

**"TO THE MARKETS OF THE WORLD"**

# Advertising

**IN THE MILL CITY,  
1880—1930**

KATE ROBERTS AND BARBARA CARON

*It is a peaceful, timeless* scene. The man in the foreground steadies a flat-bottomed boat loaded with grain sacks while another, bent forward under his load, carries a sack toward a humble windmill (fig. 1). Superimposed on this nostalgic vignette is a thoroughly modern message: "Advertising did not make Gold Medal Flour the Leading Brand in this country. But Quality did—and constant advertising hasn't hurt it any."

The easy merger of past and present in this 1906 advertisement mirrored the flour-milling industry itself, where state-of-the-art techniques were revolutionizing the ancient practice of grinding grain into flour. Nationwide, the advertising industry came into its own in roughly the same period that Minneapolis reigned as the world's flour-milling capital: 1880–1930.<sup>1</sup> From headquarters on opposite shores of the Mississippi River, Washburn-Crosby Company and its chief rival, Pillsbury Company, became industry leaders through timely equipment upgrades, highly



Fig. 1 Full-page ad from the Northwestern Miller, December 12, 1906

efficient distribution networks, recruitment of the best and brightest minds in the business—and "constant advertising."<sup>2</sup>

In their early years as industry leaders, Washburn-Crosby and Pillsbury produced many types of advertisements, all with the common goal of acquainting potential investors and customers with the companies and their leading brands.

As one historian observes, "Before the 1880s the names of most manufacturers had been virtually unknown to the people who bought their products. Tobacco was tobacco and flour was flour until manufacturers started promoting those brand names to customers."<sup>3</sup>

How did companies convince customers and investors of their superiority? An 1889 chromolithograph from the Washburn Mill Company, probably given to flour buyers and shipping agents for display in their offices, illustrates one common method of attracting attention (fig. 2). A poster-sized image shows the company's modern production and distribution methods and features combine harvesters, a centrally placed roller mill, and rail cars and steamships leading "to the markets of the world."<sup>4</sup>

*Kate Roberts, exhibits developer, and Barbara Caron, associate exhibits developer, are members of the exhibit team for the Minnesota Historical Society's new Mill City Museum in Minneapolis, opening in September.*

