

# Kellogg, Will Keith

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## SABRINA RILEY

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Will Keith Kellogg (known as W. K. Kellogg) was a businessman, entrepreneur, and co-inventor of flaked breakfast cereals. His invention and marketing of cornflakes led to the founding of the Kellogg Company (which does business as Kellogg's) in 1906.

## Early Life

W. K. Kellogg was born on April 7, 1860, in Battle Creek, Michigan. He disliked both the nickname Willie and the more formal name William;

consequently, he legally changed his first name to Will at the age of thirty-eight.<sup>1</sup> Will Keith was the eleventh of John Preston Kellogg's (1807-1881)<sup>2</sup> sixteen children. His older siblings included Merritt Gardner (1832-1921), Smith Moses (1834-1927), Albert (1836-1913), Julia Elvira (1838-1915), and Martha (1840-1852), who were the children of John Preston's first wife, Mary Ann Call Kellogg (1811-1841). After her death, he married Ann Janette Stanley (1824-1893)<sup>3</sup> in 1842. Ann Janette's children included Mary Ann (1843-1858), Laura Evelyn (1845-1916), Emma Frances (1847-died before 1849), Emma (1850-1892), John Harvey (1852-1943), Preston (1854-1855), Ella (1856-1858), Preston Stanley (1858-1930), Will Keith, Clara Belle (1863-1951), and Hester Ann (1866-1930).

The Kellogg family was introduced to Adventism in 1852 by Merritt E. Cornell and Joseph Bates. John Preston had moved his family from Massachusetts to Michigan in 1834. In 1856, he decided to move his family to Battle Creek, the new headquarters of the growing Advent movement. While raised in the Adventist faith, Will was never as committed to the church as other members of his family. Although he quit attending church services in



W. K. Kellogg.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

his early twenties,<sup>4</sup> he largely continued to adhere to Adventist temperance standards and thought of Adventist members as “our people.”<sup>5</sup>

Ann Janette Kellogg was, if not a warmly affectionate mother, an enterprising and resourceful woman from whom Will Keith inherited his business sense. He also inherited some of her stern personality, which contributed to his difficulty with interpersonal relationships at times.<sup>6</sup>

## Education

Although he attended Battle Creek No. 3 Ward School and later the Adventist church school, Will Keith’s education was hampered by severe, undiagnosed near-sightedness. He was labeled “dim-witted” and lacked encouragement from his family to pursue much of an education. After finally obtaining corrective lenses at the age of twenty, he became largely self-taught, improving his knowledge through voracious reading.<sup>7</sup> In 1880, Kellogg attended Parson’s Business College in Kalamazoo, Michigan, earning a bookkeeping certificate after three months.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter he learned by experience, managing the business operations of the Battle Creek Sanitarium for his brother, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg.<sup>9</sup>

## Marriage and Family

Will Keith married Elmira (Ella) “Puss” Osborn Davis (1858-1912) on November 3, 1880, in the Battle Creek Tabernacle. Their children were Karl Hugh (1881-1955), John Leonard (1883-1950), William Keith (1885-1889), Elizabeth Ann (1889-1966), and Irving Hadley (1894-1895).

On January 1, 1918, Kellogg married his second wife, Carrie Staines (1867-1948), a physician at the Battle Creek Sanitarium.<sup>10</sup>

## Early Career

Although meek and reserved as a young man, Kellogg demonstrated business acumen while working in the family broom-making business during his teens. In 1878, James White recommended 18-year-old Will Kellogg to George H. King, White’s partner in a broom-making factory in Dallas, Texas. Departing Michigan in December 1878, Kellogg spent most of 1879 in Dallas. The trip was an adventure, though one filled with hard work, frustration, and homesickness.

Upon Kellogg’s return to Battle Creek and following his short enrollment at Parson’s Business College, he was hired by his brother, John Harvey to manage the business operations of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, albeit without the actual title. Ever in search of efficiency, Will Keith saw many ways to improve the management and financial footing of the sanitarium. Employees quickly learned that he would solve problems swiftly and efficiently.<sup>11</sup> Will Keith was also adept at marketing his brother’s publications. In return for his long hours and

good business sense, Will Keith received minimal pay and no vacation time for the first seven years he worked at the sanitarium.<sup>12</sup> While John Harvey seemed to think of his brother as a personal assistant, Will Keith's animosity towards his older brother quietly grew.

The brothers' contentious relationship stemmed from personality differences and unresolved sibling rivalry began in childhood. John Harvey was the more outgoing and charismatic of the two; Will Keith more taciturn. Both men were innovative and visionary in their respective fields of medicine and commerce. According to Will Keith's official biographer, Horace B. Powell, "many persons have remarked that the incompatibility of the two Kellogg brothers represented a distinct loss to the world. Their talents complemented each other's and, as a team, even their large contributions to society might have been greater."<sup>13</sup>

## Inventing Flaked Cereal

Despite the brothers' differences, their greatest collaboration revolutionized the American breakfast menu. John Harvey first conceived of flaked wheat as an easily digestible breakfast food in 1894. Both John Harvey's wife, Ella Eaton Kellogg, and Will Keith worked on the experiments with John Harvey.<sup>14</sup> Although there are disputes regarding individual contributions, Will Keith certainly introduced the idea of using rollers to press the boiled wheat and then scrape the flakes off with a knife blade.<sup>15</sup> The resulting flakes were then baked.

