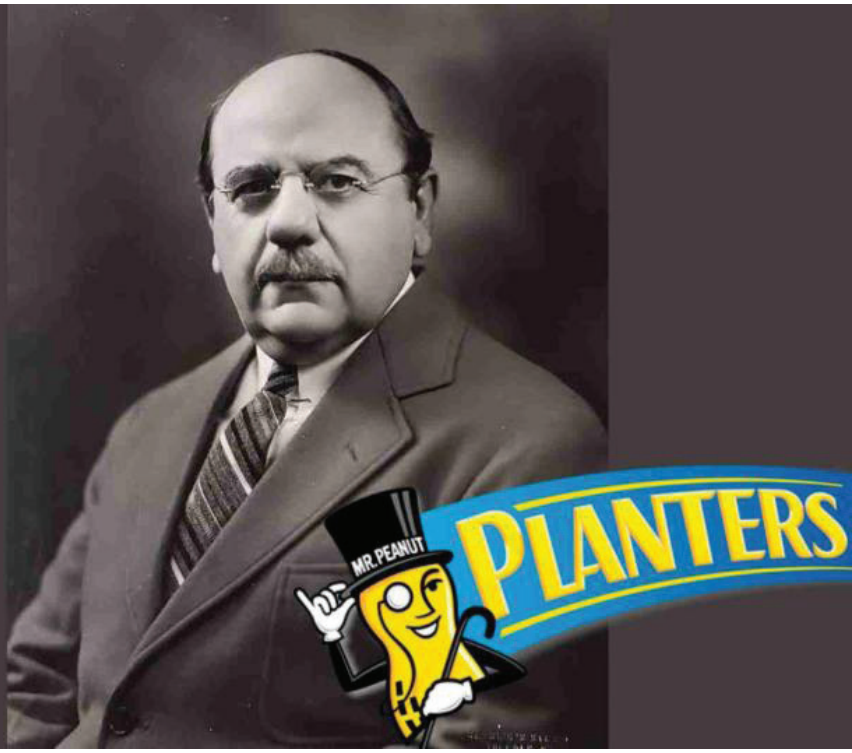
BY JOE SANO

PLANTER'S PEANUTS - NOW THAT'S ITALIAN



What does a ten-year-old do when he leaves his native Italy and ends up living with his maternal uncle in Scranton, PA? Answer: He goes to work!

Amadeo Obici was born on July 15, 1877, to Pietro Ludovico and Luigia Carolina Sartori Obici in the small town of Oderzo, near Venice, in northern Italy. Fatherless as a seven-year-old, his mother emigrated to her brother's home in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Earning a dollar a week working in a cigar factory, young Amadeo learned to read and write English. As a fifteen-year-old with a promise of free room and board, he moved to Wiles-Barre to sell fruit at a friend's stand. He fancied this type of work rather than the grueling anthracite mining opened to most Italian immigrants in that area. His hard work earned him a small nest egg that he used to open a small nut and fruit stand.

As many of us know, it can be pretty frustrating opening a roasted chestnut. Young Amadeo sought an easier way but getting castagne open was not easy. He also had peanuts on his stand.

He began to research the peanut, which is a legume, or a plant with pods that split open when the seeds are ripe. The ripened seed is the peanut. Believing he could increase his profits if his customers didn't have to crack open the shell and peel off the skin of the peanut, Obici purchased a $4.50 peanut roaster and invented his own method of blanching whole roasted peanuts. Within a few years, he adopted the title of "Peanut Specialist," and began peddling his product from a horse and wagon to other storekeepers. His early success inspired other entrepreneurial endeavors. In his early twenties, Obici mortgaged his fruit stand for $39,000 and opened a combination soda fountain and oyster bar. Above the restaurant, he installed a roaster to continue expanding his peanut business. Obici quickly recognized that the peanut market had a bright future and began envisioning an even greater market than the local economy offered.

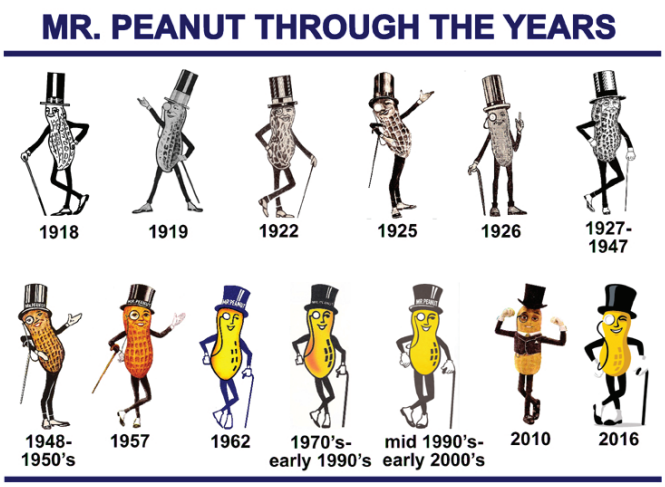
At the age of 29, in 1906, he entered into a partnership with his future brother-in-law Mario Peruzzi.