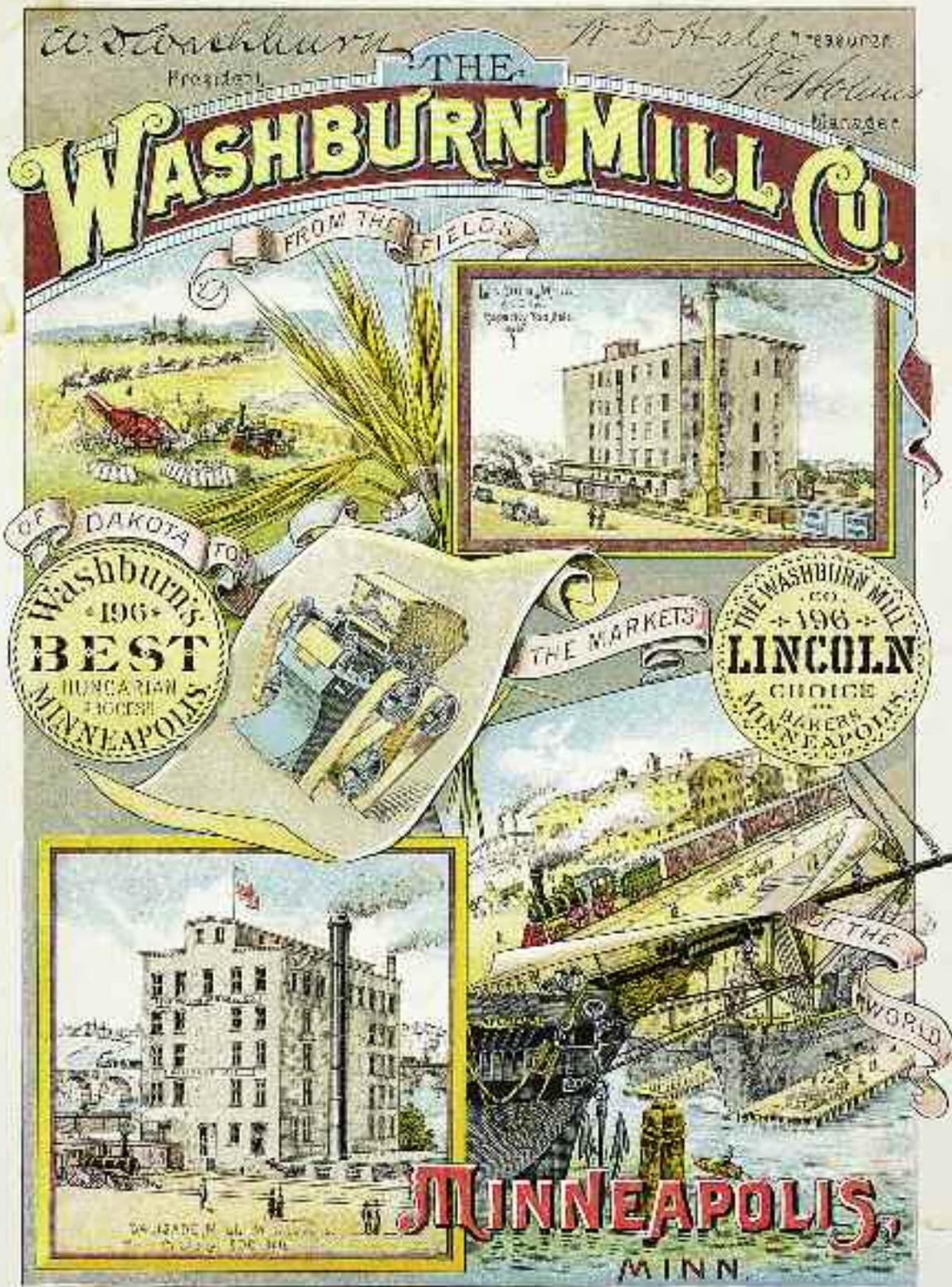


Fig. 2 Poster created by the St. Paul Dispatch, 1889, showing wheat “from the fields of Dakota to the markets of the world”

