WISCONSIN MEAT INDUSTRY HALL OF FAME
1996

Oscar Gustave Mayer
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Oscar Gustave Mayer was the third generation to guide the family business, and he led it through many years of success through innovation. Because of his leadership, the business went from a regional company to the nation's leading manufacturer of brand identified processed meats.

He was born March 16, 1914 in Chicago, Illinois, the oldest son of Oscar Gottfried Mayer (named to the Wisconsin Meat Industry Hall of Fame in 1993) and Elsa Stiegitz. He graduated from Cornell University and studied at Harvard Business School. In 1942 he married Rosalie Harrison and they had three sons -- Oscar, Donald and William.

He started officially with the company in 1936 as a production trainee. In 1946, after serving in the Chicago plant in various manufacturing positions, Oscar and his family moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where they still live. He was named as Assistant to the Vice President of Operations, and as such was responsible for the operations at Madison as well as the newly acquired Davenport, Iowa plant. In 1955, at the age of 41, he became president. The company went national in 1965 and Oscar became chairman of the board in 1966. The company stock was traded on the New York Stock Exchange in 1971. On May 31, 1977, he retired as chairman of the executive committee after forty-one years of service to the company.

During his early leadership, product manufacturing specifications were developed. He believed that if the company could follow specifications to produce products for the government, they could also do it for their own. In fact, he wrote some of the earliest specifications himself. The development of these specifications led to formation of the Product Control Department. Most of the original guidelines developed during his tenure are still being used today, not only by Oscar Mayer Foods, Inc., but by many other companies throughout the meat industry.

Growth and expansion continued and with it more internal programs were initiated to identify and promote the products. A national advertising agency was hired and in 1964 the first Oscar Mayer jingle "Oh, I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener . . ." was aired in Chicago with tremendous success.

Research and development were critical to the achievements of the company. Under the direction of Oscar, the company led the industry in development of equipment, packaging and quality improvements. The concept of sectioned and formed meats, vacuum packaging of processed meat to greatly extend shelf-life, and process automation like the twenty-eight minute continuous wiener process ("hot dog highway") were developed under his leadership.

He knew that to maintain high standards of quality, the company had to have good people. He believed that you "pick good people and encourage them." He installed a management training program which is still in existence. He hired the first African-Americans in the Madison plant and never tolerated any kind of segregation. He had an open door to employees and accepted the union when it was formed.

He has served society in many ways. He was chairman of the American Meat Institute and led the regional JOBS campaign and U.S. Savings Bonds drive. He served as a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago from 1973 to 1978. In Madison, he headed the community's first United Way campaign in 1950 and served as director of the YMCA, Chamber of Commerce and Madison General Hospital.
On May 29, 1977, the University of Wisconsin awarded him an honorary Doctor of Law degree in recognition of his service to society.

In the retirement of Mr. Mayer, P. Goff Beach remarked, "In many ways, because the world in recent years has grown so cynical and so critical of business and industry, the third Oscar has had the most difficult task of all in preserving the unique "personality" of Oscar Mayer & Co. That he has done it is a special tribute to him."