

# A condensed history : the Page brothers and Anglo-Swiss

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## A Condensed History: The Page brothers and Anglo-Swiss

"Ours is the original condensed Swiss milk and the best. Every other kind is inferior."

It was a bold advertising claim, but sound facts lay behind it. An unswerving dedication to product quality drove



George and Charles Page, the American brothers and Nestlé forefathers who built Europe's first condensed milk factory in 1866.

Nowadays when we pour pasteurised fresh milk onto our breakfast cereal, or sweetened condensed milk onto our dessert, we take it for granted that such staple foods are safe.

This wasn't always the case. Until the nineteenth century, pure, fresh milk was a prized commodity in towns and cities across Europe. Milk was often a major carrier of disease, as refrigeration was uncommon and it quickly spoiled. Milk adulteration was also rife and could kill. Chalk, water and other substances were often added.

This was the situation that Charles found when he arrived in Zurich in 1865, as a young US Vice Consul of Trade. Yet in the Swiss countryside he saw cows grazing on fresh, green meadows. This made him think of a popular new American foodstuff that, as a journalist covering the country's Civil War, he had seen issued to Union troops.

**Europe's first condensed milk factory**  
Invented by Gail Borden in the early 1850s, canned condensed milk proved invaluable as a military ration in the 1860s. While fresh milk had spoiled due to long supply chains, canned milk was nutritious, portable, long-lasting and, crucially, safe. Little surprise then that sales exploded in US towns and cities after the war.

Hoping for similar success in Europe, Charles Page founded the Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk Company in Cham,



Switzerland, in 1866. At this time George was in the US learning Gail Borden's

pioneering process for producing condensed milk. This involved heating milk to evaporate some of the water, then adding sugar as a preservative.

A year later, the Pages opened Europe's first condensed milk factory in Cham, and their *Milkmaid Brand* began to roll off the production line. High standards of quality and safety, a modern factory, efficient distribution and savvy marketing ensured the product was a success. The brand that began Nestlé's history is still sold today as *Nestlé Milkmaid*.



As early as 1868, Anglo-Swiss sold over 374,000 cartons of condensed milk. Demand was led by Great Britain and its colonies, whose appetite for condensed milk had inspired the brothers to choose their company name. Charles died in 1873, and by 1891 George was managing a business with 12 factories across Europe and the US that exported worldwide.

### 'The General' proves an enlightened leader

George Page, or 'The General' was the driving force behind Anglo-Swiss. An enlightened man, he understood that long-term business success meant behaving responsibly: towards suppliers, employees and society. Anglo-Swiss used only fresh milk from local cows, and farmers were guaranteed payment for daily supplies at an agreed price.



Milk was delivered to the factory in steam-cleaned churns, and tested in a laboratory for its fat content and purity. Farmers were given technical help to increase milk quality and quantity, and George Page encouraged advanced methods for keeping and feeding cattle. Such a scientific approach to dairy farming was extremely rare in the 1860s. Page's treatment of his workforce was similarly advanced for the era. Anglo-Swiss staff who fell ill were given pay when they were sick or suffered work-

place accidents, rather than simply sacked. They could also join a voluntary health insurance scheme. George Page built housing for staff in Cham and a kindergarten for their children.

### Sharing Nestlé's passion for nutrition

As a progressive employer, Page had a lot in common with another recent immigrant to Switzerland, the German Henri Nestlé. A similar passion for nutrition and social purpose inspired Nestlé to invent his *Farine Lactée* infant food, which he sold from 1867 in Vevey.



After 1878, Henri Nestlé's company and Anglo-Swiss became direct rivals, as the two firms each began producing versions of the other's core product, which their customers liked to buy together.

Despite this rivalry, the two companies thrived while other competitors failed. This is because they won trust through unstinting quality standards. Both used the same ingredient, milk, to provide essential science-based nutrition.

A merger of equals made sense. George Page, who had opposed a deal on these terms, died in 1899. In 1905 the agreement was signed, and the Nestlé and Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk Company was born. The rest is Nestlé history...

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