The partners incorporated their business as Planters Nut and Chocolate Company and expanded their line of merchandise to include chocolate-nut bars, chocolate covered peanuts, and various chocolate confections.

Their focus remained on peanuts. Selling branded, whole salted nuts in penny and nickel bags on a large scale would be their future.

It was an extremely ambitious venture given the profit margins being small. Obici, however, increased his profits by concentrating on brand creation, and combining all phases of production, marketing and sales.

Obici also found ways to improve his product and streamline his business operations. In 1910, for example, Planters adopted the grease-proof glassine bag/ later to cellophane , which solved one of the company's major packaging problems and kept peanuts fresher longer. Obici invested $25,000 to build a shelling and cleaning mill to process raw peanuts in Suffolk, Virginia, so he no longer had to rely on suppliers to prep his product. Shortly after, he introduced Planters "Nickel Lunch," a two-ounce package of whole blanched nuts selling for 5 cents, and the demand for Planters Peanuts became even greater. That was his goal. "Everybody has a nickel!"



Obici, searching for new and novel marketing techniques, held a contest to find a logo for the company. Anthony Gentile, a 13-year-old Virginia student, submitted the winning drawing of an animated peanut and won $5. Modified over the years, the ever-dapper Mr. Peanut eventually added a top hat, white spats, ebony cane, and monocle to his distinctive ensemble. The new logo proved to be a stroke of marketing genius. Mr. Peanut appeared on every package and container produced by Planters.

Now Obici flooded the market with Mr. Peanut marketing knick-knacks in the form of toys and books targeted at young consumers. He believed that marketing to children could guarantee an adult market for years.

After he married Lousie Musante, they moved near his plant in Suffolk, Virginia, the heart of Virginia peanut country. Obici became a generous benefactor to his adopted community, endowing a hospital in memory of his beloved wife after her death in 1938.

Planters' confection and manufacturing processes expanded after the establishment of the Suffolk plant. In 1921, a second factory was built in San Francisco, California, to capitalize on a growing market on the West Coast. Four years later, a third manufacturing plant was established in Toronto, Canada, and a national advertising campaign was launched to familiarize Canadians with the product. The company's national headquarters, with its executive offices, remained in Wilkes-Barre.

When Obici died in 1947, he headed a $60 million corporation consisting of seventy retail stores and four manufacturing plants, employing 5,000 people. Following his ideas for growth, his leadership team, realizing the value of a children's market, capitalized on the Mr. Peanut product line. By 1951, mail orders for such items as stuffed dolls, toothbrushes, backpacks, savings banks, and rings had exploded to between 25,000 and 30,000 a week.

It was during the 1950s that Planters brought the Mr. Peanut character to life. "Mr. Peanut" could be found outside their retail stores giving away samples. I for one remember the smell of fresh roasted peanuts at the Planter's store on the corner of State and Pearl Streets with Mr. Peanut handing out samples.

In 1961 when Standard Brands bought Planters for $20 million, it began to phase out its retail business, concentrating instead on supermarket sales. Wilkes-Barre, no longer the national headquarters for the multimillion-dollar peanut company, became just one of many distribution centers across the nation. Business continued to decline in the 1970s with a heightened awareness of food allergies and fad diets. Peanuts were banished from the diets of many Americans who preferred low-fat foods.

Another corporate merger took place in 1981 when Standard Brands and Nabisco combined to form Nabisco Brands. When Nabisco merged with R. J. Reynolds in 1985, the days of the old Planters headquarters were numbered.

Today Planters Peanuts is part of Altria's Kraft Food Chicago based division. If you are lucky enough to still have any of its promotional products, including a Mr. Peanut doll, bank or coloring book…you have a desired collectable.

Mr. Peanut remains the most recognized trademark among all snack foods. So, when you see Mr. Peanut, the vision of Amedeo Obici, an Italian immigrant who realized his American Dream remember, "That's Italian"! ❑