BREAKFAST FROM BATTLE CREEK

In 1880, nobody in the tiny village of Battle Creek, Michigan would have believed that this village would become the “breakfast food capital of the nation.” Battle “Crick,” as the local people called it, was said to be named over a disagreement between a small group of Indians and land surveyors. There was a good supply of water for powering machinery. The town developed some flour mills and sawmills. Life was peaceful for the six thousand inhabitants.

Among Battle Creek’s citizens was a young medical student named John Harvey Kellogg, who was one of sixteen children born to a broom maker from Massachusetts. John Harvey was born in 1852.

The Kelloggs were all members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which established itself in Battle Creek around 1860. They did not smoke or drink alcohol, they avoided pastries and other rich desserts, and above all they practiced vegetarianism. The Adventists taught that the body was God’s temple and must not receive the flesh of His creatures.

John Harvey believed that vegetarianism was the road to good health and a long life. The diet of most Americans in the late 1800s was heavy and greasy. It consisted of fatty pork and beef that often was preserved in a salt barrel; of doughy, sweet puddings and pies, eaten hot out of the pudding pot or oven; of boiled coffee and overcooked vegetables. Most of the American people ate too much in addition they gobbled and gulped their food because they were a people on the go. Many Americans suffered from the “great American stomachache,” a form of indigestion that was called dyspepsia.

Kellogg began his medical studies with a thousand dollar loan from the Adventists. While furthering his medical studies, Kellogg began to specialize in the surgical treatment of the diseases of the stomach and intestines. He also experimented with a new diet, very different from that of his youth—before his family embraced Adventism—when his daily breakfast had consisted of hot pancakes with bacon fat and molasses.

While attending Bellevue Hospital Medical College, Kellogg lived in a small apartment in New York City. His breakfast consisted of seven graham crackers, an apple, and a slice of coconut. He had no way of cooking a hot cereal such as oat porridge or cornmeal mush. This is when the idea that you should be able to purchase cereals at groceries already cooked and ready to eat.

When Kellogg returned to Battle Creek, he began to think of a way to turn whole wheat into a precooked flake that could be eaten with milk and fruit or a little sugar. This idea would make him the founder of the breakfast-food industry.

“The doctor,” as he was now called, had the perfect laboratory. He took over the management of the Adventists’ vegetarian boardinghouse, which was developed into a world-famous health resort and hospital known as Battle Creek Sanitarium. He was always looking for wholesome new foods to add variety to the menu.
Many of Kellogg’s experiments were carried out secretly in his wife’s kitchen, in the twenty room mansion he had built in Battle Creek. He would boil up a batch of whole wheat and water, and roll it thin. Then he would attempt to scrape it into flakes and bake them in the oven. But the wheat mixture just wouldn’t flake. Time after time he ended up with hard little granules that had to be soaked in liquid for hours to become edible.

Then an accident took place. Dr. Kellogg was called away from his boiled whole wheat as it lay on the rolling board. When he came back to it some hours later, he found that it flaked beautifully and, when baked, the flakes were large, thin, crisp, and delicious! The wheat, he realized, had to stand awhile in order to flake, a process known as tempering.

In 1895, John Harvey Kellogg’s wheat flakes went on the market for sale to groceries all over the country. This first ready-to-eat flaked cereal was called Granose. Soon Battle Creek was the manufacturing center for other health-food pioneers. Already Charles W. Post, a one-time patient at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, had introduced Postum, a “coffee” made from bran and molasses. In 1906, Dr. Kellogg’s younger brother, Will Keith Kellogg, introduced the history-making Corn Flakes. In that same year, C.W. Post brought out his version of flaked corn, later known as Post Toasties.

Although Charles W. Post died from a serious stomach ailment at the age of sixty, both John Harvey and Will Keith Kellogg lived past their ninety-first birthdays. Flaked cereal for breakfast may not have been the reason for the Kelloggs’ long and healthy lives. But along with C.W. Post, the Kellogg brothers brought wealth and fame to Battle Creek, Michigan—and all three pointed the way toward a lighter diet for millions of people.