



“Give Me Some Peanuts and Cracker Jacks ...”

## The History of Cracker Jacks

Cheryl Miller

For over a century, kids have loved their sugar coated treats and the prize included in the Cracker Jack box. This sticky concoction of popcorn, peanuts, and molasses has been around for quite some time. Besides the wonderful snack, every box of the caramel-flavored confection comes with a toy – including a ring, tiny books, tattoos, charms, and even a complete model train!

Back in 1872, a German immigrant named Frederick William Rueckheim and his friend William Brinkmeyer began selling popcorn on a Chicago street corner from a one-popper stand. A year later, Rueckheim's brother Louis bought out Brinkmeyer and the brothers opened a popcorn specialties business and called it – F.W. Rueckheim and Bro.

In 1893, they debuted a combination of peanuts, popcorn, and molasses at the Chicago World's Fair and of course, it was an overnight success. Three years later the brothers gave a salesperson a sample of their confection and the man excitedly responded, “That's a cracker jack (a slang term of the period meaning something exceptional or first-rate)!” The name stuck, like the peanuts and popcorn do in your teeth! The name was followed by the slogan – “The more you eat, the more you want.”

Cracker Jacks were originally sold in stores in large tubs but boxes began to be used in 1899. In 1903, the brothers took on another partner – E.G. Eckstein and the company became Rueckheim Bros. & Eckstein. Beginning in 1910, the company issued coupons to dealers to give to those people who purchased Cracker Jacks. In turn, they could redeem their coupons for prizes. Two years later it just made sense to the partners to include a prize in every package of Cracker Jacks.

In 1908, Albert Von Tilizer, a vaudeville actor, wrote the words, and Jack Norworth wrote the music to “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” The ironic thing about von Tilizer is that he wrote the music some twenty years before he actually saw his first baseball game. This song has forever immortalized one of our favorite childhood snacks.

The company made a patriotic gesture during World War I by putting red, white, and blue stripes on the box, along with Sailor Jack and his dog Bingo, the Cracker Jack mascot. Rueckheim modeled Sailor Jack after his grandson Robert, who died of pneumonia soon after Jack appeared on the box in 1916.

Over 17 billion prizes have been included in the Cracker Jack box and they have evolved over the years, reflecting the changing times and changing interests of children. Among the early prizes were tin banks and paper spinners. The first prize was a series of 16 paper dolls from 1898. In 1914, the most expensive prize was a set of 144 2 ¼ x 3: baseball cards. They are extremely valuable today. In fact, in 1993, a complete, much sought-after set sold at auction for \$98,000. Ty Cobb and Joe Jackson cards, at \$1,400 each, are the priciest in the set.

Hand-painted wood and porcelain toys, tin cartoon characters, disguises, and whistles were included in the 1930 boxes. In the 1940's, toy pilots and soldiers, military-style badges, and other patriotic items were common. During my era, the 1950's, I can remember receiving cowboys, space toys, charms, and mini etcha-sketch pads – my favorite! In the 1960's and 70's the toys evolved into riddle collections, tattoos, and charms with sayings like “groovy” and “what's happening.”

In 1984, a series of wiggle pictures was issued to commemorate events at that year's Olympic Games and were included in the Cracker Jack box. In 1993 Cracker Jack celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Cracker Jack continues, even unto this day, to be a favorite of young and old alike because, as you know, “the more you eat, the more you want.”

## Resources

Author Unknown, *Cracker Jack Prizes*, Collector Magazine, p. 26.

Edens, Cooper, 2005. *The Glorious Songbook: A Classic Illustrated Edition*, Raincoast Books, Vancouver , British Columbia , p. 26.