

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: FLOUR POWER

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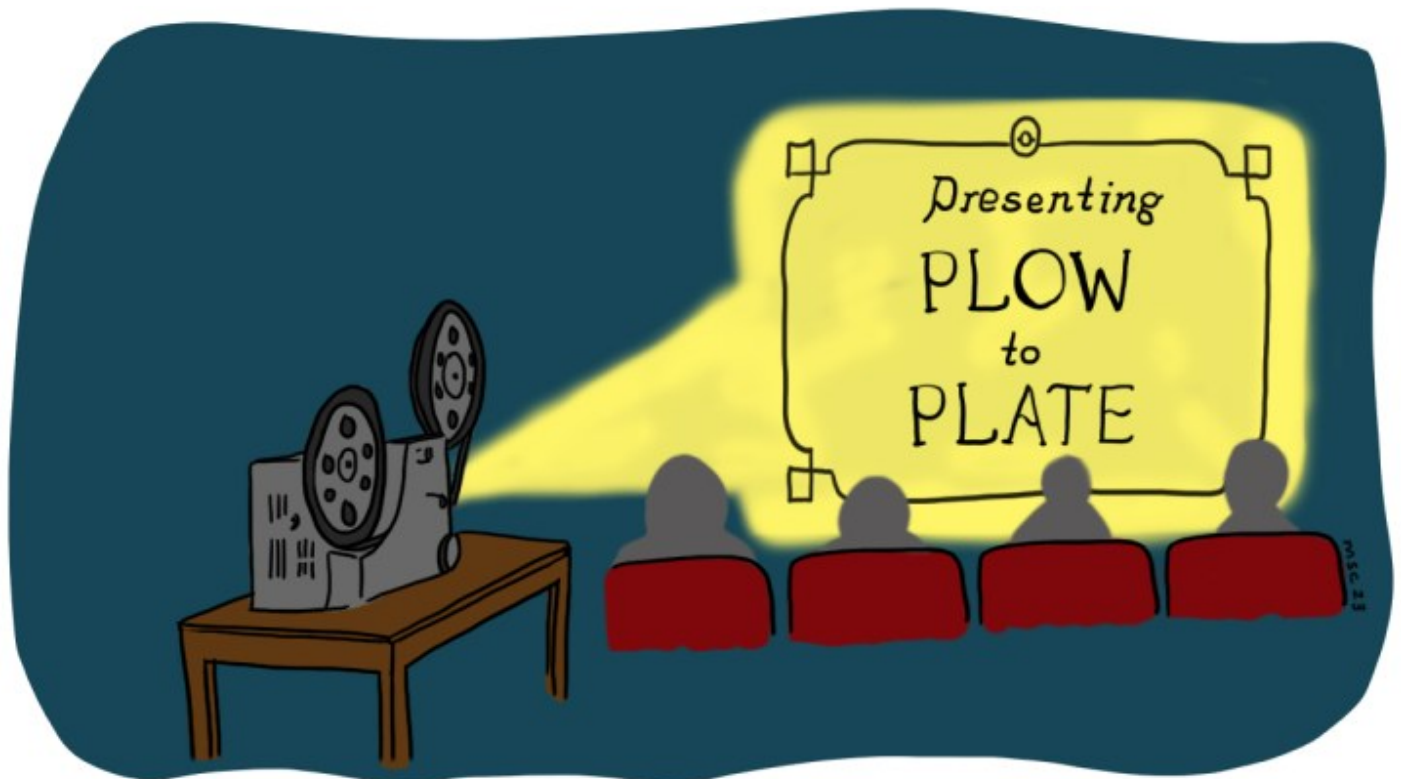


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

Our founding fathers proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” Can the same be said for all foods? Twin Cities Public Broadcasting System launched the *Minnesota Experience* series with an episode called “Flour Power,” which “explores how milling made Minnesota.” By the hour’s end, you realize it made a whole lot more through manufacturing innovation, advances in industrial agriculture, new forms of advertising, groundbreaking public relations, marketing and global shifts in diet and consumption.

Minnesota experienced the King Wheat Era, also known as the “grain rush,” from the 1860s to the 1880s, when grain and flour mills were ubiquitous. Myriad wheat ports and river cities sprang up to transport flour before railroads took this over in the 1870s. Fortunes were made in warehousing, storing, shipping and selling. Minnesota’s natural advantages included fertile farmland and the Mississippi River that powered

the mills. Turkey Red wheat inspired the lyrics “For amber waves of grain” in the anthem “America the Beautiful.”

“Flour Power” traces this industry primarily through two corporate giants: the Washburn-Crosby Company, headquartered on the west side of the Mississippi River, and the C. A. Pillsbury Company, founded on the east side. These two giants competed against one another for 120 years. When Washburn-Crosby raised a sign bearing its new advertising slogan, “Eventually, Why Not Now?,” Pillsbury responded with its own, “Because Pillsbury’s Best.”

During this long rivalry, the companies learned to more effectively separate the wheat from the chaff, creating a more desirable, pure white flour with a longer shelf life, which allowed for shipping without spoilage and was also easier for homemakers to bake with. Other innovations included installing an exhaust system to vacuum flour dust from the air. On May 2, 1878, this dust caused the Great Mill Explosion, which killed 18 people and leveled several city blocks. Steel rollers were introduced in the 1870s, ending the use of millstones after 2,000 years of human history.

Flour became a staple in grocery stores because bread could be baked for breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. It was the first industrially produced and widespread carbohydrate in world history—the original convenience food. Despite these successes, flour, like other products, was still subject to consumer tastes and preferences. Sylvester Graham, the father of the Graham cracker, believed that whole wheat flour, which contained more fiber, the germ and bran (or middlings) was healthier and more nutritious.

“Flour Power” does not gloss over the less savory aspects of this industry’s growth and dominance in Minnesota and elsewhere. The founding fathers of the Twin Cities were philanthropists who built their park systems and arts and cultural institutions. But at the same time, as capitalists, they also cut down pine forests, polluted rivers and damaged the plains. They had a negative impact on the environment, flooding burial grounds and displacing native people. The documentary also covers the eco-

nomic and political struggles between ordinary rural farmers and these urban robber barons. One historian observed that it was high ideals and greedy intentions combined and wrapped together as part of the same story.

The final third of the film shows how innovations in salesmanship and product development are just as important to company growth as breakthroughs in industrial production. In 1901, the invention of puffed rice and other grains opened new markets, primarily breakfast cereals. A backlash against food allergies led to the development of Wheaties, Cheerios and other popular, supposedly healthy breakfast cereals. Betty Crocker was introduced in 1921 and quickly became the second-most-recognized woman after Eleanor Roosevelt. She even received countless marriage proposals. Washburn-Crosby bought radio station WCCO in 1924 to advertise its brands. The company promoted Wheaties with the world's first commercial radio jingle, sung live by a barbershop quartet. In 1928, Washburn-Crosby became General Mills and gained a national, then global, footprint. In 1932, General Mills developed *Betty and Bob*, a radio soap opera sponsored by Bisquick, and, in 1933, introduced *The Lone Ranger*. The Pillsbury Bake-off competition was founded in 1949, a forerunner of all that has followed. Both companies moved beyond flour to other foods (e.g., Bacos bacon bits) and then, as holding companies, to other nonfood products and industries. It's the American story, writ large. So are all foods created equal? The humble wheat germ would have a hard time making its case.

"Flour Power" will screen on Tuesday, April 14, 2026

Please join the Plow to Plate mailing list by emailing plowtoplate@gmail.com to receive a screening link.

Adam Rabiner lives in Ditmas Park with his wife, Dina.