

History Trivia

PABLUM

IN EARLY 1900s North America, infant and young child mortality was commonplace. Children seemed to have very little resistance to disease, dying of illnesses such as rickets, typhoid and diphtheria. Doctors recognized malnutrition as a prime culprit for much of this heartache.

How to solve the problem eluded the medical profession until 1930 with the invention of Pablum, a pre-cooked, chock-full-of-vitamins, infant cereal that generations of children around the world have loved and eagerly devoured. Adults, on the other hand, have turned up their noses at the mush, likening its taste to that of boiled Kleenex.

Pablum — and its companion, Sunwheat Biscuits for toddlers — were the brain-child of a dedicated team of doctors and researchers under the leadership of Dr. Alan Brown.

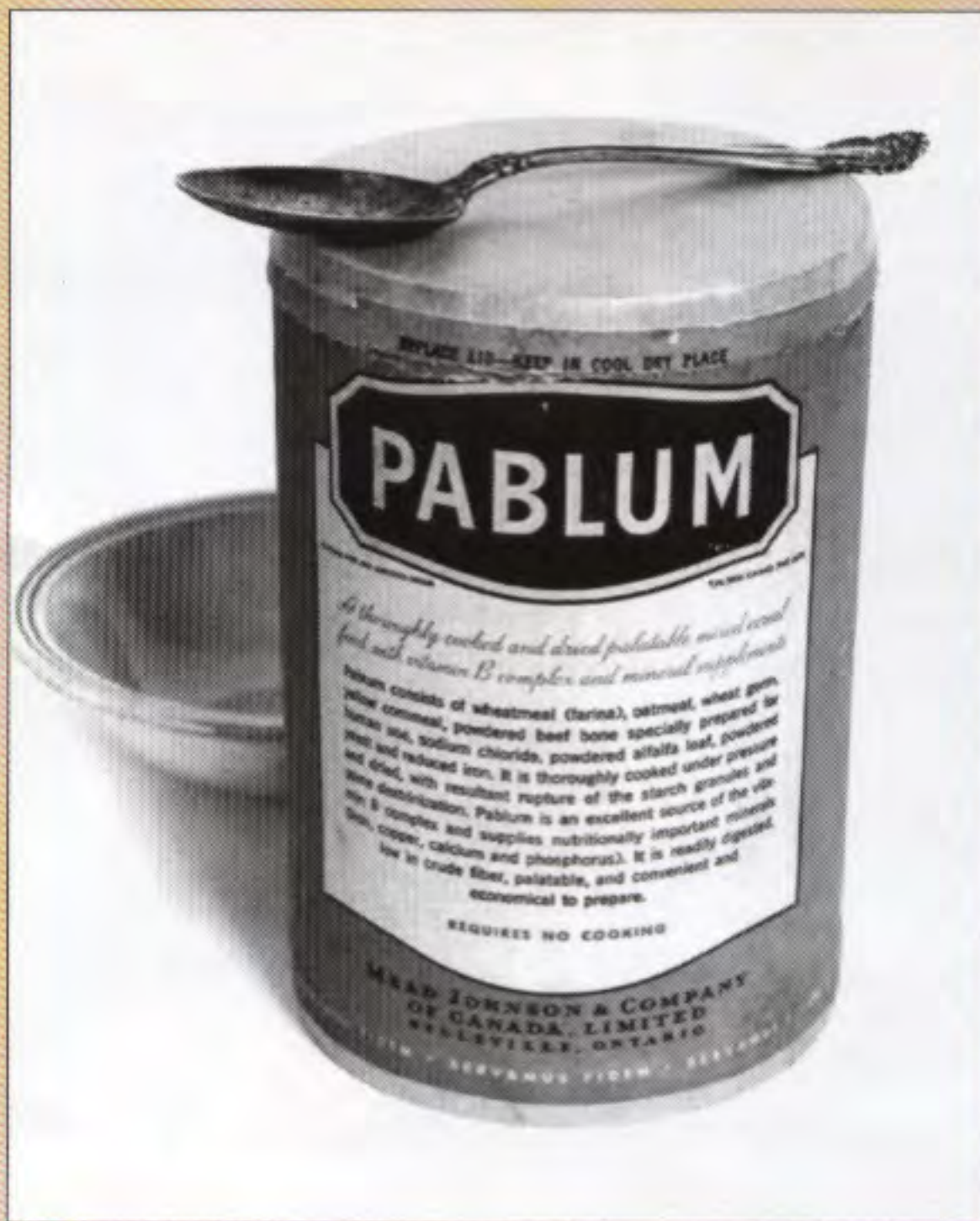
The Toronto-born Brown was an ambitious and educated doctor who had undertaken post graduate studies in Europe. Upon

his return to his native land in 1914, he boasted to John Ross Robertson, benefactor of the Hospital for Sick Children, that he could cut infant deaths at the Toronto hospital *in half*. The catch? Brown wanted Robertson to hire him as head of the hospital.

In a classic case of put up or shut up, newspaper baron Robertson hired the 27-year-old Brown as a physician in the infant department. Energetic and well-liked, though sometimes aggressive, within four years Brown was promoted to Physician-in-Chief of the hospital.

Brown surrounded himself with the best and brightest talent he could attract, including Dr. Theodore Drake and Dr. Frederick Tisdall. Together, these doctors and their teams would re-invent the way babies and children around the world were fed.

Nutritional research was a fairly new field. The finely milled cereal babies were being fed — consisting primarily of wheat, oats or corn meal — was routinely stripped of its bran and germ, since whole grain



An early package of Pablum.
Image courtesy of The Hospital for Sick Children

cereal was hard to digest. In essence, all the cereal's "goodness" was being removed and there was no technology in those days to "add" essential vitamins and minerals back into the mixture.

The same dilemma, how to create a healthy cereal, was the goal of Dr. W.R. Graham at the Ontario Agricultural College, who was searching for a healthy feed for chicks. By combining Dr. Graham's research with their own, the "Sick Kids" doctors came up with a nutrient-rich toddler biscuit that included ingredients such as wheatmeal, oatmeal, cornmeal, wheat germ, brewer's yeast, bone meal and alfalfa, sweetened with honey. It went on the market as "Sunwheat Biscuits".

However, babies couldn't chew the biscuits, so the team came up with a cereal that had many of the same ingredients, could be mixed with milk and spoon-fed. The downside was that it required lengthy cooking. This was a major problem in a time period during which there was little refrigeration. Cooked foods that required a long time to prepare were often made in large batches, gathering harmful bacteria before they were consumed.

A recent scientific invention solved the dilemma. The process of drying milk by letting it drip on a red-hot revolving drum and scraping it off, was adapted to the doctors' cereal to create a flaky white powder that could be kept indefinitely. With the addition of warm milk or water, parents had an easy-to make, vitamin- and mineral-enriched cereal. Dr. Drake came up with an appropriate name, "Pablum", from the Latin word *pabulum*, meaning food.

Pablum did more than save generations of children from malnutrition. Royalties from its manufacture provided funds used to formally establish the Hospital for Sick Children Research Institute, whose discoveries contributed to the doctors' goal of healthier and longer lives for the world's children. — BEV CLINE