

William Wrigley Jr and the chewing gum empire

From the sweeties.net wiki

The biggest chewing gum company in the world began with a free gift. William Wrigley Jr was not trying to sell gum at all. He was trying to sell soap.

Soap, then baking powder, then gum

William Mills Wrigley Jr was born in Philadelphia on 30 September 1861, into a Quaker family of English descent. In 1891, aged 29, he moved to Chicago to go into business for himself with \$32 to his name, selling Wrigley's Scouring Soap. To tempt customers, he gave away baking powder with the soap. The baking powder turned out to be more popular than the soap, so he switched to selling baking powder, and in 1892 began giving away two packets of chewing gum with every can. Again, the free gift was more popular than the product. So Wrigley went into chewing gum.

His first gums were called Lotta and Vassar. In 1893 came Juicy Fruit and Wrigley's Spearmint, and in 1914 Doublemint. For almost a century those three were the heart of the business.

Advertising

Wrigley believed in advertising. When advertising rates fell in 1907 the company expanded its advertising, and Wrigley's Spearmint sold more than \$1 million worth in 1908. By 1911 it was the most popular chewing gum in the United States. Later, Doublemint was sold with its twins: from 1939 the adverts showed identical twins in matching outfits, first as drawings and later played by real twins on radio and television.

Baseball and an island

Gum made Wrigley rich, and he spent the money in a big way. He bought into the Chicago Cubs baseball team and was its majority owner by 1921. Its ballpark was renamed Wrigley Field in 1926 and still carries the name. In 1919 he bought control of the company that owned Santa Catalina Island, off the coast of California, and built a hotel, a casino building and a tile factory there. In 1930, during the Depression, he gave the Salvation Army the use of a six storey building in Chicago as a lodging house for the unemployed, and gave it the building outright the next year.

William Wrigley Jr died on 26 January 1932 at his home in Phoenix, Arizona, aged 70.

Gum goes to war

His son, Philip K. Wrigley, took over. In the Second World War he made an unusual decision: the entire output of Wrigley's Spearmint, Doublemint and Juicy Fruit went to the American armed forces, while the company kept advertising so people would not forget the brands, with a campaign called Remember this

Wrapper.

The controversies

Wrigley's gum was traditionally made with chicle, a natural gum from trees, bought largely from Central America. In 1952, when Guatemala brought in land reforms meant to end feudal working conditions for peasant farmers, Wrigley stopped buying chicle from Guatemala.

In 2013 Wrigley temporarily halted its new Alert energy gum after the United States Food and Drug Administration said it would look into the safety of caffeine added to foods. And in 2021 the company sued firms selling cannabis sweets in packaging that looked like its Skittles, Starburst and Life Savers brands. In 2023 one of those cases ended with the seller agreeing to a permanent injunction and to pay significant sums.

The barcode first

On 26 June 1974, a supermarket in Troy, Ohio, installed the first barcode scanning equipment. The first product ever scanned with a barcode was a ten pack of Wrigley's Juicy Fruit. A copy of that pack is on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

The family lets go

The Wrigley family ran the company for more than a century, through four generations. In 2006 William Perez became the first person from outside the family to lead it, and in 2008 Mars agreed to buy Wrigley for about \$23 billion, far more than its stock market value of \$17.3 billion. Wrigley's gum now sits alongside Mars chocolate in the same part of the Mars business. See [the mystery of the Mars family](#).

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