WISCONSIN MEAT INDUSTRY HALL OF FAME
1993

Patrick Cudahy and Michael F. Cudahy
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Patrick Cudahy was born March 17, 1849 and died July 25, 1919. Because of the great Irish famine, his family moved to Milwaukee three months after he was born. At age 13, he began working as a "carrying boy" for packer Edward Rodis. At age 25, he became superintendent of Plankinton and Armour, Milwaukee's largest packer, and in 1888 Patrick and John Cudahy (Patrick's brother) took over the business. John was always a silent partner, but the company held the name "Cudahy Brothers" until 1957.

In the 1870's, Patrick was instrumental in moving the industry from barreled pork to a cured meat business. For many years the company's main business was supplying European markets with cured pork, but in the 1920's the business was forced to change because Britain imposed tariffs on American products, giving preference to products imported from Commonwealth countries. Cudahy Brothers employed between 1,000 and 1,500 workers at this time, and shifted their production to the domestic scene, specializing in semi-perishable canned hams (one of the first U.S. packers to produce this product), sliced dried beef, Italian-style sausage and sliced bacon.

In the 1880's, Patrick purchased 700 acres of land in what is now Cudahy, Wisconsin, and in 1889, a new plant was built on the site. The panic of 1893, soon after, threatened the company, but the business survived four years of economic struggle, and emerged with a strong foothold in domestic and export trade. In the 1890's the Wisconsin village was named Cudahy. Many plant workers bought lots in the area, and paid for them by deductions from their pay. Patrick named many of the streets in the growing community after meat packing industry friends, such as Philip Danforth Armour and Gustavus Franklin Swift. The company advertised for workers in foreign language newspapers, and attracted hundreds of immigrants from Poland, Germany, Ireland, and Austria-Hungary, along with Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks. Workingmen's hotels popped up in Cudahy. A statue of Patrick Cudahy has been erected in that community.

Patrick Cudahy had a bittersweet relationship with the village of Cudahy. This apparently existed for a number of reasons, one of which was the fact that he supported temperance, and fought against liquor. He argued with the Cudahy Common Council about the spread of taverns in the village. Never-the-less, he provided many benefits to the community, including helping to start other industries and building a library. He said, "It is a source of satisfaction to me to look over those 25 years and see what has been accomplished, but I would feel much better if there were not the antagonistic spirit in Cudahy which seems to prevail to a great extent among its citizens."

Cudahy Brothers had a role in the development of the Green Bay Packers. In the earliest years the team was sponsored by Bonner Packing Company of Green Bay. When the plant folded, the players came to work for Cudahy Brothers, and traveled to Green Bay for weekend games.

Michael F. Cudahy, the oldest of Patrick's sons, was born May 27, 1886 and died May 20, 1970. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin, joined the company as Treasurer in 1908, was appointed Vice-President in 1909, was appointed the company's Executive Manager in 1913, and became President after his father's death in 1919. Michael remained as President until 1961, when his son Richard D. Cudahy succeeded him.
Michael F. Cudahy guided the company through many problems and was responsible for initiating numerous, progressive changes. The company provided a strong compensation package for returning veterans and families of deceased veterans of World War II. It provided jobs for displaced European Nationals during World War II. On the other hand, organized labor and strikes gave the company considerable trouble.

It was the first company to install a sharp freezer (1930) and was justifiably proud of the laboratory and experimental kitchen. They were recognized by the American Humane Society for using the electrical stunning method. The motto of "Home of Sweet Apple Wood Smoke Flavor" is well known. It was a large producer of dried beef products which were packed under 79 different labels.

In the 1970's, a new stockyard was built at the plant, and Patrick Cudahy was a major purchaser of hogs from Wisconsin, northern Illinois and eastern Iowa. At that time, the company was slaughtering 1.5 million hogs and producing 1.5 million pounds of dry sausage, annually. In recent years, the company underwent the following transition. Beef slaughter was stopped in 1964, but the company still processed and sold beef cuts. Patrick Cudahy was sold to Bluebird, Inc., of Philadelphia in 1971.

Bluebird (including Patrick Cudahy) was sold to Northern Foods of England in 1980, and in 1984, Patrick Cudahy was again sold; this time to Smithfield Foods of Virginia. Upon demands for cuts in labor rates, a 28-month strike began in 1987. In 1988, the company closed its hog slaughter, and became a specialty meats manufacturer. A total of 370 people now work there.

Richard D. Cudahy, Patrick's grandson wrote in 1989, "Patrick Cudahy is a fine enterprise which, though sorely abused at times, has managed to survive for 100 years in pretty much the same quarters it began. Come to think of it, that is pretty amazing."

Patrick and Michael F. Cudahy built a large packing company, survived many external and internal obstacles, slaughtered more hogs than any other Wisconsin packer for many years, and produced a broad and well-recognized product line.