A monster of a cookie

In Chapel Hill, the story of a man, his design and the success of the Oreo

BY EMILY WALLACE
Twelveten times a year, a disc of vanilla cream is stamped between two chocolate wafers to produce the Oreo, the world’s most popular manufactured cookie.

An American staple since 1912, the Oreo has a flavor that contrasts sweet cream and crisp chocolate cookies. Its texture is marked by a distinct decorative pattern: a small, circular border hatched with short, shallow lines and an interior ringed with four-leaf clovers. But the cookie, 491 billion of which have sold worldwide, still leaves some details in question.


“Bill, Chapel Hill, NC,” answered: “My father is William A. Turnier. He worked for the entire 49 years of his working life at Nabisco. In 19[52] he was assigned the task of producing a new design for the Oreo.”

It turns out Bill Turnier of Chapel Hill really is the son of the man who, by nearly all accounts, designed the modern Oreo. To many, Bill Turnier’s comment wasn’t breaking news. Cookie and design enthusiasts have long credited William A. Turnier as the cookie’s artist—and no one else has publicly emerged to claim the title—but they’ve done so without knowing many details about his life.

Bill Turnier has those details—stories and memories of his dad, a former mail boy-turned-design guru who also put his imprint on the Nutter Butter and the Milk-Bone. And he has the proof: High above a closet door in Turnier’s tidy brick home in east Chapel Hill hangs a framed copy of the blueprint for the Oreo’s most enduring design, unchanged for nearly 60 years. In the corner, the printed name: “W.A. Turnier”

Nabisco confirms that Turnier worked for the company between 1923 and 1973 as a member of the engineering department where he created dies—basically high-tech cookie cutters—to stamp patterns. The company won’t, however, say that he made the design. “We have no way of knowing who came up with the actual visual concept of what each new cookie/cracker product would look like,” wrote an archivist for Kraft Foods Corporate Archives, who wishes to remain unnamed, in an email to the *Indy*. The blueprint hanging in Chapel Hill leaves the mystery open to interpretation. Nothing appears under the box for “Designed by,” but “Drawn by” reveals the name W. A. Turnier penned by hand on July 17, [19]52. The only other name on the document shows up as the scribbled initials of an overseer in the box for “Checked by.”

William Adelbert Turnier was born in Edgewater, N.J., in 1908. As a toddler, he became ill with polio. “That was very significant,” Bill Turnier says. “My father dropped out of school at age 16. Kids were mean to him because he had a limp.” So Turnier took a job in nearby New York City as a mail boy at Nabisco, which also employed his father, Adelbert.

When Turnier arrived at Nabisco in 1923, the Oreo was already well into production. It launched in 1912 and is believed to have taken its name from the Greek word for mound, the shape the cookie is reported to have briefly mimicked. That’s hard to imagine today, when a great deal of the cookie’s appeal has to do with its combination of three flat discs—two parts cookie and one part cream—which can be playfully pulled apart and reassembled.

Schematic of a snack: Bill Turnier’s blueprint of the Oreo design compared with the cookie

PHOTOS BY JEREMY M. LANGE

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JP TROSTLE

A sweet story

The man who designed the Oreo cookie

BY EMILY WALLACE
Folklorist Elizabeth Mosby Adler addresses this in her essay from the early 1980s, “The Oreo Syndrome: Creative Eating,” which uses the Oreo to deconstruct highly individualized rituals that people develop with certain foods. “Each technique is personal,” she writes of the multi-part cookie. “Do you scrape the frosting off with your teeth? Do you carefully try to lift it off, separating the filling from the cookie? Are you a failure when you painstakingly pry the cookie open, only to have the frosting split and stay tightly attached to both sides?”

Noted food writer Colman Andrews of The Daily Meal says the meat of the matter is in the cream filling. “It’s the whole point of Oreos,” he proposes. “The chocolate cookies, which aren’t particularly good as chocolate cookies go, are just the excuse to eat the rest—like the bottom part of muffins, when all anybody really wants are the tops. The white stuff appeals to that part of us that can’t resist swiping a finger through the frosting on a cake.”

Taste and technique aside, a great deal of the cookie’s attention centers on its emboss—the textures and shapes on the chocolate. According to Nicola Twilley of The Atlantic, since its inception the cookie has had three designs. The first image was sparse, the seemingly hand-drawn script for “OREO” appearing alone with the letters R and E slightly taller than the O’s. Half circles scalloped the edges, and an X marked each quarter of the cookie.