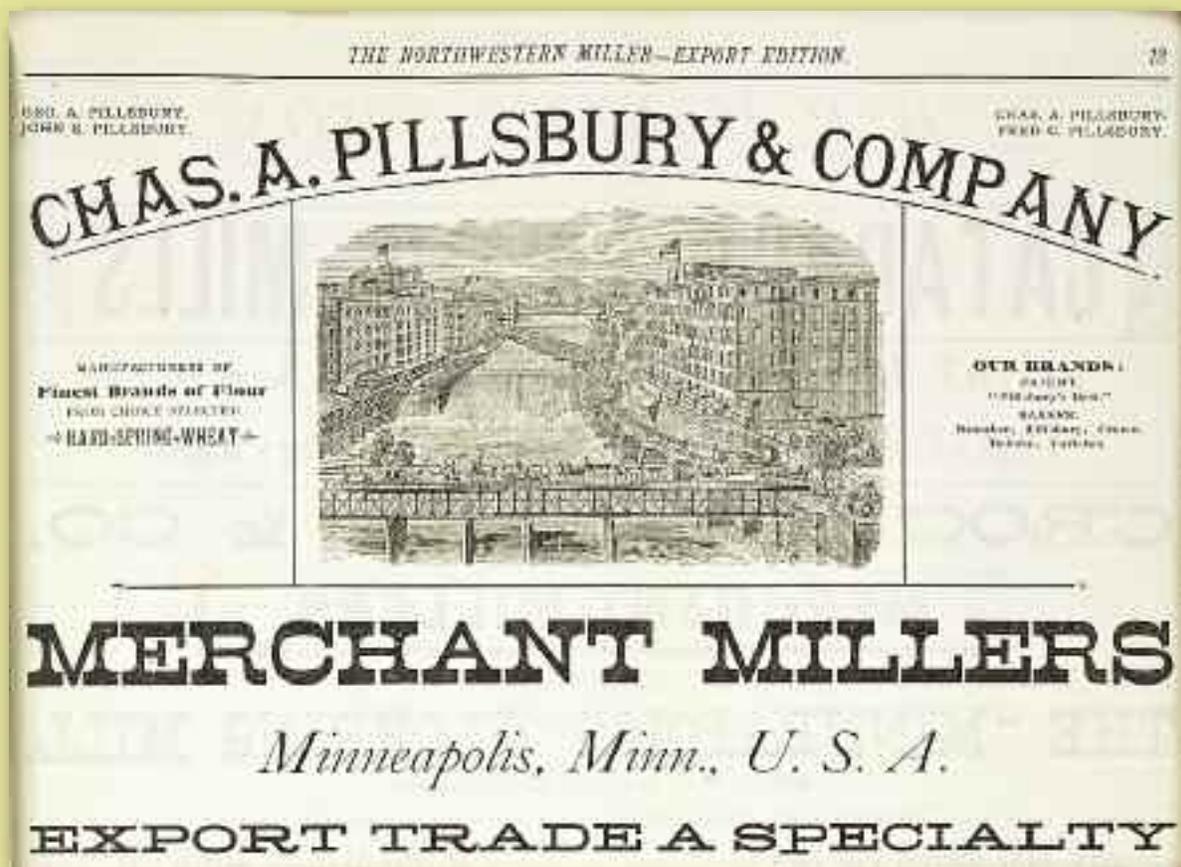
Such sweeping views of industrial progress appeared in other formats, too, including an advertisement for C. A. Pillsbury and Company from the October 15, 1882, issue of the *Northwestern Miller*, a Minneapolis-based trade journal with national and international distribution (fig. 3). The half-page ad includes a dramatic illustration of the company's mills overlooking St. Anthony Falls (both scaled larger than life), the company's brand names and owners, and prominent mention of its export trade. Typical of its time, this advertisement showcases a thriving industrial complex at peak production.<sup>5</sup>

Advertising was by no means limited to office displays and magazine pages. Trade cards, pamphlets, package inserts, and envelopes were

all popular methods of reaching potential customers. In a Gold Medal flour trade card issued about 1904, the familiar industrial view of Washburn-Crosby's mills appears in the background (fig. 4). In the foreground, a profusion of barrels and bags sports the Gold Medal seal. Like most mills, Washburn-Crosby packaged its products under several brand names. But it was Gold Medal—the company's "Superlative" brand, renamed after it captured the gold medal at the 1880 Millers' International Exposition in Cincinnati—that was to become Washburn-Crosby's signature flour. A similar composition appears on the cover of an 1897 pamphlet from the rival Pillsbury-Washburn Company, where a triumphant female figure atop a barrel of Pillsbury's Best dominates the scene (fig. 5). Like Washburn-Crosby, Pillsbury-Washburn had recognized the need to forefront just one of its brands. (The "Pillsbury's Best XXXX" trademark, registered in 1875, is still found on the company's packaging.)<sup>6</sup> This lively image hints at things to come in flour advertising. Women emerged as primary flour purchasers in the early-twentieth century, and they were increasingly pictured in advertisements. Even more interesting is the child in the foreground who brandishes a tiny loaf of bread—a pint-sized predecessor of the legions of satisfied customers to appear in future advertisements.

This shift from views of a company's headquarters to glimpses of its customers became increasingly prominent. The earliest advertise-

Fig. 3 Ad from the export edition of the *Northwestern Miller*, October 15, 1882, stressing Pillsbury's place in the global economy



# MILLING IN MINNEAPOLIS

- 1856** Cadwallader C. Washburn of Maine establishes the Minneapolis Mill Company, which controls waterpower and leases water rights to mill operators on the west side of St. Anthony Falls.
- 1861** W. D. Washburn, C. C.'s brother, enters the lumber and sawmilling business.
- 1866** C. C. Washburn builds his first flour mill in Minneapolis. Called "Washburn's Folly" and later known as the B Mill, it is the largest flour mill west of Buffalo, New York.
- 1869** Charles A. Pillsbury and his father, George A. Pillsbury, secure one-third interest in the Minneapolis Flouring Mill. George's brother, John S. Pillsbury, buys into the partnership.
- 1870** The Pillsbury family purchases a bankrupt mill, which becomes the first independent operation of C. A. Pillsbury and Company.
- 1873** W. D. Washburn adds flour milling to his sawmilling company.
- 1874** C. C. Washburn's A Mill is completed; its capacity of 3,000 barrels per day is three times larger than the B Mill's.



