

T V BREAKFAST

By Miles DeCoster

I HAD BREAKFAST WITH BARBIE THIS MORNING. SHE didn't eat much—she's just a doll. Well, not just a doll. She is also, now, a breakfast cereal. As too are Batman and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Ralston Purina is definitely on a roll. Funny, it says just "Ralston" on the front of the box. Batman's cereal is yellowish and shaped like a batman with wings spread. Barbie's cereal is not shaped like Barbie but like the "fun shapes of your daughter's favorite Barbie things." Pink hearts, yellow stars, lavender cordless phones.

Breakfast with Barbie has less sugar per serving than Kellogg's Fruit Loops or Fruity Marshmallow Krispies—or two hot fudge sundaes, for that matter. The chart on the box doesn't list its standing against Ninja Turtles or Batman since they are also made by Ralston Purina, but with marshmallows listed as the second ingredient on the Turtles' box I think they might give those Fruity Krispies a run for their money. The Turtles' cereal, incidentally, consists of pink, green, pale blue and lavender turtle-like marshmallow blobs mixed with a sweetened cereal in the pillow shape familiar to fans of the Chex line.

The cold-cereal aisle may be the most dynamic one in the whole supermarket. For here, in less than 40 feet, is played out a ferocious fight among corporate giants for consumer attention, for cereal sales, for shelf space. Kelloggs, Post, Quaker, Ralston Purina, General Mills, Nabisco and the house brand are the standard lineup. The cereal side of the aisle is roughly split into upper and lower shelves, for adults and children respectively.

On the lower shelves, character licensing is the dominant trend. Something a kid can know and want the first time down the aisle: cartoon and action figures from TV and film, and video games. In addition to the above-mentioned characters, cereals of the past few years have been based on GI Joe, Pac Man, Donkey Kong Junior, Mr. T. In my supermarket, Batman cereal knocked Nintendo Game System cereal off the shelf.

On the top shelves, refined typography and oats are the latest trends, though oats have been discredited somewhat. Oatbake, Post Honey Bunches of Oats, Cracklin' Oat Bran, Oat Bran Options, Oat Chex, Quaker Oat Bran, Kellogg's Common Sense Oat Bran, Post Oat Flakes. If fun is the dominant theme of lower-shelf marketing, health is the theme of the top shelves.

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Unlike the cartoon characters, nutrition and health have been a part of cereal marketing since its inception. Cold cereal began as

a health food, developed at a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Mich., in the first years of the 20th century. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg was the director of the sanitarium, a robust man with a booming voice who attracted thousands to his weekly lectures on nutrition and morality. Diet was an important part of Dr. Kellogg's regimen. He was an avid experimenter in the sanitarium's kitchen, where he developed Granola and Caramel Cereal Coffee. In 1904, with his younger brother Will, he developed the Corn Flake. Breakfast in America was never to be the same again.

Cold cereal spread slowly at first, the Kellogg brothers pushing their flakes and berries as a healthy alternative to the traditional hearty but heavy morning repast. A breakfast appropriate to America's agrarian past but not to its urban future. Cold cereal was an adjunct to the mission of the sanitarium, a side business. However, an eccentric entrepreneur from Texas opened their eyes to the possibilities of cold cereal, and right under their noses.

Charles W. Post was a guest at the sanitarium (he paid his bill with blankets left from a bankrupt venture) and shortly thereafter started his own cereal company in Battle Creek. He developed a crunchy nugget he called Grape Nuts and a fair imitation of the Kellogg's corn flake which he first marketed as Elijah's Manna. The name met with some protest from religious groups and was shortly changed to Post Toasties. Unlike the Kelloggs, Post was an aggressive marketer and advertised his cereal in newspapers and the emerging "national" magazines, like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He filled his ads with hyperbolic copy extolling the miraculous curative powers of the Post products. His Toasties and his cereal coffee substitute, Postum, were the sure-cures for tired blood, acne, indigestion, baldness, clouded vision, almost any affliction, in fact. Post started selling lots of Toasties. Other would-be cereal kings flocked to Battle Creek, and there were soon over a hundred cereal companies calling it home.

The Kellogg's Corn Flakes Company eventually became the vehicle of the younger brother. Under his guidance the company followed the marketing lead of Post and, in fact, quickly surpassed its rival in sales. It was Will Kellogg's signature which became the company logo and which, in the heady days of the early '20s, spread across the largest electric sign in the world, in bright red letters against the blue-black sky above Times Square. The company developed a national advertising and sales campaign and gave away thousands of sample boxes. When the Depression came, they doubled their advertising.

The early cereal companies were dominated by their founders, but as the markets

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