

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Ainsworth to Tailored Pet Nutrition: *Pluck, Resilience, and Risk-Taking*

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June 2020

GEORGE AINSWORTH LANG



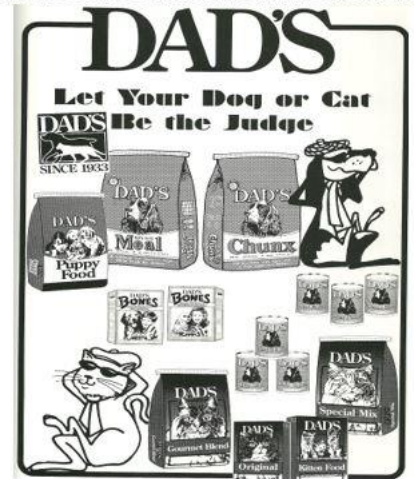
In 2017, Ainsworth Pet Nutrition, a private for-profit company in Meadville's Fifth Ward had an estimated 452 employees, 284 based in Meadville. The Department of Labor and Industry's first-quarter report of that year listed Ainsworth Pet Nutrition as the sixth-largest employer in Crawford County and Crawford County's third-largest for-profit employer. Then early, in April 2018, Ainsworth Pet Nutrition announced that the company would be sold to J.M. Smucker Company for \$1.9 billion (Martin, *Erie Times-News*, 4/5/18).

Ainsworth Pet Nutrition began in 1933, in the height of the Depression, as Dad's Dog Food. The founder, George Ainsworth Lang, while employed at Talon, the company that originated the zipper and was hiring in the depth of the Depression, decided to try his hand at producing a homemade dog food in his hometown, Meadville. He quit Talon and began following his intuition. What precipitated this endeavor was his Springer Spaniel, Lady, who gave birth to 11 puppies. At the time, commercial dog food cost five cents a pound, and average work paid about 40 cents an hour. The need to feed 11 puppies more economically and George Ainsworth Lang's ingenuity launched a billion-dollar company.

Despite the Depression and an era when commercial dog food was a luxury, George Lang personally knew of the need for low-cost dog food because his springer spaniel puppies were hungry. George used a cereal product his father sold at their local grocery store called “Dad’s Health Wheat,” and combined it with meat meal in an old peanut roaster. The result was a biscuit his dogs loved. George and members of the Lang family began to promote and sell the product to friends and neighbors. Soon pet owners from all over northwestern Pennsylvania and Ohio were asking for it (dadspetfoods.com/about-us).

George knew a good opportunity when he saw one. He left his job at Talon, and along with other members of the Lang family, established a private company, Dad’s Pet Care. Dad’s Dog Food, the wheat-based dog food, became the first of many products produced by the company officially established as Dad’s Pet Care. The company purchased its ingredients locally from the farmers of Crawford and surrounding counties. Buying locally ensured that ingredients were fresh. It also meant that the company was a supporter of its neighbors and potential customers. Further, it helped to reduce transportation costs and keep costs low. Dad’s Pet Care message was: “By knowing where our ingredients come from and whom they come from we can ensure that the pet foods we make are safe for your pets, and ours. When you care about pets as much as we do, that’s the most important reason of all” (dadspetfoods.com/about-us).

