

Hershey Factory Centennial!

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It has been 100 years since the first shovels of dirt were turned for a factory that created a community, where residents still are mindful of founder Milton S. Hershey, his generosity and his business acumen.

Hershey had failed at candy ventures from New York City to new Orleans before succeeding with caramels, at a plant down the road at Lancaster. He soon sold that business and built the chocolate factory. By the time the factory was finished in 1905, Hershey had whipped up a milk chocolate formula that is still being used today. Hershey Chocolate Co. is now Hershey Foods Corp., which brings in more than \$4 billion annually and employs more than 15,000 people in central Pennsylvania alone.

“He took quite a risk in going into chocolate, but he was not foolhardy in his risks,” said Richard R. Zimmerman, who was chief executive of Hershey Foods Corp. from 1984 to 1993. “He knew the business and he knew he was a good businessman.”

Just about everything in town sprang from Hershey’s chocolate. His profits built every amenity for his workers, and he assumed a role that some in town refer to as a “benevolent dictator.” His companies sold home sites to employees and underwrote mortgages for them. They even ran everything from a trolley system to a butcher shop.

At the height of the Depression, he built the Hershey Theater and Hotel Hershey, and a 7,000-seat ice hockey rink. In the 1960s, his foundation gave \$50 million to help found Pennsylvania State University’s only teaching hospital. A \$5 billion trust feeds, clothes, shelters and educates about 1,300 disadvantaged boys and girls at a school he established in 1909.

Hershey’s money also funds cultural institutions, such as the theater and botanical gardens, and more than \$1 million a year goes to the town’s public schools. Today, the town of almost 13,000 has an amusement park, a state-of-the-art arena and a convention center. As 74-year-old Carl Fasnacht, retired after 46 years with the chocolate company, put it: “You have pretty much around you what a big city does.”

“It’s nice to be in a town that stands for philanthropy, and it’s not so bad being in a town that smells like chocolate,” said Kathryn Taylor, 55. On March 1-2, Taylor and her fellow Hershey residents began celebrating the month-long centennial of that ground-breaking. A historical marker was unveiled at the ceremony by the state, honoring “Hershey - model industrial town and noted tourism destination.”

For the town’s residents, many of whom either work for or are retired from Hershey, the anniversary is particularly sweet. Six months ago, they thwarted an attempt by the Hershey Trust Co., which has overseen Milton Hershey’s fortune since his death 57 years ago, to sell the company. A sale, they said, would have shattered the town's identity.

The original Hershey factory still stands at Cocoa and Chocolate avenues in Hershey, PA.

