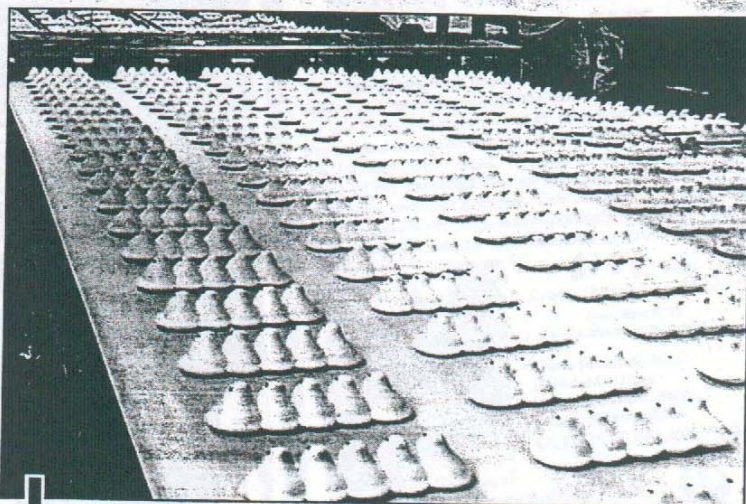


A Nation Celebrates Marshm



If the United States — known as the world's only superpower and its cultural trendsetter — has its way, Peeps could soon take over the globe. Marshmallow Peeps are America's No. 1 selling non-chocolate Easter candy, far surpassing even the beloved jelly bean. Far from the regions of Netherlands and Ecuador where Peeps now inhabit, my own childhood memories involve carefully plucking stray threads of green plastic Easter grass off the sides of my Peeps before devouring them. For readers who missed growing up with Peeps, they are two-inch-long marshmallow candies in the shape of a chick. Right now, Peeps splash the retail world with bright yellow, neon pink, lavender, blue, and white Peeps — their colors in order of popularity.

A fat-free, 32-calorie candy gives us reason enough to celebrate, but these whimsical marshmallow creatures are trendy too. Peeps have stepped into the spotlight on the Rosie O'Donnell Show, CNN, and Baltimore's Fox-TV. And although I'm looking for a journalist's scoop, I learn that stories have appeared in *Elle*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Boston Globe*. A nation celebrates marshmallow and sugar.

I loved Peeps as a child, and still

Parade of the Peeps: The birthplace of this celebrated Easter candy is, appropriately, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Correspondent Diana Wolf went to the source to understand the phenomenon.

do, preferring to eat them stale, a crunchy-chewy combination achieved after patient weeks of exposing Peeps to air. How did this innocent, once-a-year squishy treat become a phenomenon?

Not surprisingly, the evolution of Peeps begins with your average rags-to-riches Russian immigrant

'This candy has grown to become an icon, a family tradition in a lot of households. We have very, very dedicated fans.'

story. Samuel Born, a candy maker by trade, arrived in the U.S. in 1910. His inventions include chocolate jimmies, chocolate coating for ice cream bars, and the Born Sucker Machine, which mechanically inserts sticks into lollipops.

In 1923, he opened his own manufacturing company in Brooklyn called Just Born, and moved it to its present home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1932.

Just Born originally produced chocolates, but that line was halted sometime after Just Born acquired the Rodda Candy Company of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1953. Rodda possessed jelly bean technology and a small line of marshmallow "peeps" products. Samuel Born mechanized the 27-hour hand-squeezing process down to six minutes. At which point history — and an obsession — was well born.

Today, Rodda's technology lives on in Just Born Jelly Beans, Teenee Beaneee Gourmet Jelly Beans, as well as Mike and Ikc, Hot Tamales, and Zours jelly candies.

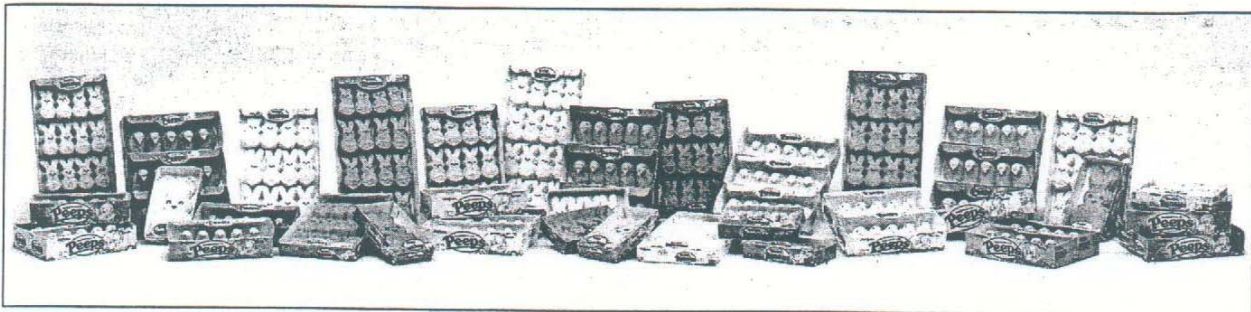
Marshmallow Peeps have prospered, now producing a variety of seasonal marshmallow items: original Peeps, Bunnies, and Eggs at Easter, Spooky Cats, Ghosts, and Pumpkins for Halloween, Trees, Snowmen, and Cutouts during Christmas, and Hearts at Valentine's Day. No one is writing odes to the snowmen or cats, so what makes the plump little chicks magical?

