

# Fred Wolferman

Owner, Wolferman's Gourmet Grocery  
1870-1955

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by Daniel Coleman

As a young man, Fred Wolferman struggled to maintain his interest in the grocery business, having dreamed from an early age of becoming a doctor. He later recollected a game in which he and the store's first clerk fought boredom by perfecting the art of catching a cranberry, tossed from across the store, in their open mouths. Wolferman's company which has defined "good things to eat" for several generations of Kansas Citians, however, grew from a father-son (and, literally, one horse) operation at its founding in 1888 into an employer of over 500 at eight area stores and restaurants by the 1960s.

German native Louis Wolferman, Fred's father, had come to Kansas City from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Fred was born on September 13, 1870. The elder Wolferman, whose vinegar plant hardly paid the bills, mortgaged his family's modest home at 1521 Charlotte to purchase the stock of a foundering grocery store for \$750.00. Fred Wolferman shelved his dreams of a career in medicine or law at age 17 when he realized how badly his father needed assistance in the venture.

The first Wolferman's, located at 9th and Oak, was a one-story, rented space in which canned goods and freshly ground coffee were sold. Wolferman learned hard lessons by experience; for instance, he was thrilled on the first day open to sell many cans of peaches at 15 cents apiece, only to learn later that each cost 25 cents to restock. The work was long and difficult. Wolferman made early market rounds each morning, then visited customers in person to take orders. After returning to the store to fill the orders, his dependable horse, Fanny, helped him make deliveries.

Wolferman's moved to 1108 Walnut in 1895. Business grew steadily and the store added a delicatessen, bakery, candy shop, and liquor department. Wolferman continued to learn from embarrassing mistakes, such as the two young lambs he tied in front of the store one year to advertise spring lamb for Easter meals, whose cuteness discouraged customers from purchasing the featured meat.



In 1908 he purchased a farm near today's 97th and Holmes Road, from which he supplied the store with fresh milk, butter, eggs, turkeys, and chickens. The company's own production of so much of what it sold earned Wolferman's a reputation for quality. Sausage, bread, salad dressing, candy, roasted coffee, and, most famously, English muffins: all were made in-house to Fred Wolferman's own tastes and specifications.

After a 1909 fire, Wolferman rebuilt at 11th and Walnut, incorporating an elegant staircase, indoor balcony, and the Tiffin Room, where customers enjoyed the store's own blended teas. Wolferman's became a centerpiece of Kansas City's vibrant downtown shopping area. New locations anticipated southern suburbs: a store at 59th and Brookside Boulevard opened next to a cornfield in 1912, followed by a Plaza restaurant and several Midtown satellites.

When Wolferman was not developing a new treat (or ensuring its quality by personal taste-testing), he lived the life of an avid sportsman. A fan of basketball in its earliest days, he also traveled to view celebrated prize fights and horse races and enjoyed duck hunting well into his 70s. He died at 85 on October 2, 1955.

Under the management of his sons, Wolferman's continued to satisfy epicurean Kansas Citians, while greatly expanding its specialty gift and mail-order business. In recent years, the company has operated under the banner of Sara Lee, Williams Foods, and Harry & David, and Wolferman's English muffins, which owe their luxurious size to the tuna cans in which Fred Wolferman first shaped them in 1910, remain popular.

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