*Sometimes rivals, now one company:  
Washburn-Crosby A Mill and the Pillsbury B  
(closer to river), postcard, 1915*

- 1877** Washburn-Crosby Company is founded by brothers C. C. and W. D. Washburn along with W. D.'s brother-in-law John Crosby. The dynasty now operates three separate milling companies: W. D. Washburn, C. C. Washburn, and Washburn-Crosby.
- Washburn-Crosby's William Dunwoody convinces a Glasgow firm to place a small order for flour, signaling the beginning of flour exporting in Minneapolis.
- 1878** Washburn's A Mill explodes. C. C. Washburn rebuilds and equips it with the newest technology, making it, for a brief time, the largest mill in the world. Mill City Museum is located in the ruins of this mill.
- 1879** C. A. Pillsbury and Company contracts with architect LeRoy S. Buffington to build the new Pillsbury A Mill on the east side of the Mississippi River.
- 1889** A London financial syndicate purchases several Minneapolis milling companies, including C. A. Pillsbury's and W. D. Washburn's, creating Pillsbury-Washburn Flour Mills Company, Ltd., the largest flour miller in the world.
- 1908** After unsuccessful grain speculation, Pillsbury-Washburn goes into receivership.
- 1909** Pillsbury Flour Mills Company, an operating company, incorporates in Minneapolis and leases the Pillsbury-Washburn mills.
- 1928** Several regional milling companies merge with Washburn-Crosby to form General Mills. With 27 companies in 16 states, it becomes the world's largest flour miller.
- 1935** To reduce expenses and avoid holding-company legislation, Pillsbury Flour Mills incorporates in Delaware.
- 1989** Grand Metropolitan, based in the United Kingdom, acquires Pillsbury.
- 1997** GrandMet merges with Guinness to form Diageo.
- 2001** General Mills, based in Golden Valley, acquires Pillsbury from Diageo to become one of the world's largest food companies.



Fig. 4 Trade card, about 1904. Many shoppers collected these brightly colored advertisements, often saving them in albums.

ments showing satisfied consumers focused on servants—a group better acquainted with the subtleties of flour varieties than the well-to-do homeowners who paid the food bills. In the 1890s Washburn-Crosby featured a pair of maids merrily rolling a barrel of Gold Medal flour into a pantry (fig. 6). These images appeared on calendars, trade cards, envelopes, and magazine advertisements. A decade later, household helpers were still appearing in Washburn-Crosby advertisements, but their unencumbered merriment had been replaced by knowing smiles. In a 1908 advertisement, a young maid looks confidently over her shoulder at a stack of Gold Medal flour bags (fig. 7)—or is she casting a reassuring glance toward the reader? Either way, the message is clearly that the competent consumer chooses Gold Medal flour.

*In 1907, while this maid* and others graced the pages of the *Northwestern Miller*, an equally striking but altogether different advertisement made its first appearance. Rather than depicting the consumer, it addressed her with a short, direct slogan destined to become part of the American popular lexicon (fig. 8). “Eventually—Why Not Now?” was the brainchild of Benjamin Bull, a Washburn-Crosby executive who oversaw the company’s advertising. The slogan appeared in magazine advertisements, on billboards and packaging, and later on a neon sign suspended over Washburn-Crosby’s A Mill, usually in a script said to have been modeled after Bull’s own handwriting. Beginning in 1915, Pillsbury answered its chief rival in its own advertisements (fig. 9). “The Flour Question Settled—Because Pillsbury’s Best” put the corporate

giants in direct public communication with each other—one of few instances in modern marketing history in which an advertising campaign has so directly challenged that of a competitor.<sup>7</sup>