"They're sugary, they're gooey, they're yummy, and they're cute," says Lauren Easterly, marketing assistant, a hometown girl settling into her first Easter season here. "This candy has grown to become an icon. It has become a family tradition in a lot of households. You could say we have very, very dedicated fans."

Proof of this loyalty can be found in more than 60 unofficial Peeps websites the company is aware of. Most people contact Easterly before posting their site, and she follows up to make sure Peeps aren't being misused and there's no inappropriate language. Fans snap pictures of Peeps at historic sites and national landmarks. They compose poetry and songs (including my personal favorite that transforms The Monkees' "I'm a Believer" lyric to "I'm a Peep-leaver"). They use spray-painted Peeps to create post-modern, Impressionist, and Surrealist works of art. Among the many

mallow & Sugar

by Diana Wolf



Peeps eating contests is the annual Sacramento Peep-Off, now in its sixth year.

The scientific community has also contracted Peeps Fever. Scientists from Atlanta's Emory University conducted experiments to test the indestructibility of Peeps. In another probe, Peep-o-nauts were stowed away on NASA weather balloon launches from the Marshall Space Flight Center during the Leonid and Perseid meteor showers.

How did this cult following attach itself to the chewy, wholesome Peeps of my youth?

Always the intrepid reporter, I journey to the birthplace of Peeps, the sacred destination of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to discover the answer.

Right off the main road, with no electric gates or elaborate security, stands the Just Born factory. Neon banana, watermelon, and strawberry candy characters on the lobby walls generate a glow, telling me this company takes candy seriously fun. The lobby's supporting columns are filled with Mike and Ikes and Teenee Beenees. Hallways here are lined with Peeps pictures, stuffed Peeps, and strings of Peeps and Bunnies electric lights (available exclusively at Target). A welcome sign — a paper Peep with my name on it — announces my visit.

My guides are Ed Broczkowski, export development manager, and Wendy Esch, product manager for the company's colorful and fast-growing array of seasonal items. Just Born does not offer public tours, but special arrangements have been made for this inquisitive reporter determined to delve into the mysteries of the Peeps phenomenon.

Before entering the Peeps manufacturing area, I am asked to remove every piece of jewelry, watch, hairpin — anything that could fly off into the vats. I'm given a metal pen with which to take notes, so should it fall out of my hands, the metal detectors will sense it. I slip into a labcoat and hairnet, required attire for anyone on the factory floor, and follow my leaders into "Peepsville."

Peepsville is warm, with a cloud of sugar and a lingering sweet smell hanging in the air. The confection ingredients — sugar, corn syrup, water, gelatin, and flavoring — are combined in a mixture called slurry, which is then whipped to give it fluffy airiness. The whipped slurry flows through tubes to the two assembly lines via original machinery dating from 1953.

One machine exclusively produces classic Peeps all year round. A second machine is adjusted to whatever product is in demand, which today is Bunnies. Excess Peeps and their country cousins are stored in a temperature-controlled facility in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to retain freshness within their official 18-month shelf life.

A thick coating of yellow sugar

covers the conveyor belt, providing a mat to coat the critters' bottoms. As I watch, the Peeps are squeezed out tail first, five at a time, in a row of puffy white number 2's. The Bunnies and other flat characters squeeze through cookie cutter shapes, where a wire cutter separates them. A whirling wind

'We're looking to build the same love of Peeps in other countries, and the story transcends boundaries.'

tunnel tosses the sugar into the air, coating every side of the marshmallow. It's blissful — yet I'm coughing from the sugar dust.

The Peeps travel up a long conveyor belt in regiments of 30 across and hundreds deep. I do not grasp the enormity of the task until Wendy Esch tells me 3.8 million individual edible items are squeezed each day. This year, over 1 billion Marshmallow Peeps will be produced.

