

Contemporary Collectibles: Wham-O's famous fads still have fans

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Although he was given his due when he died recently, few members of the general public knew the name Richard Knerr. He, with a partner, was the man whose company, Wham-O, promoted two of the most iconic, faddiest, "weren't-they-always-around?" products of the 20th century - the Hula-Hoop and the Frisbee. Not to mention Slip 'N' Slide, Water Wiggle, Super Ball and Silly String.

Together with his childhood friend Arthur "Spud" Melin, he founded the firm in Pasadena, Calif., in 1948. They christened it Wham-O, inspired by the sound that their first product, a slingshot, made when it hit its target.

The Frisbee was not an original creation of Wham-O. During the 1870s, the Frisbie Baking Company of Bridgeport, Conn., began using thin metal bases under their pies. Some time around the 1920s, these tins began to be used as playthings by college kids - it probably started at Yale - who tossed them back and forth through the air, yelling out "frisbie" just before the disk made contact. (An alternate story sets the beginnings with Middlebury College students who, when having stopped to fix a flat tire, found a pie tin in a field and started throwing it, also yelling the name of the pie company.)

In the late 1950s, at the height of UFO fever, an inventor named Fred Morrison marketed a product called Morrison's Flyin' Saucer, acknowledging its resemblance to an alien spacecraft. In 1958, he sold the rights to Wham-O, who rechristened it the Frisbee.

The product zoomed to popularity from the late 1960s through the '70s, as a kind of calm, countercultural alternative to rough, competitive sports like football, although in time Frisbee became almost as competitive itself. A whole Frisbean vocabulary evolved, with terms like wrupleplat, sprovit, blort and vit used by enthusiasts. And, as we all know, the Frisbee sails on.

The Hula-Hoop, sometimes called the biggest fad in history, introduced by Wham-O in 1958, was another spin on a product that long predated Wham-O: In ancient Egypt, children played with large hoops of dried and stripped grapevine, and continued to do so with wooden ones for centuries. They were rolled endlessly, propelled by a rod, and, yes, tossed into the air, caught and gyrated around the waist. Indeed, there was a proto-hula-ish-hoop craze in Edwardian England (causing a great deal of physical damage), and bamboo rings were similarly used by Australian children in their gym classes.

Kerr and Martin happened to be at a New York toy fair when they were discussing boomerang techniques with an Australian attendee, who happened to mention that Aussie practice of placing bamboo hoops around the waists and spinning them by gyrating their hips for exercise. In a "Eureka!" moment, Knerr and Martin conceived of creating the modern, colorful, poly-plastic version - after first experimenting with wood.

Seeking a product that would be sturdy, lightweight and would float on water, they approached the W.R. Grace Chemical Company, which created for them a composite polyethylene called Grek, and Melin himself went around demonstrating the hoops throughout Southern California. They named it Hula-Hoop after rejecting such other options as Swing-A-Hoop and Twirl-A-Hoop.

The phenomenon swept the country in the summer of 1958, selling 25 million in four months, the craze spreading as far as countries like Japan (where it was called the Huru-Hoopnu). Celebrities twisted and twirled on TV, teenage marathons were held, and sales shot to 100 million with, at its peak, Wham-O producing 20,000 hoops a day.

But then, almost as suddenly, the mania faded, though it did return later with the addition of ball bearings inside, and lives on with Melin and Knerr's other immortal artifact, the Frisbee.

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