In 1924, the center was filled with a ring of laurels, two turtledoves and a thicker, more mechanical Oreo font. Then, in 1952, the current cookie was created. Of that design, architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote in the Times on the cookie’s 75th anniversary, “It stands as the archetype of its kind, a reminder that cookies are designed as consciously as buildings, and sometimes better.”

Patterned pastries are common. In The Atlantic, Twilley unpacks the centuries-old history of cookie embossing, calling it “both pragmatic and decorative.” She explains how piercing pastry—known as “docking”—helps bake cookies and crackers crisply and evenly. Initially a somewhat slow, hand-punched process, industrial cookie design took off after the 1890s with the development of a machine that could cut and decorate 80 biscuits in a mere minute. But Twilley says it wasn’t until the 1920s, with the introduction of the mechanized rotary molder—a device akin to a souped-up rolling pin covered in stamps—that the “true golden age of biscuit engineering” began.

During the manufactured cookie’s boom in the early 1920s, Turnier was making rounds in the Nabisco factory as part of the mail team. It stands as the archetype of its kind, a reminder that cookies are designed as consciously as buildings, and sometimes better.”

—Architecture critic Paul Goldberger

Right: William A. Turnier  PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TURNIER FAMILY
Below: a portion of the blueprint  PHOTO BY JEREMY M. LANGE
It was a job that introduced him to employees throughout the factory, including the people who worked on designing Nabisco’s various products. They became Turnier’s closest colleagues. As Bill Turnier puts it, “The guys in the engineering department were nice to him. They would sort of let him come around and teach him stuff about drafting. He started doing that. And he went to some schools at night and got the equivalent of a high school degree.”

Turnier eventually traded letters for blueprints, moving up the ranks to become a member of the engineering department. Once there, Bill Turnier says his father put his touch on some of Nabisco’s better-known products. He created the waffled pattern on the peanut butter snack sandwich known as the Nutter Butter, which launched in 1969, and a delicate, vine-like design on the creamy Carnevo cookie, which debuted in 1954. Bill Turnier believes that his father also tweaked the classic, buttery Ritz, added grass to the bottom of one of Nabisco’s Barnum animal crackers, and—to many a dog’s delight—worked on the Milk-Bone. The latter, Bill Turnier proudly notes, bears his father’s distinct penmanship. “I can be walking down the dog food aisle and choke up,” he says.

But of all of those designs—of all cookies, for that matter—none is as scrutinized or respected as the Oreo. There have been similar, but less successful cookies. Four years before the Oreo, Sunshine Bakeries introduced the Hydrox, a chocolate and cream sandwich snack. But as architecture critic Goldberger explains, its design was “at once more crude and delicate than the Oreo,” featuring a ring of bubbly flowers. The Oreo, writes Goldberger, “is the more American-looking of the two,” juxtaposing “homelike decoration with an American love of machinery.” And it’s in that mix, he says, that there “lies a triumph of design.”

Like the cookie itself, the Oreo’s emboss can be divided into component parts. People have attempted to decipher the images like hieroglyphs: “Could Nabisco’s icon—an antenna-topped oval at the center of the cookie—represent a European character for quality, or is it the Knights Templar’s Cross of Lorraine?” asks Twilley. Or is the flower-like design “a schematic drawing of a four-leaf clover or—cue the cliffhanger music from Jaws—the cross pattéé, also associated with the Knights Templar, as well as with the German military and today’s Freemasons?”

“I read something on the Internet about some speculation about Masonic designs, et cetera,” Bill Turnier told me. “But my father was not a Mason. His father was, but he had no big enthusiasm for it. Some of this Masonic stuff, I can’t imagine the people who get into that and the numerological significance.”

Nonetheless, cookie enthusiasts and numerologists often called his father. “Someone wanted to know the significance of there being 90 notches around the edge,” Bill Turnier says. “I think there’s 90, and my dad’s like, ‘I don’t know, is that how many there are? I bet I put my compass down and kicked every fourth degree.’”

Bill Turnier recalls that his father also fielded complaints about the four-leafed flower. “Somebody called him up when he was 65 and said there were no flowers with four petals on them. My dad couldn’t care.” (There are, for the record, plenty of flowers, including the Western Wallflower and varieties of primroses, which bear four petals.)

