

THE HISTORY OF THE FRISBEE®

By Phil Kennedy, Co-author (with Fred Morrison) of *FLAT FLIP FLIES STRAIGHT, True Origins of the Frisbee*

Humans have been tossing flat, round objects since time immemorial—first, out of curiosity to watch something remain airborne in defiance of gravity and because it was fun. Later, it was discovered that flying objects could also be used as weapons, which led to showing off feats of skill, and organized sporting events, such as hurling the discus at the early Greek Olympics.

By the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s, manufacturers began mass-producing many products that were secondarily flyable, such as container lids and tins of various designs. Perhaps the most ubiquitous were cake and pie tins used by bakers, both at home and in local shops across the land, and around the globe. Thus, flipping empty tins became a standard rite-of-passage for youngsters throughout this country over the past 150 years.¹

Fred Morrison was a typical American lad growing up in the rural town of Richfield, Utah during the 1920s and '30s. He spoke of becoming fascinated early on trying out all sorts of flat objects to see how they would sail through the air, including paint can lids, pie tins, and cake pans.

Sometime in the 1930s Fred's father moved his family and his optometry practice to Los Angeles. In 1937 Fred was invited by his high-school girlfriend Lu, to her uncle's house for a Thanksgiving Day celebration. After dinner, the party moved to the backyard where the uncle produced a popcorn can lid to toss about for fun. For the next few weeks, Fred and Lu continued to get together to flip that lid until it became beat up, sharp-edged, and dangerous. To continue their activity Fred "borrowed" a cake pan from his mother's kitchen.

After having moved their pan-tossing to the nearby shore, a beachgoer, who had become fascinated by Fred and Lu's adept flipping, offered to buy their cake pan for a quarter. A lightbulb went on in Fred's head. A new cake pan cost five cents. If he could trade nickels for quarters...there was a business!

Soon "Flyin' Cake Pans" were available at beaches and parks all over L.A. The proceeds funded dates and eventually a wedding ring. Fred and Lu got joined.

Fred and his father tinkered with the idea of producing a "better-flying cake pan" out of custom-formed sheet metal, but then along came WWII. Fred enlisted in the Army Air Corp and flew missions over Italy in a P-47 Fighter Bomber. His flying experience gave him new insights on the aerodynamics of flight...and, once out of the service, a new inspiration to pick up where he had left off.

In 1946 he drafted a brand new design for a flying disc and called it the “Whirlo-Way” (after the champion race horse). At the time Fred was moving their growing family about while searching for work as a carpenter. He took a job working for Warren Francioni who had a business installing butane heating systems in the San Louis Obispo, California area. Warren had also been a WWII pilot and took a liking to flipping cake pans with Fred. Warren also took an interest in Fred’s idea of producing a better-flying design...especially after Fred shared his Whirlo-Way drawing with him.

They decided to explore manufacturing the Whirlo-Way... but take advantage of the newly-developed plastic injection process instead of metal. An arrangement was agreed upon whereby Warren would secure the funds for developing Fred’s design and both would contribute to the sales and promotion of their new product. In late 1947 their new business, PIPCO, was born. (PIPCO did NOT stand for “Partners In Plastic” as has been erroneously asserted by many sources beginning in the 1970s, but for—as Fred abashedly admitted—“If It’s a PIPCO Product, It’s a Pip!” A “pip” at the time meant a “humdinger.”)

By March 1948 Southern California Plastics (SCP) was molding the first colorful batches of the very first plastic flying discs. But instead of Whirlo-Way, “Flyin-Saucer” was tooled into the mold to take advantage of the public’s fascination with U.F.O. reports that had begun grabbing headlines in 1947.

Despite relentless effort by the PIPCO duo, Flyin-Saucers didn’t take off. Direct sales to the public at various fairs and events were effective, but limited, and not cost-effective. Attempts to promote sales through stores or wholesale representatives were unsuccessful and by February 1950, Fred had had enough. He gave up his half-interest in PIPCO and never again had any contact with Warren.