Exporter Broczkowski indicates that the number includes the 10 million Peeps exported to 14 of the company's 22 export countries. You may find Peeps in your travels to Mexico, South Africa, Singapore, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. You will not find them in the Middle East since Peeps are made with a pork gelatin base. (However all the company's jelly candies are certi-

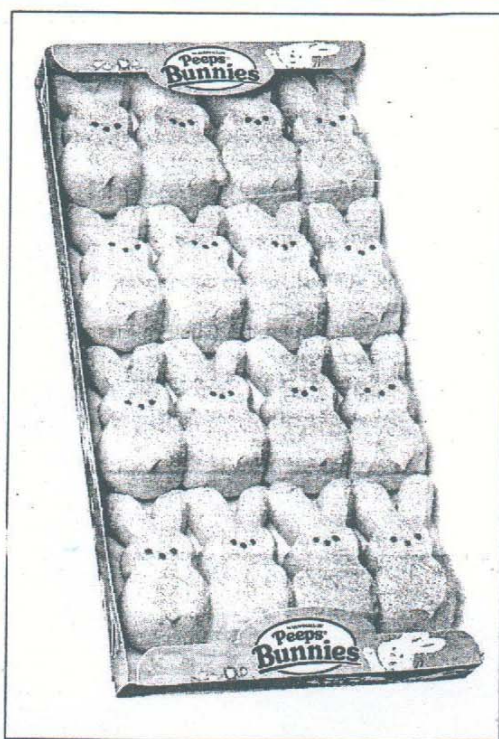
fied kosher by the Orthodox Union.)

With the exception of Canada, described as Peeps' "most mature market," which has experienced the joy of Peeps for the past seven to eight years, Just Born's other export countries have only received precious Peeps within the past two years. "It's a feel-good product, and we're trying to get that story out there internationally," he says.

Broczkowski also likes to call himself Peeps' "travel director." Born a few blocks from the factory, he used to watch the trains delivering sugar to the candy factory from the end of his block. His grandmother had worked at Just Born during the Depression, and he has the fondest memories of eating Peeps from his Easter basket. The son of a firefighter and housewife, Broczkowski he earned his MBA from Lehigh University, and has been employed at Just Born for three years. As the company's export specialist he says, "We're looking to build the same love of Peeps in other countries, and the story transcends cultures and boundaries."

Success has been surprisingly smooth. Every year, Just Born attends a worldwide candy show in Germany, the title of which translates as the International Sweets and Biscuits show (ISM). Here the company sets out to prove Peeps uniqueness. "There's a lot of marshmallow products, but nothing that looks like the Peep, that has the dimensionality, the size, the color, and how it's presented — in packaging where the item becomes the front panel," the com-

Continued on following page



Classic Bunnies: The Just Born company cranks out bunnies for Easter, but it has expanded its selling season by also offering Spooky Cats, Pumpkins, and Ghosts for Halloween.



Continued from preceding page

pany boasts. At trade shows, when Peeps are described as made of marshmallow to others, "they look at you like they don't believe you. Then they tap on its head, and they see that it squishes."

However the overseas story hasn't been without hiccups. Just Born had to redesign its packaging to include both English and French to conform to Canadian market requirements. Cracking the potentially huge Chinese market required even more creative outreach. Broczkowski discovered that since the Chinese do not celebrate the Easter holiday, people there were faced with some questionable stories about a product that is based on the Easter story and only sold in the U.S. at that time.

Reassured "that Easter is a positive holiday in the United States, that it's about rebirth and renewal and spring, and Peeps were a good luck thing to have. They were returned quickly to the shelves," reports Broczkowski. Today China is the only market where Peeps are sold year round.

Peeps' most "challenging" export destination has been the United Kingdom due to public antipathy toward genetically-modified foodstuffs. Because the corn products used in Peeps cannot be guaranteed 100 percent GM-free, they are kept out of grocery stores. Yet they sell out every year at Woolworth's, UK's largest chain.

Broczkowski is looking at other confection consuming markets, such as Japan and Russia — moving up to a global scale — but also trying to establish a broader presence in its current markets. This small company is stepping on the toes of true multinationals like M&M Mars and Hershey.

In the opinion of this reporter, however, Peeps have little to fear from such big competition. After all, neither chocolate giant boasts a fan club 10,000 strong and whose welcome kit includes a free package of Peeps, as well as the "Newspeepers" newsletter. Here

you'll find recipes as well as craft ideas for gluing Peeps on colorful Easter bonnets and stringing necklaces. Peeps aren't just for eating. Who knew?

