

The President and Fellows of Harvard College

Out of the Cracker Barrel: The Nabisco Story from Animal Crackers to Zuzus by William Cahn

Review by: Joe B. Frantz

The Business History Review, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Autumn, 1970), pp. 408-409

Published by: [The President and Fellows of Harvard College](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3112634>

Accessed: 04/02/2014 13:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The President and Fellows of Harvard College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Business History Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

the whole is remote and lifeless. Leading figures do not come to life, they inhabit a two-dimensional world in which Houghton and Mifflin are virtuous and their adversaries invariably duplicitous. Such simplistic dichotomy leads to the kind of postage stamp psychology which characterizes James T. Fields, of Ticknor & Fields and one of Mrs. Ballou's villains, as being a charming egocentric because he "had only a younger brother and had been brought up by a widowed mother" (62). Would Fields have been ennobled by having an older brother, two younger brothers, no brothers? The possibilities suggested by this type of analysis could be programmed for a sophisticated computer.

The Building of the House is valuable for its information and vulnerable in everything else. It will be useful to scholars interested in the culture of the late nineteenth century Northeast and to those who are curious about the development of the American publishing business. Undoubtedly, it will also please owners, employees, and admirers of Houghton Mifflin.

* * *

OUT OF THE CRACKER BARREL: THE NABISCO STORY FROM ANIMAL CRACKERS TO ZUZUS. *By William Cahn. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1969. Pp. 367. \$8.95.*

Reviewed by Joe B. Frantz
Professor of History
University of Texas, Austin

Austin, Texas, has a pretentious little place that is a favorite of mine called the Country Store, which keeps a cracker barrel and a big head of cheese with a knife ready for customers who come in to shop for paintings and various art supplies. I don't paint, but I go in regularly for the free crackers and cheese. Although I never knew the cracker barrel days, I feel strongly in my romantic soul that they must have been great, and so I long for the days I never knew, which is one quality I have in common with more successful businessmen.

Deep down, I, like they, know that the cracker barrel days were no good, or were merely the best that could be had for that period. I know that the crackers must have been stale, broken, and soggy. Consequently, I am struck by the revolution which occurred with the introduction of the packaged, fresh cracker, which Adolphus W. Green put on the market in 1899. Sanitarily wrapped packages that would keep the product unsoiled until the ultimate user was ready to consume it turned loose a whole new way of life. Here is the true beginning of the modern supermarket, with its stalls of neatly wrapped carrots, desserts, and fresh meats, all looking very antiseptic and all looking exactly alike, whether you're buying in California or Maine. This then is what the National Biscuit Company has contributed to the progress of civilization. *Fortune* magazine was carried away to the extent of claiming that Nabisco "did almost as much as the introduction of canned foods before it, and the invention of the electric refrigerator after it to change the techniques for modern merchandising."

408 BUSINESS HISTORY REVIEW

William Cahn writes about Nabisco's past with the flair of a successful professional writer, which he is. He is particularly skillful in his interweaving of documentation. He does not hesitate to reproduce whole letters, advertisements, and directives with the idea that they give more direct flavor (necessary in a cookie history) than any amount of artful paraphrasing. The narrative flows and the analysis is apt. Without question, this is a book in which the National Biscuit Company can take pleasure, which does not necessarily damn it. The author has evidently invaded the business records of the company, has interviewed everyone from bakers and cookie cutters to presidents and comptrollers, and has read widely in the relevant social and industrial history. He traces the rise of the company's leadership from the days of Adolphus W. Green down to the present, including the usual story of the enlargement of ethical and social values so necessary in modern business leadership.

Green knew how to promote his product, and he had a strong feeling for service. But to him labor unions were an anathema, and people in general were customers, nothing more. He had no patience with the new-fangled, progressive spirit of the twentieth century. Green's regime was followed by the usual breathing period in which Nabisco, possessor of a proud and valuable name, tried to bridge the gaps between previous success, current lag and confusion, and recovery of future greatness in its field. Green's successor, Roy E. Tomlinson, tried to broaden responsibility at the executive level, but it remained for George H. Coppers to bring the company into the present.

Rising through the legal department of Nabisco, Coppers became president in 1945. As a result of previous training at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, he was convinced that what the Nabisco Company needed first was *policy* and secondly a feeling for *people*. Almost immediately, he circulated to all his supervisory employees a communication entitled *Company Policy*, which stated in effect that devotion to past policy was a ruinous activity. So often, he said, officials take negative stances on the basis that this is company policy. Accordingly, he said, "And so now I say to you that there is no 'Company Policy' except such as is dictated by your common sense, sound judgment, observance of law and the dictates of your conscience." When it was suggested to Coppers that "no one man can change the thinking of this company," Coppers suggested drily and bluntly that he would try.

Since the beginning of Copper's presidency, Nabisco has been a new company. A product leader from the start, with a record of never having missed a dividend, Nabisco has moved out into a field of leadership and involvement. Or in the author's words, "Nabisco has moved from introvert to extrovert," with "a responsibility to . . . be heard on issues and matters affecting the common good." In the process, its sales and profits have continued to expand so that now its annual foreign sales of \$150,000,000 exceed its best year prior to World War II. Dedication to something other than profit can pay off; at least, that would seem to be the way this cookie crumbles.

* * *