
William H. Danforth Ralston Purina, Danforth Foundation

By M. Karen Hubbard

William H. Danforth was born in 1870 in a swamp area in southeast Missouri. He helped his father in their store in Charleston, Missouri. He was a sickly farm boy but was dared by his school teacher to become “the healthiest boy in the class”. His life was built upon the idea that to live is to dare.

Mr. Danforth graduated from Washington University in St. Louis (across from Forest Park) in 1892 and found a job in the brick business. He was not satisfied because this was seasonal work. He always remembered what his father had said, “Get into business that fills a need for lots of people—something they need all year round and in both good and bad times”. Two men persuaded Danforth to join them in producing horse and mule feed. At that time there were 2 feeds for horses and mules besides hay: corn, which every year thousands of horses died from colic caused by bad corn, and oats which was expensive. In 1894, the Robinson-Danforth Commission Company was formed. Their slogan was “Cheaper than oats and safer than corn”. Danforth began as the bookkeeper and became a good salesperson.

1894 was a good year because Mr. Danforth married Miss Adda Bush. They had two children, Dorothy and Donald. It was a difficult year because a tornado hit St. Louis and wiped out the company’s factory. He did not let this get him down; he went to the bank and borrowed \$25,000 to rebuild.

Danforth was interested in human nutrition, too. He believed that a hot whole wheat cereal would be a healthy breakfast food. In 1898, Danforth began selling the cereal to St. Louis grocers under the Purina label. The cereal was later renamed Ralston Wheat Cereal to gain the endorsement of a famous health teacher, Dr. Ralston, who had 800,000 followers. By 1902, the company changed its name to Ralston Purina.

Mr. Danforth fought in the First World War in France. Rations (food) were labeled “chow” and he observed that the word “chow” brought soldiers in the battlefield great enthusiasm. After the war, he returned to his business and put the word “chow” to all livestock and poultry feeds that his company produced. Throughout the United States and Canada, farmers knew the name “Purina Chows”.

Another of Mr. Danforth’s sales promotion ideas was to have a distinctive trademark. At that time, companies did not have standard packaging. Mr. Danforth bagged his animal Chow in sacks marked with uniform red and white checker board pattern. He had remembered from his childhood the Brown family

who wore clothes made from the material from the same bolt of checkerboard cloth. He said, "You couldn't miss a Brown kid".

In his personal life, he did not let business crowd out a happy balance of life. He believed that a person's ingredients for life are a body, a mind, a personality and character must grow in balance with each other. He wrote a number of books on this subject.

In 1924, Mr. Danforth and some friends organized the American Youth Foundation to train young men and women in Christian ideals and help them prepare for a life of responsibility and leadership. He helped start Camp Miniwanca, a 300-acre campsite near Shelby, Michigan. For 30 years, up to the time of his death, he went to this camp and counseled thousands of young people.

Donald Danforth, son of William Danforth, persuaded his father in 1926 to open Purina Pet Care Center which conducted feeding trials and nutritional studies. It covers 337 acres and is located 45 miles southwest of St. Louis. It is now known as "Purina Farms," an animal educational facility. It is the oldest and largest facility in the world.

In 1927, Mr. and Mrs. Danforth established the Danforth Foundation as a national educational philanthropy. It extended scholarships to many college students and teachers. Presently, its main goal is to help revitalize St. Louis region and make it one of the top metropolitan areas in America.

He wrote an inspirational "Monday Morning Message" each week for his associates and employees for nearly 40 years. In 1955, in his 84th year, he wrote, "Some folks are continually making changes. I flatter myself that I like new ventures and new experiences. But when it comes to fundamentals I believe in finding the right foundations and building on them. I'm a poor changer. For instance, here are some of the fundamentals I have never changed: I have been a church member for over 60 years; married to one wife for over 60 years; a lodge member for over 60 years; a Purina man for over 60 years."

Mr. Danforth was his company's active Board Chairman, tireless traveler, and leader of youth until his death on Christmas Eve 1955.

In 2001, the Ralston Purina Company merged with the Nestle Company to become the Nestle Purina Petcare Company. It is now the world's largest producer of dry dog food, dry and moist cat foods, and leading producer of cat box filler in the United States and Canada.