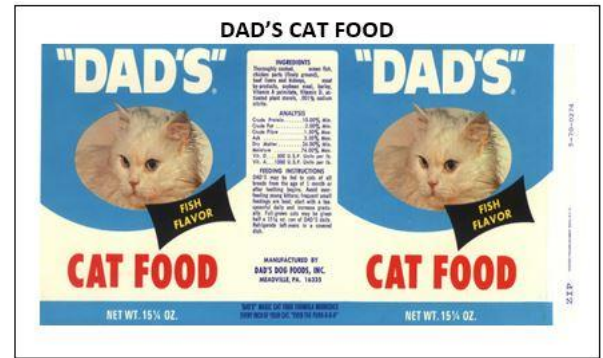
DAD’S DOG FOOD AD MEDVILLE CENTENNIAL



George Lang died in 2010, but the company remained a closely held Lang family business. The fourth and fifth generations of the Lang family continued to own and operate the company from a multi-plant complex in Meadville. In 2013, the name of the company was changed to Ainsworth Pet Nutrition. By this time, the Ainsworth Company had three business units including Dad’s Pet Care, Ainsworth Specialty Brands, and Ainsworth Custom. Despite the name change and the increase in products, Ainsworth remained committed to George Lang’s original legacy of combining high-quality ingredients into great-tasting (at least to dogs and cats), nutritious pet foods that are a favorite among champion breeders and family pet owners.

By the 21st century, Ainsworth Pet Nutrition offered consumers a full line of pet food products including premium and super premium dog biscuits, soft and chewy dog and cat treats, dental care dog bones, dry food products for dogs and cats and specialty brands such as Rachel Ray Nutrish pet foods. At the time of its sale to Smucker’s, Ainsworth pet products were distributed in 24 states and 50 U.S. markets.

Keeping to its original practice, ingredients were still being purchased directly from local suppliers, who were required to sign affidavits attesting to ingredient safety and quality. Inspectors accepted only ingredients that met Ainsworth's stringent quality control specifications. Ainsworth Pet Nutrition did not alter the ingredients and did not use low-cost substitutes. Ainsworth Pet Nutrition also managed an extensive research and development department devoted exclusively to pet nutrition and care.



Throughout its history, Ainsworth remained a good community partner. It continued to buy locally grown products ensuring the freshest ingredients for its pet foods. In 2011, Ainsworth President Elliott Haverlack announced the company had entered into a lease arrangement with the city of Meadville for the nearby municipal building to serve as a new corporate headquarters for Ainsworth's 75 to 80 management employees. Haverlack noted, "the lease is a great opportunity for the city and for Ainsworth Pet Nutrition." The city had too much space and had outgrown its Mill Street location. Ainsworth announced that it was looking forward to "our move to downtown Meadville." (Spicer, *Meadville Tribune*, 9/22/2011). Ainsworth Pet Nutrition had been headquartered at 18746 Mill Street since 1948. The Mill Street building continued to house research and development, quality assurance, and plant-specific operations.



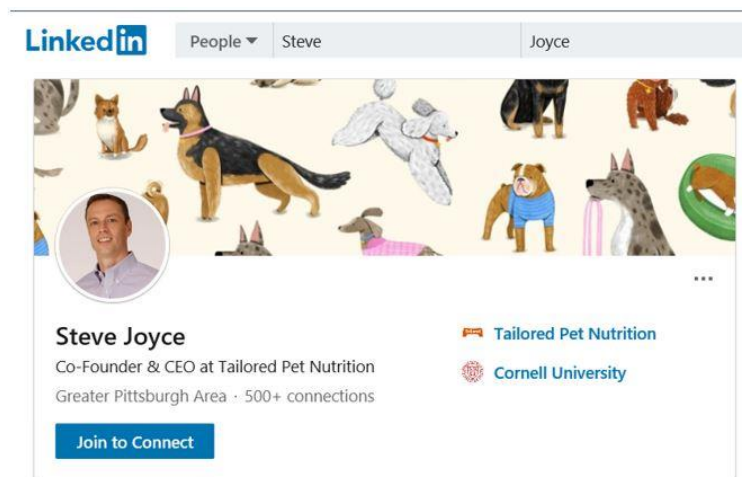
In 2018, the Orville, Ohio-based J. M. Smucker Company bought Ainsworth Pet Nutrition. The Smucker Company was founded in 1897 by Jerome Monroe Smucker and initially focused on making and selling apple butter. Then Smucker's added other fruit spreads and jellies. In more recent years, Smucker's has expanded by purchasing popular brands. In 2003, Smucker's doubled in size with the purchase of Jif and Crisco brands and then, in 2009, the company doubled its size again when it added coffees to its brands. In 2016, Smucker's decided to expand into the pet food market, realizing that 70 percent of American homes have pets. In 2018, Smucker's purchased Ainsworth Pet Nutrition being particularly interested in the Nutrish brand. By 2019, Smucker's was operating more than 20 manufacturing facilities in the U.S. and Canada. Smucker's has three Pennsylvania plants, the former Ainsworth plant in Meadville, another in New Bethlehem, and another in Bloomsburg. In 2019, it had more than 7,000 employees and its annual sales topped \$7.8 billion (Myers, *Erie Times-News*, 8/11/2019).