Warren continued to keep the business afloat by engaging additional financial partners and in May 1950 entered into an agreement with Al Capp to promote Li'l Abner’s Flyin’ Saucers. The deal turned disastrous. Faced with financial ruin, Warren Francioni shelved the mold and re-enlisted in the Air Force.

In 1953 SCP asked Warren if he would allow them to remold the Flyin-Saucer using the newly-developed softer, more-durable polyethylene plastic in exchange for royalties for all sales that might be generated through their own promotion. Warren agreed, and Flyin Saucers (no hyphen) were soon soaring again.

By 1954 Fred Morrison yearned to augment his income by selling saucers again in his spare time and decided to contact SCP to find out if Flyin-Saucers were still available. He learned they were! He placed several orders, but soon discovered

that producing his own disc from a brand new mold would be much more profitable than continuing to buy them from SCP.

In early 1955 Fred sat down at his kitchen table and designed the disc that would prove to be the archetype for the modern plastic flying disc. The media was all abuzz with talk of future space travel. Fred wanted a name that was “spacey.” Pluto was the last planet discovered...what would euphoniously go with “Pluto”? A platter was disc-shaped. “Pluto Platter” it was! Lu added the instructions: “Flat Flip Flies Straight–Tilted Flip Curves, Experiment!”

Pluto Platters began sailing at fairs on weekends promoted by Fred and Lou through their new business: American Trends Co. Sales were so vigorous over the next two years that they caught the attention of Rich Knerr and Spud Melin, owners of Wham-O, who manufactured slingshots, crossbows, and boomerangs, but were interested in breaking into the burgeoning popular toy market.

After weeks of negotiation, Fred and Lu reached an agreement with Rich and Spud on January 23, 1957 (Fred’s birthday) to allow Wham-O full control of manufacturing and sales promotion of the Pluto Platter in exchange for royalties on all future sales.

A few months later, apparently Rich Knerr learned that college students back on the East Coast were calling the Pluto Platter a different name: Frisbee. Being a passionate sportsman, it seems likely that Rich read about this in a May 13, 1957 article in *Sports Illustrated* about the new fad of flying discs. The article doesn’t mention the Frisbie Pie Company at all. In fact it states, “Nobody at Princeton seems to know who named the Frisbee, or why.” Regardless of the unknown source, Rich liked the name, and, if it would help sell more of his new Pluto Platters, what the hell, he’d call them Frisbees, too! By June 17th Wham-O did.²

In 1958 Wham-O helped Fred obtained a design patent for his flying disc.

Sales of the Platters remained steady, but relatively modest until 1964 when Wham-O hired Ed Headrick, a former appliance sales executive. Ed’s first job was to boost sales of their flying discs by re-inventing the Pluto Platter. Gone was the “spacey” name and flying saucer design from the ‘50s. Times were a’changing! Baby-Boomers were coming of age and needed an outlet for their hormones. Sports were in! Ed beefed up the weight of the rim for added stability, replaced the planet names with raised ridges for a better thumb grip, added a wide, black, racing stripe, and a label using the Olympic logo to legitimize the disc’s appeal to sports fans. The Pluto Platter had become “Professional”-ized and sales soared!

OPTIONAL FOOTNOTES:

1. It is known that many people were tossing round flat objects (including metal pie tins from many small bakeries) all across the country before the mid-1800s. Therefore, the Frisbie Pie Company, founded in 1871, has no credible claim to have inspired the flying disc, or specifically the plastic flying disc which later became named the Frisbee. Fred Morrison never visited the East Coast (except to pass through NYC by rail while in the service during WWII to catch a boat to Europe and back). Furthermore, distribution of Frisbie Pies was confined to southern New England, so were unknown on the West Coast where Fred lived all his life.
2. It is likely that the name “Frisbee” did in fact originate from the name of the Frisbie Pie Co. through the popularity of tossing Frisbie tins for fun and sport by students at Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, and Princeton. The terms “Frisbie, Frisbee,” etc. undoubtedly have received extra exposure over the years due to the fact that the goings-on of Ivy League college students have historically received extra (undue?) attention in the media.

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