The new cereal product became one of many foods sold by the Battle Creek Sanitarium's Sanitas Food Company. Although Will Keith managed the company, as with the sanitarium, John Harvey maintained firm control, vetoing many of Will Keith's innovative ideas. This included Will Keith's initial suggestion of experimenting with flaked corn cereal. John Harvey also received the credit for—as Will Keith saw it—the work Will Keith was actually doing; however, Will Keith never claimed to be the sole inventor of Sanitas Food Company's products.<sup>16</sup> While the doctor viewed his patients at the sanitarium as the primary consumers of these products, Will Keith understood the potential for marketing them to a broader sector of the public, and he had the ingenuity to make it happen.

## Cereal Magnate

Will Keith's first step toward independence was taken in 1899 when he negotiated a salary of twenty-five percent of the net profits of the newly incorporated Sanitas Nut Food Company, Ltd. He was also made general manager of the company. Sometime between 1898 and 1905, Will Keith switched from making flaked wheat cereal to corn and continued to improve the recipe, keeping track of procedures, flavor, and texture with the precision of a scientist. Due to a growing number of competitors, boxes of cereal began to appear with his signature on them to indicate authenticity.

The final break with John Harvey came in 1906 when Will Keith founded his own Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company on February 19. Later renamed the Kellogg Toasted Corn Flake Company, and now known just as the Kellogg Company (trade name Kellogg's). Despite the separation of the brothers' business interests, their relationship remained acrimonious and disagreements morphed into a series of lawsuits.

Will Keith was an early adopter of modern advertising campaigns which created demand for his product. As a manufacturer, he "refused to be satisfied with the status quo." He constantly sought improvements and "encouraged his employees to develop ever more sophisticated means of packaging to keep his cereals fresh and toasty whether on the grocery shelf or in the kitchen cabinet." While eschewing unions, he made his factories "safe, hospitable, and fiscally sound workplaces" and was "sincerely concerned about and loyal to his workers."<sup>17</sup> As a result, he accrued a multi-million-dollar fortune.

## Later Life

As a man with a demanding work ethic and high standards, Kellogg's relationships with his wives, children, and grandchildren were fraught with disappointment. He found his children and grandchildren incompetent and weak. They thought him cold and critical. Consequently, upon Kellogg's death, leadership of the Kellogg Company was not left to any of his heirs.

Kellogg contracted glaucoma, which made him increasingly blind throughout the 1940s. He died on October 6, 1951, and was buried in Battle Creek, Michigan.

## Legacy

Like other successful industrialists and businessmen of the era, Kellogg became a philanthropist in his later years. Despite his inability to maintain warm familial interpersonal relationships, he possessed a strong desire to use his fortune for the betterment of others, particularly children. In 1930 he established the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for the purpose of "...administering funds for the promotion of the welfare, comfort, health, education, feeding, clothing, sheltering and safeguarding of children and youth, directly or indirectly, without regard to sex, race, creed or nationality...."<sup>18</sup> Upon his death, Kellogg's entire personal fortune was bequeathed to the foundation. In the years prior to his death, Kellogg also established trust funds benefitting many family members and friends.<sup>19</sup> Additional trust funds supported educational institutions.<sup>20</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Howard Markel, *The Kelloggs: The Battling Brothers of Battle Creek* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017), 51.
2. "John Preston Kellogg obituary," *ARH*, 14, May 31, 1881.
3. Uriah Smith, "Ann J. Kellogg obituary," *ARH*, May 16, 1893, 15.
4. Denis Fortin, "Will Keith Kellogg," *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 439-440.
5. Horace B. Powell, *The Original Has This Signature—W. K. Kellogg* (Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1989), 14.
6. Powell, 12 and 38.
7. Howard Markel, *The Kelloggs: The Battling Brothers of Battle Creek* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017), 54.
8. *Ibid.*, 81-82.
9. *Ibid.*, 203.
10. "Widow of W. K. Kellogg Dies at Home of Niece," *The Herald Press* (St. Joseph, MI), February 17, 1948, 9, accessed May 17, 2023, Newspapers.com.
11. Powell, 60.
12. *Ibid.*, 59.

13. Ibid., 76.
14. Markel, 129-131.
15. Powell, 90-92.
16. Powell, 95.
17. Markel, xxv.
18. "Overview," W. K. Kellogg Foundation, n. d., accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.wkkf.org/who-we-are/>.
19. "Kellogg Estate is Left to Foundation," *Battle Creek Enquirer and News*, October 12, 1951, 1 and accessed May 15, 2023, Newspapers.com.
20. Powell, 298-299.

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