Back in Peepsville, the Peeps miracle of sight is administered in a separate room high above the

birth as the wax eyes are put on the Peeps (other characters' features are made of icing). I didn't expect the loud "pop-pop-pop," but I stare, transfixed, as brown eye dots appear where none were before, again and again. I am like a kid in a candy factory.

Wendy Esch says the Peeps travel backwards "so they don't see where they're going so they can't fly away." They also can't see her pluck a conjoined quintuplet of Peeps off the belt, offering me a fresh sample. "It's the ultimate roasted marshmallow," Broczkowski adds. He is right. The Peep is warm and gooey, sticking to my fingers and the roof of my mouth. Wow — even stale Peeps can't compare to this!

The chicks' six-minute ride ends in the packaging area, where the marshmallow has hardened enough to be dropped into cardboard boxes. Peeps plop automatically, but Bunnies are hand

Chicks and eggs symbolize new life, and bunnies represent fertility. Thus, the candy is connected to beliefs. 'It's a sweet way of teaching the faith.'

Branching Out: *The classic chicks, opposite page, are complemented by snowmen, right. The company also makes 'Mike and Ike' and 'Hot Tamales.'*

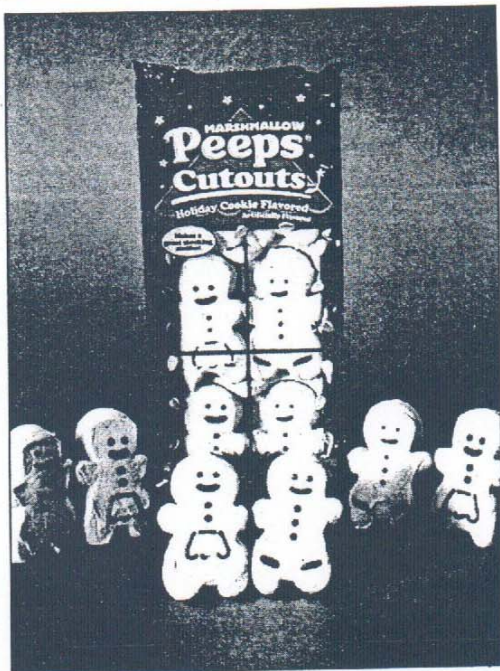
packed. Although this line will eventually be automated, I'm told that none of the workers here will lose their jobs. Just Born's factory is home to 470 employees, many of whom are multi-generational employees. This factory is a family too.

Evolving a company to capitalize on holiday candy sales, combined with loving care to customers and employees, serves to strengthen Peeps fandom. Responding to laments that the months between Easter Bunnies and Halloween Spooky Cats pass too slowly without a Peep, Just Born launched another product. New Marshmallow Peeps Stars, a white sugar-coated patriotic star that glistens with blue and red flecks, was introduced at this year's Olympics in Salt Lake City. It will go on sale in stores for Memorial Day. Another new treat this year, available when back-to-school supplies are replaced with trick-or-treat bags, is Cocoa Bats, the company's first chocolate marshmallow candy.

In 2003, the awesome 50th anniversary of Marshmallow Peeps will be observed with special events and promotions, including exclusive 50th anniversary Marshmallow Peeps products available for one year only. In addition, a new Easter Egg flavor will be introduced, as well as a new two-heart marshmallow product for Valentine's Day.

With such a sugar rush, it's easy to forget that Easter is a Christian religious holiday. Reverend Sam Sirianni, pastor of Holy Angels Church in Trenton, and director of the Office of Worship for the Diocese of Trenton, says that the Catholic church takes no position for or against holiday candy. Even this priest has fond memories of Peeps. Next to chocolate, he says, "they were my favorites."

Easter, he explains, celebrates the Paschal mystery of Jesus's death and resurrection. Early Christians adopted pagan symbols of spring and gave them new



meaning in their celebrations. Chicks and eggs symbolize new life, and bunnies represent fertility. Thus, the candy is connected to beliefs, but their symbolic connections are sometimes forgotten. "It's a sweet way of getting the faith across, of teaching the faith," says Reverend Sirianni.

Amen to that, and pass the Bunnies. ■

For more information visit Just Born's official website at www.marshmallowpeeps.com.

Other sites include: www.marshmallowpeeps.org — Tracy & Mia's Peep-O-Rama, including a gallery of Peeps pictures, from Philadelphia to Paris, with links and the neon Peep.

www.geekbabe.com/peeps/ — A big list of Peeps links.

www.nokilli.com/food/peep.html — Website for the annual Sacramento Peep-Off.

www.peepresearch.org/ — Scientific research on Peeps from Emory University (includes "fear response" category).

<http://users.ids.net/~flamingo/mp.html> — Peeps song parodies.