

# 'The Wonderful Story of Planters Peanuts'

New exhibit at Luzerne County Historical Society tells delicious, inspirational story

**Y**ou just can't help but smile when you see Mr. Peanut. We see images of the iconic character who represents Planters Peanuts with distinguished style and good taste (pun intended) everywhere — from the company's unmistakable, classic cans of peanuts to the pages of Facebook. This delightful character, who was created by a 12-year-old boy in 1916, is timeless; as is the success story of the men who brought Planters Peanuts to life, Amedeo Obici and Mario Peruzzi.

We recently caught a glimpse into the world of Planters Peanuts when we stopped by the Luzerne County Historical Society Museum as curator Mary Ruth Burke prepared for the opening of a new exhibit, *The Wonderful Story of Planters Peanuts*. A preview reception will be held at the Society's museum on Friday, March 30, from 5 to 8 p.m. and the display opens on Saturday, March 31. The exhibit will feature a re-creation of the Planters Peanut Store, which once stood at 15 E. Market St., Wilkes-Barre, as well as photographs, documents and artifacts from the Society's collections, and many items on loan from family members and collectors.

As we perused all the peanutty goodness in the museum, Burke offered us a glimpse into the world of Planters Peanuts:

**How would you summarize this story, in a nutshell?**

It's a wonderful Italian immigrant, rags-to-riches type of story. Amedeo Obici came to the United States from Italy in 1888 by himself. He was 11 years old. He had less than a dollar in his pocket and he didn't speak English. He had a tag on his coat saying he was going to meet his uncle (Vittorio Sartor) who had already immigrated, and was living in Scranton with his family.

**Where were his parents?**

His father had died and left his mother with four children, including Amedeo, and the uncle suggested she send him over to live with him and work in America. He came by himself and started working for his uncle, who had a fruit stand. And he went to night school to learn English. He was very hardworking, very creative and determined, and by 1895 he had saved enough money to bring the rest of his family to this country. Then, he came to Wilkes-Barre because he felt there were better business opportunities here, and he opened his own fruit and peanut



PHOTO COURTESY OF LUZERNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Planters Peanut Company headquarters on South Main Street, Wilkes-Barre, with parade float, September, 1939.**

stand in 1896 on East Market St.

Since peanuts had a longer shelf life than produce, he felt this was a good commodity to have because you didn't have to worry about so much waste. He was also interested in science and he did a lot of experiments and research about keeping peanuts fresh and how to roast them. He and the man who ended up being his brother-in-law developed a shaking machine that would shake the skins from the peanuts without breaking them in half. Amedeo felt people would prefer them that way.

**Tell us about his partnership with Mario Peruzzi.**

He met Mario Peruzzi, who was another Italian immigrant, and they became friends. In 1906 they joined forces and started the Planters Peanut Company. They had six employees, mostly family, possibly all family. Amedeo would go out with a horse and cart and distribute the peanuts around town, and the rest of them worked in processing the peanuts. Then he started packaging them.

**Amedeo was also brilliant at marketing, wasn't he?**

His first marketing (initiative) was to get a whistle for his peanut roaster that he went around town with — that way people could hear him coming. And he had an ad in a flood book for the 1904 flood (so this was even before he started Planters). It had his face on it so he would be recognizable when you see him around town. It said, "Do you know Obici? The peanut specialist. Available everywhere."

**1906** - Planters Peanuts is founded  
**1916** - Mr. Peanut is created  
**1927** - Planters opens retail stores all over the country.  
**1961** - Planters is sold to Standard Brands for \$20 million  
**Today**, you can even "like" Mr. Peanut on Facebook! [www.facebook.com/mrpeanut](http://www.facebook.com/mrpeanut)

And then they added confections to the line-up and they incorporated as the Planters Nut and Chocolate Company. They worked really hard and it really took off. And also, an early logo was "Clean and Crisp" because in the late 1800s you couldn't necessarily be assured your produce or food was clean and fresh, so he was assuring his customers. It even says here "Experiments have proven that atmospheric moisture affects peanuts. This can have been devised to protect them. . . it says to keep the cover closed. He was way ahead of his time."

**Who will get the most from seeing this exhibit?**

I love Wilkes-Barre. It's my hometown. Working here I have a chance to raise people's consciousness about what a great place this is and what great things

came out of here and that we should be proud of our area. This is just perfect for that. It's inspirational. I hope that people will be impressed that this happened here and they'll be inspired at what can be accomplished with hard work and determination and lots of creativity. And it's a lot of fun, too. People have happy memories. Amedeo was completely successful. Mr. Peanut is everywhere. He's an icon. And so many people will say, "Oh, I remember that Mr. Peanut walking around the square when I was a kid" or "I remember smelling the peanuts, and I had a Mr. Peanut bank, and straws," so it's something that people can relate to.

**What surprised you most while planning this exhibit?**

The most interesting thing to me was how far ahead of his time Amedeo was. He took peanuts to another level and it was completely done through marketing and an obsession with quality. He really was ahead of his time.

—julie imel

The Wonderful Story of Planters Peanuts will be on display for the National Convention of the Peanut Pals collector's club, which will be held in Wilkes-Barre in July, and remain on display through Oct. 27. Reservations for the preview reception on March 30 may be made by calling 823-6244, extension 3. The reception is open to the public at a cost of \$20 per person, and \$15 for Historical Society members.

## The birth of Mr. Peanut

During our visit, Burke explained how Mr. Peanut came to life. In 1916, the company held a contest in Suffolk, Va., for school children to submit ideas for a mascot or spokesperson for the company. The winner was 12-year-old Antonio Gentile, who was awarded a \$5 cash prize. Gentile's original design included the cane, and an artist in Wilkes-Barre added the top hat, spats and monocle we all know and love today. "Once Mr. Peanut became the 'spokes-peanut' for the company, he appeared on everything," she said. "They started featuring premiums where they would have Mr. Peanut whistles, cups and banks and night lights and coloring books and paint sets — everything imaginable."