The “Because Pillsbury’s Best” campaign appeared in magazines for little more than a year, perhaps because a shortage of wheat at the end of World War I forced millers to increase the undesirable bran content in their flours.<sup>8</sup> The company did not produce “Pillsbury’s Best” in 1918; it marketed a variety of alternate flours instead. While the company reprised “Because Pillsbury’s Best” advertisements in early 1919, it also forged an advertising direction that was to have more lasting impact. An advertisement appearing in *Ladies’ Home Journal* showcases Pillsbury offerings, from flour and bran to cereal, along with mouth-



Fig. 5 Pamphlet cover, 1897, an early instance of women and children appearing in advertising



Fig. 6 Advertising on a grocer's envelope, 1899, one of several places these merry maids appeared

watering products made from them (fig. 10). The industrial scene so prominent in earlier advertisements appears here in an impressionistic haze, as if receding into memory, while the brightly lit packages with their distinctive red-and-white swirls take center stage. Appearing in the popular press more often than in trade journals, Pillsbury's "Family of Foods" advertising campaign focused on brand recognition and responded to consumers' needs to choose from a growing assortment of products on grocers' shelves in the years after World War I.

**Product diversification**

was just one of many changes facing American women, who by the 1920s were making the majority of food-buying decisions for their households. These women were spending more time outside their homes, in paying jobs or volunteer activities. As domestic help became less afford-

able, they were learning to manage households without the servants that had been available to their mothers and grandmothers. Many young women were moving away from the relatives who once would have been their closest domestic advisers.<sup>9</sup>

To fill the educational void created by these changes, advertisements for household products began to take on an instructional tone. One of the most notable domestic advisers to arrive on the scene was Betty Crocker, introduced by Washburn-Crosby in 1921. Not only was Betty a trustworthy friend, but her "kitchen-tested" recipes and household tips were widely available in cookbooks, advertisements, and package inserts. In a 1925 advertisement from *Farmer's Wife*, Betty Crocker looks directly at the reader—presumably a housewife—with a reassuring smile, while holding a plate of perfectly cut and baked biscuits (fig. 11). The back-

ground view is not the industrial landscape so prominent in early advertising, but a more consumer-friendly view of Betty's workplace—the test kitchen staffed by home economists. In a similar vein, a plate of perfect biscuits takes center stage in a series of educational advertisements for Pillsbury's Best flour. Each advertisement in this series offers a brief primer on the qualities of "balanced" flour necessary for successful baking.<sup>10</sup>

From detailed renderings of mill buildings and machines to mouth watering depictions of piping-hot biscuits, advertisements reflect the close watch Washburn-Crosby and Pillsbury kept on the changing marketplace—and on each other. During Minneapolis's reign as the "Mill City" from 1880 to 1930, innovations in flour production and packaging were matched by innovative advertisements—key ingredients in the Minneapolis millers' recipes for success. ❖



Pure  
Wholesome  
Clean  
Nutritious  
And  
Excellent:  
Genuine  
Faultless  
Worthy  
Helpful  
And  
Reliable.  
Without  
Doubt  
Gold  
Medal  
Flour  
Makes  
Better  
Buns  
Biscuits  
Bread  
Rolls  
Pastry  
And  
Cake  
Than  
Any  
Other  
Flour  
On  
Earth.

**The Power behind the Cook**

WASHBURN-CROSBY CO. MILLS, CHICAGO, ILL., U.S.A.

Fig. 7 Bags replaced barrels of flour, but Gold Medal brand was still the maid's choice; Northwestern Miller, November 18, 1908.

*Eventually*

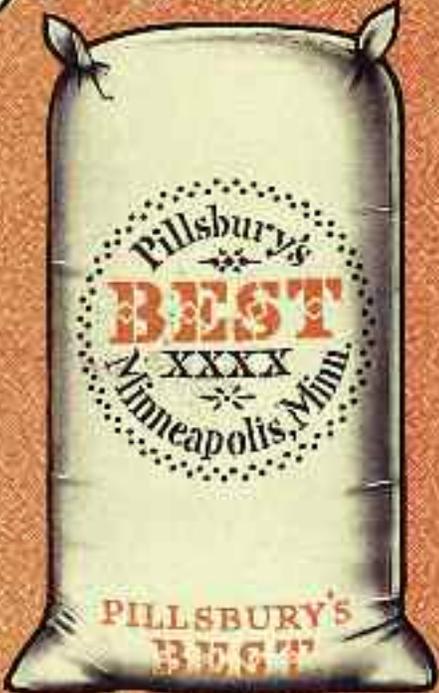


Why Not Now?