At the time of the sale, the Ainsworth plant in Meadville was producing 200,000 tons of pet food annually. Along with the processing plant, Smucker's acquired the Ainsworth-owned brands including the much-desired Rachel Ray Nutrish pet foods

and added them to Smucker's pet food products, which includes Milk-Bone, Kibbles n'bits, Natural Balance, 9lives and Meow Mix.

Smucker's immediately invested \$5 million to expand raw materials storage capacity at the Meadville plant and another \$4 million that includes a \$1.3 million state grant to reconfigure the sidings and rail facilities. However, the changes were not all good for the Meadville community. Smucker's no longer needed the Ainsworth headquarters, the old Meadville municipal building rented from the city of Meadville, since the administrative headquarters of Smucker's is based in Orville, Ohio. Most distressing was the reduction of administrative staff at the Meadville plant, staff that was replaced by the existing Orville, Ohio administration. Though production jobs remained at around 300, approximately 70 of the Ainsworth employees, largely in administration, lost their jobs (Myers, *Erie Times-News*, 8/11/2019).

Then, on May 19, 2020, Tailored Pet Nutrition sales went live online at www.tailoredpet.com. Tailored Pet Nutrition is a whole new way of providing pet food to customers. It is a business that has jumped to the 21st century taking advantage of the internet and the changing purchasing habits of Americans. Tailored Pet Nutrition is an Allegheny County-based company, located outside of Meadville not far from the old Ainsworth Pet Nutrition site. Tailored customers complete an online "quiz" about their pet that is then used by Tailored to determine the ingredients most suited for your animal: dog, cat or other furry being. Tailored Pet Nutrition then customizes the food and ships it to the customer. Ingredients may include chicken, salmon and other proteins and locally grown farm products, such as sweet potatoes, squash, lentils, and peas. The final product is guaranteed to be delectable and healthy for your pet (Myers, *Erie Times-News*, 6/7/20).



This is where pluck, resilience, and willingness to take a risk made the difference. Tailored Pet Nutrition was founded by some of those administrators who made Ainsworth Pet Nutrition in Meadville so successful that it became a billion-dollar company. Tailored Pet Nutrition co-founder and chief executive is Steve Joyce, the former vice president of marketing for Ainsworth. In addition, other former Ainsworth administrative officials joined the new Tailored Pet Nutrition team. But even gung-ho entrepreneurs with pertinent experience, creative insight and willingness to take a risk need some help. The Economic Progress Alliance of Crawford County was there to give a helping hand. It provided the new start-up funds and space at the Crawford Business Park.

Just as George Ainsworth Lang recognized the need and saw the opportunity in the height of the Depression to produce wholesome, inexpensive dog food, pet food tailored to your pet's need and sent to your home fits the model of the 21st century emerging world. As Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg once noted, "In a world that is changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks."

Photos:

George Ainsworth Lang: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/george-lang-obituary?pid=143967898>

Dad's Dog Food: <https://www.dadspetfoods.com/about-us>

Peak Food: <https://www.amazon.com/Rachael-Ray-Nutrish-Northern-Woodlands/dp/B06WGM3W6K>

Dad's Cat Food: <https://majalahka.com/>

Smucker's Plant: <https://www.jmsmucker.com/smucker-cafe-store>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***Judy Lynch, Ph.D.**, is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.*

