and SKIPPY. The story of Hormel Foods mirrors the evolution of American enterprise—marked by innovation, resilience, and an evolving sense of purpose in service to both customers and communities.

This book traces the journey of Hormel Foods from its humble beginnings to its place today as a diversified Fortune 500 company. We begin with the young George A. Hormel, who, equipped with little more than \$500 and a relentless work ethic, carved out a niche in the burgeoning Midwest meat industry. Early on, Hormel showed a penchant for adaptation—moving boldly into new markets, diversifying its product lineup, and pioneering novel foods like dry sausage and canned ham that would become staples across the country.

Through the 20th century, the company's leadership cultivated a spirit of innovation, launching now-legendary brands and adopting forward-thinking policies such as employee profit-sharing and, later, corporate philanthropy through the Hormel Foundation. The development of SPAM in the late 1930s not only revolutionized the American pantry but also played a critical role in feeding Allied troops during World War II. Hormel Foods' responsiveness to wartime needs—and ability to scale production at an astonishing rate—demonstrated its capacity for both social impact and operational excellence.

Yet Hormel's narrative is not simply one of products and profits. The company's adaptability has been tested through labor strife, market disruptions, and shifting consumer tastes. The book delves into these challenges, from the highly publicized Austin strike of 1985 to the many strategic decisions that have kept Hormel relevant in an era of globalization and rapid change. The consistent theme is an ability to evolve—whether through key acquisitions, international ventures, or a steadfast commitment to safety, quality, and community.

Central to Hormel's ongoing success has been its strong values and people-centered culture. From its leaders and frontline workers to its many partners and customers, the company's ethos—rooted in integrity, quality, and continuous improvement—has shaped both its internal environment and its broader contributions to society. Hormel Foods remains committed not only to financial growth but to sustainability, animal

welfare, hunger relief, and empowerment of its employees and the communities where it operates.

As we examine Hormel Foods' present and future, we will investigate how this American original is navigating today's challenges: adapting to new markets, responding to consumer demand for transparency and sustainability, and charting a responsible path forward. Through peaks and valleys, Hormel's journey offers valuable insights into what it means to endure, to lead, and to inspire as a truly American company.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Entrepreneurial Spark: George A. Hormel's Vision

The story of Hormel Foods Corporation begins, as many great American stories do, with a determined individual, a bold idea, and a healthy dose of grit. George Albert Hormel, the founder, was born in Buffalo, New York, on December 4, 1860, to German immigrants John and Susanna Hormel. His early life was characterized by hard work and an unexpected entry into the meat industry. The Panic of 1873, an economic depression, forced young George to leave school and contribute to his family's income. This led him to Chicago, where, at the age of 15, he began working in his uncle Jacob "Jay" Decker's meat market and packinghouse. It was here that he learned the fundamentals of meat processing and packing, working long hours for modest pay but gaining invaluable experience.

The lessons learned during these formative years profoundly influenced George Hormel's approach to business. His mother, Susanna, instilled in him the importance of cleanliness, a principle his uncle reinforced, often repeating that "Clean food doesn't spoil in a hurry; Dirty food spoils while you look at it." This early emphasis on hygiene would become a cornerstone of Hormel's philosophy and a distinguishing factor in his future endeavors within an industry not always known for its pristine conditions. This foundational understanding, coupled with his innate industriousness, prepared him for the entrepreneurial path he would eventually forge.

At 19, George Hormel decided to strike out on his own. He left Chicago, traveling to Kansas City, Missouri, with very little money but a strong belief in his ability to succeed. He secured a job as a wool buyer, an experience that would further broaden his understanding of agricultural markets and supply chains. His travels as a buyer eventually led him to Austin, Minnesota, a town that would become synonymous with the Hormel name. It was in Austin that George Hormel recognized an opportunity to establish his own meat business.

In 1887, George Hormel saw his chance. A customer's meat market in Austin had been destroyed by fire. The owner rebuilt, but was no longer interested in operating the market. Seizing the moment, Hormel borrowed \$500 and purchased a share in the business, forming a partnership with the owner's son, Albrecht Friedrich. Together, they opened the Friedrich and Hormel meat market. This initial venture, though successful, ultimately proved to be a stepping stone. Hormel envisioned a larger operation, a packinghouse, while Friedrich was content with a smaller butcher shop. This difference in ambition led to the dissolution of their partnership in 1891.

With the funds from the dissolved partnership, George A. Hormel, then 31 years old, was ready to realize his larger vision. In 1891, he established Geo. A. Hormel & Company, a pork packinghouse on the outskirts of Austin, Minnesota. He set up his initial operations in a converted creamery building located on the Cedar River. In its earliest days, the company focused on packaging and selling ham, sausage, and other pork products. To ensure the viability of the fledgling business, George Hormel also diversified his trade, dealing in hides, eggs, wool, and poultry.

The establishment of Geo. A. Hormel & Company marked the formal beginning of what would become a multinational food processing giant. George Hormel himself was deeply involved in every aspect of the business during these foundational years, from buying livestock and butchering animals to grading meat and even cleaning hog pens. His relentless commitment to quality and efficiency, combined with the lessons learned from his early experiences, laid the groundwork for the company's future success. While he couldn't compete with the massive Chicago packers of the era, Hormel's strategy focused on quality and innovation, setting his company apart.

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