

Otto Rohwedder

The saying, “It’s the greatest thing since sliced bread” is really a tribute to the work of inventor Otto Frederick Rohwedder,

the father of commercially sliced bread.

Born in 1880 and growing up in Davenport, Iowa, Mr. Rohwedder’s

background wasn’t originally in baking. At the time he began to conceive of and work on a bread slicer in 1912, he owned three jewelry stores in St. Joseph, Mo.

“Sliced bread is a great American invention,” said Allen Wright, vice-president of sales with Hansaloy Corp. Mr. Wright helped nominate Mr. Rohwedder for the Baking Hall of Fame. “Sliced bread is also something consumers take for granted in most parts of the world. Mr. Rohwedder truly changed the way people think about bread. He also introduced a huge convenience for consumers.”

Not surprisingly, Mr. Rohwedder faced various obstacles along the way when developing his invention. Initially, a 1917 fire in Monmouth, Ill., destroyed the factory where his prototype machine and blueprints were. It took him until 1927 to recreate the invention and overcome losses, but finally on July 7, 1928, the slicer was successfully installed and used for the first time at the Chillicothe Baking Co. in Chillicothe, Mo. Mr. Rohwedder also started his own company known as the Mac-Roh Sales and Manufacturing Co. and filed a patent for the bread slicing machine.

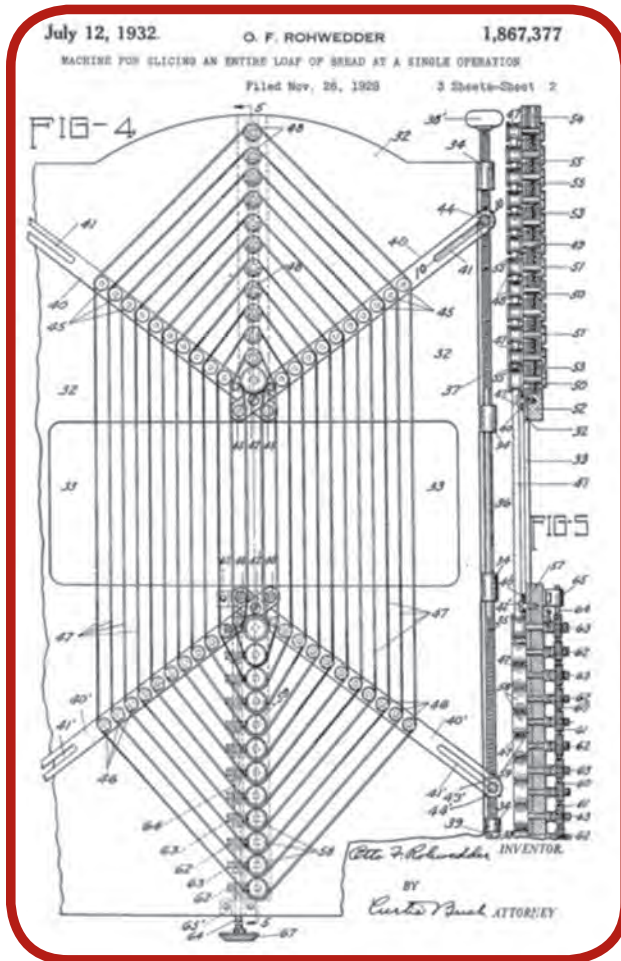
Yet even as he introduced the invention, there were many in the baking industry who didn’t think it would catch on because they thought it would dry out the bread too quickly.

“Like any paradigm changing invention, most people could not conceive of sliced bread at the time,” Mr. Wright said.

But those obstacles were overcome, and Gustav Papendick, a baker from St. Louis, improved the slicer by adding a collapsible bread tray allowing loaves to be wrapped in wax paper.

From that point on, sales of Kleen Maid Sliced Bread skyrocketed, and in 1930 Wonder bread began selling





Patent figure 1867377 of the machine for slicing bread at a single operation.

pre-sliced bread. The invention had taken hold, and many national bakeries also began selling pre-sliced bread.

Steve Wright, president of Hansaloy, said the invention was out of necessity as the toaster recently had been invented and Mr. Rohwedder saw the need for uniformly sliced bread to fit in a toaster. His invention also helped make the sandwich more practical.

Despite the success of the slicer, the economic conditions of the time did have an impact on Mr. Rohwedder. He worked in investments and securities during the 1920s, but as the Great Depression settled in, he was forced to sell his invention to Micro-Westco in Bettendorf, Iowa, in 1933. He was vice-president and sales manager of the Rohwedder Bakery Machine Division until he retired in 1951. In retirement he moved to Albion, Mich.

Mr. Rohwedder died in November 1960. Today there is a model of the bread slicer on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

At the American Society of Baking meeting where Mr. Rohwedder was formally inducted into the Baking Hall of Fame, the A.S.B. had an actor dress up to portray the inventor. The actor, along with Steve Wright, accepted the award.

Mr. Rohwedder and John Hansen, the founder of Hansaloy, worked together closely during the machine development, and Mr. Hansen provided blades for the original machine.

"It's another example of American ingenuity and necessity driving invention," said Steve Wright. "It's one that's been popularized by the saying."

Steve Wright said Mr. Rohwedder never received proper recognition or financial compensation during his lifetime partially as a result of having to sell the rights to the invention during the Great Depression. ■



Steve Wright, president of Hansaloy, by Otto Rohwedder's Hall of Fame plaque.



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