

Walter Diemer, the accountant who invented bubble gum

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Bubble gum was not invented by a chemist or a master confectioner. It was invented by the man who did the accounts.

The gum that would not bubble

People had chewed gum for a long time, but blowing bubbles with it was another matter. The Fleer Chewing Gum Company of Philadelphia spent years looking for a gum that could be blown into bubbles without sticking. In 1906 Frank Fleer, the company's founder, made a bubble gum he called Blibber Blubber. It could be blown into bubbles, but it was too sticky and broke apart too easily, and it was never sold to the public.

An accountant with a hobby

Walter Diemer was born in Philadelphia on 8 January 1905. By 1926 he was working as an accountant at Fleer, at a time when the company's president wanted to cut costs by making the firm's own gum base. Diemer liked to experiment with gum recipes in his spare time.

After about a year of attempts, in 1928, he made a mixture that was less sticky than ordinary chewing gum and stretched more easily. He could blow bubbles with it. But the next morning he could not make it again. It took him four more months to get the recipe right, and then he made a batch of 300 pounds.

Why bubble gum is pink

The only food colouring in the factory was pink, so that is what Diemer used. It stuck: pink became the standard colour for bubble gum around the world.

Sold out in a day

Diemer wrapped 100 pieces using a machine meant for salt water taffy and took them to a local sweet shop, priced at a penny each. They sold out in one day. Fleer put the gum into production as Dubble Bubble, and Diemer himself taught the company's salesmen to blow bubbles, so that they could show shopkeepers and customers what made it different. Sales passed \$1.5 million in the first year.

No patent, no royalties

Diemer never patented his invention, and competitors soon followed, helped by bubble gum becoming a cheap and popular treat during the Great Depression. According to his second wife, Florence, he never received royalties, and did not mind. He stayed with Fleer for decades, oversaw the building of bubble gum

factories in Philadelphia and in Barcelona, travelled the world selling gum, and rose to senior vice president and a seat on the board. He retired in 1970.

Pud and the Fleer Funnies

Dubble Bubble came wrapped with a comic strip, the Fleer Funnies. Its first characters, Dub and Bub, arrived in 1930, and were replaced in 1950 by Pud, who became the brand's mascot. During the Second World War, Dubble Bubble went to the armed forces, but sugar and latex ran short and bubble gum making stopped in 1942. It restarted in 1951.

Fleer shut its Philadelphia plant in 1995, after Dubble Bubble had been made there for 67 years, and in 1998 the brand was sold to Concord Confections, later part of Tootsie Roll Industries. The recipe has since changed, and the comics have gone, but Pud remains.

The bubble gum grandad

After his first wife died in 1990, Diemer rode around his retirement village in Pennsylvania on a big tricycle, handing out bubble gum to children. He died on his 93rd birthday, 8 January 1998. The American comedy show Saturday Night Live joked that his body had been found stuck under a cinema seat.

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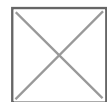
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