Turnier’s ties to other cookies remain more obscure, mentioned little, if at all, in written histories and spurring few calls from curious fans. As manufactured cookies go, the Oreo’s popularity in taste and design reigns supreme. Turnier himself preferred the simple Oreo to other snack sandwiches. But Turnier didn’t eat many cookies. “We’d ask, ‘Do you want a cookie, Dad? How many do you want?’ The answer was always ‘one.’” In this way, Bill Turnier says, his father was a typical engineer—very “measured.” “He’d sit there for awhile and eventually have another,” Bill Turnier says. But his father had no obvious ritual tied to eating the cookie. “He would just take them and bite them.”

Bill Turnier admits he now eats the Oreo in a similar way. “I just take some bites out of [the cookie],” he says. As a child, however, he attempted to drag out the process of eating an Oreo as long as possible. “I liked to crack them open and scrape my teeth on the stuff and then you’d have these two chocolate cookies. They would last you an eternity that way rather than taking bites out of them.”

It seems probable, however, that the ritual was more for fun. In the Turnier family, there was no real need to stretch out the eating of a cookie. They were abundant. “We used to get extra broken cookies,” Bill Turnier recalls. “My dad would go in and get this enormous bag of [them], So we never lacked for cookies,” he says. “It’s kind of amazing we all didn’t become grossly overweight.”

Over its lifetime, the classic Oreo has spawned a ragbag of related products, like the dense double-stuffed cookie—an Oreo look-alike with cake-made wafers, and mint, vanilla or peanut butter fillings—or original Oreoos draped in fudge. There are bite-size Oreoos, ghost-stamped wafers for Halloween with orange cream, and premade Oreo-based piecrusts and ice cream cones. But Turnier stayed loyal to the plain, original cookie,eschewing vanilla and gussied-up flavors. “He didn’t think it was too cool,” Bill Turnier says.

In 1973, Turnier retired from Nabisco. Seven years later, he left New Jersey with his wife and relocated to Salt Lake City, where he spent time gardening and became an avid fan of the Utah Jazz. His history with the Oreo, however, followed him west. A brother-in-law publicized Turnier’s relationship with the cookie. “They were doing some contest about Oreoos and [my brother-in-law] said, ‘You ought to get the designer. He lives right here.’ So they got him, and somebody found out about it at Fox [News],” Bill Turnier explains.
Turnier’s most significant call, however, came from Nabisco itself. According to Bill Turnier, the company needed his father’s help to confirm aspects of the Oreo’s design in order to build a lawsuit against a company making a copycat cookie in Trinidad and Tobago. It was at this time that Turnier was presented with a copy of the cookie’s original blueprint, the one that now hangs in his home. But the only thing Kraft Foods Corporate Archives will validate about Turnier is his role as a design engineer and his receipt of a Suggestion Award in 1972 for an idea that increased the production of Nilla Wafers on company machinery by 13 percent.

Throughout his career, Turnier carried such creativity home with him, keeping a camera close by to snap family pictures and landscapes. He prided himself on setting up elaborate trick shots. But it wasn’t an artistic life that he wished to pursue. “He was always disappointed that he never got a college education,” Bill Turnier explains. “He always thought that the world would have been his apple if he’d had [a college degree]. He said he could have gone elsewhere. He could have done something else.”

However, Bill Turnier never heard his father explicitly state that he would have rather done anything but work for Nabisco. He believes that on balance, his dad was a happy man with a beautiful wife and three children. And Turnier had a job—one that didn’t make him rich (Nabisco didn’t pay him royalties for his designs) but that enabled him to provide for his family.

Turnier, who died in 2004, encouraged his children to get the education that he’d wished for himself. And though a young Bill Turnier spent summers in New York loading trucks and cleaning equipment for Nabisco, he eventually fulfilled his father’s wish, earning degrees from Fordham University, Pennsylvania State University and the University of Virginia. After graduating from law school at the latter, he took a job at New York’s venerable Cravath, Swaine & Moore, the second-oldest firm in the nation.

Bill Turnier eventually left New York for Chapel Hill. He claims to have no artistic talent, but he definitely has his father’s knack for detail. For more than 30 years, he has taught tax law at UNC, which he loves, but admits is tedious at times. “Every once in a while when things are getting boring or something, I’ll tell them about the dollar sign and where that came from,” he says of his classes. “It doesn’t come like you used to think, from Scrooge McDuck with a U and an S on it from the Donald Duck cartoons.”

And for times that get really drab, Bill Turnier pulls out another line: My father drew the Oreo.

“—Bill Turnier on the theory that the Oreo’s design has Masonic and numerologic codes

William A. Turnier also designed the weave print on the Nutter Butter. PHOTO BY JEREMY M. LANGE