Fig. 8 The first "Eventually" ad, Northwestern Miller, September 11, 1907

THE FLOUR QUESTION SETTLED

*Because*



PILLSBURY'S BEST

**Pillsbury's Best**

Fig. 9 Pillsbury's rebuttal, first published in the Northwestern Miller, September 22, 1915

# Pillsbury's FAMILY OF FOODS

Light, tender pancakes, with a delicious flavor—bran muffins, healthful and appetizing—wheat cereal that makes breakfast an event—bread, cakes and pastry, which are real food treats—all are made best with The Pillsbury Family of Foods—a select family of selected foods.

Pillsbury's Best Flour—Health Bran—Wheat Cereal—Pancake Flour—rye, durum and graham flour—all are fully guaranteed. With satisfaction, to you, positively assured let Pillsbury be your guiding word to the best in foods. Your grocer carries Pillsbury Products.

PILLSBURY FLOUR MILLS COMPANY  
Minneapolis, U. S. A.

Fig. 10 Ad showcasing a variety of Pillsbury products, Ladies Home Journal, October 1919



Fig. 11 Betty Crocker takes center stage in this ad from the *Farmer's Wife*, July 1925.

## Notes

1. James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). “By the turn of the century,” Norris writes (p. 39), “advertising in popular magazines often exceeded a hundred pages an issue.”

2. Washburn–Crosby and Pillsbury were by far the largest flour millers in Minneapolis, controlling 87 percent of the city’s mills in 1890; see Lucile M. Kane, *The Falls of St. Anthony: The Waterfall that Built Minneapolis* (1966; rev. ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987).

3. Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1998), 48.

4. Symbolizing modernization in the industry, roller mills processed wheat through a succession of rollers. This allowed millers to make high-quality flour at unprecedented rates. The first complete automatic roller process in the U.S. was installed in the Washburn A Mill in 1879. See Robert M. Frame III, “Millers to the World: Minnesota’s Nineteenth-Century

Water Power Flour Mills,” *Minnesota Historical Society report*, 1977, p. 55–56.

5. For more on the use of industrial scenes in late-nineteenth-century advertising, see Pamela W. Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 122–23.

6. The XXXX mark in the Pillsbury’s Best logo is “rooted in the symbolism of the Middle Ages. Bakers then had marked their best flour, for use in the preparation of communion bread, with three crosses”; see William J. Powell, *Pillsbury’s Best: A Company History from 1869* (Minneapolis: Pillsbury Co., 1985), 32.

7. While Bull is credited with creating the “Eventually” campaign, the production of Washburn–Crosby’s advertisements was apparently handled by outside firms. The same appears to be the case with Pillsbury.

Describing the popularity of the “Eventually” slogan, *Northwestern Miller* editor William Edgar wrote, “In an incredible short time the perpetual interrogation became a by-word. If anyone happened to say ‘Eventually,’ another would finish with

‘why not now?’ and ‘Gold Medal’ flour would be brought to the minds of both.” See William C. Edgar, *The Medal of Gold: A Story of Industrial Achievement* (Minneapolis: Bellman Press, 1925), 268.

8. Powell, *Pillsbury’s Best*, 105.

9. For more on women’s domestic life in the 1920s as reflected in advertising, see Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

10. “Society needed more advice, advertisers often observed, simply because the complexity of consumer choices had revealed new dimensions of public incompetence”; see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 343. For more on Betty Crocker, see Susan Marks-Kerst, “Betty Crocker: Marketing the Modern Woman,” *Hennepin History* 58 (Spring 1999): 4–19.

*All images are from the MHS collections.*



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