

Patrick F. Taylor Foundation Object Project

Fact Sheet

Refrigerators=Happiness

Focusing on everyday things that changed everything, “Object Project” will use common objects and uncommon display techniques to encourage visitors of all ages to discover fascinating stories behind objects and the role of innovation in American history. “Object Project” will use more than 250 objects related to and including bicycles, refrigerators, ready-to-wear clothing and a variety of household conveniences to explore how people, innovative things and social change shaped life as we know it. The 4,000 square foot “Object Project” is divided into four sections: Bicycles, Refrigerators, Ready-to-Wear Clothes and Household Hits. Details on the Refrigerator section are below:

Refrigerators=Happiness

Until the 1930s, most households used large blocks of melting ice to keep food cold in “iceboxes.” Some families chilled food only seasonally, taking advantage of cold temperatures by keeping perishables in the cellar, on the porch, or in window box refrigerators. But in the 1930s, Americans began to think differently about what they ate (informed by new findings in “scientific nutrition” and food safety) and how they spent their time (in light of new opportunities for both work and recreation outside the home). They increasingly gave up their unreliable iceboxes for newly affordable electric refrigerators; by 1940, 64% of American households had one.



By the 1960s, Americans were buying ever-larger refrigerators with spacious freezers. And they were filling their freezers not just with frozen vegetables, fruits and meats (marketed as “better than fresh”), but with frozen *prepared* foods: “easy on mom” frozen dinners, “pepped up” boil-in-bag vegetables, and an ever increasing selection of luxurious frozen entrees and side dishes that, according to a 1967 advertisement, “even the best cooks serve.”

HIGHLIGHTED OBJECTS

• Ice cube tray, 1930s

“Object Project” features an ice cube tray embossed with instructions for how to use it. Americans were used to having ice at home—in large, messy blocks used to chill an icebox. But in the 1930s and 1940s, as more Americans purchased electric refrigerators, they began to see ice not as a burdensome necessity, but as a delightful novelty. “The use of ice-cooled beverages is becoming constantly more popular,” noted a refrigerator salesman’s manual in 1928. “This calls for . . . ice of suitable size for cooling drinks.”

• Goldman shopping cart, 1937

“Object Project” features an example of the earliest grocery cart. Because refrigerators kept food safe for longer periods, shoppers could make less frequent trips to the grocery store—a welcome time saver when more than 11 million women worked outside the home and “the average woman” was, according to a 1932 household manual, a “busy woman nowadays.” But that required buying more food each time. Sylvan

Goldman of the Standard Grocery chain in Oklahoma City enabled a change in shopping habits—and increased his sales—by introducing the first grocery carts in 1937.

- **Leftover dishes, 1930s**

“Object Project” features covered glass dishes meant especially for storing leftover food. “Leftovers” as a term originated in the late 1890s. Food conservation campaigns during World War I urged their use, but not until the Great Depression in the 1930s did leftovers become a household obsession—a trend that continued during World War II. “Leftovers are valuable,” counseled the writer of a refrigerator owner’s manual; “Don’t waste them.”

- **TV dinner trays, 1950s**

“Object Project” features first generation three-compartment Swanson TV dinner trays; in 1960, the company added a fourth compartment. By the mid-1960s, the market for frozen prepared foods was booming. Among the categories leading the boom were what the frozen food industry classified as “nationality” foods: Italian (\$100 million in 1967), Chinese (\$30 million) and Mexican and Tex-Mex (\$25 million).

- **Pretty Maid toy kitchen, 1950s**

In the 1950s and 1960s advertisers and retailers idealized the kitchen as the housewife’s realm, a symbol of fulfilling domesticity. Toy kitchens—complete with the latest style of refrigerator freezers—fostered pretend-based play that reinforced expected gender roles for girls—and introduced them to the culture of consumption. The toys had all the up-to-date, desire-inducing features of the real things.

- **Food stamps, early 1970s**

“Object Project” features food coupons from the early 1970s. In the 1950s and 1960s, the nation enjoyed an unprecedented abundance of food; nevertheless, many Americans went hungry. The Food Stamp Act of 1964 promised “a fuller and more effective use of food abundances,” but hunger remained an obstinate problem—and how to solve it, a source of ongoing political debate.

ACTIVITIES

- **What’s in the Fridge?: 1930s**

Visitors can delve into the contents of a 1930s refrigerator to explore what Americans were eating—and why. This interactive activity is set into an actual General Electric “monitor top” refrigerator that shows shelves filled with milk bottles, fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, an elaborately garnished congealed ham salad, and leftover peas. Turning graphic panels reveal a wide variety of historical materials that range from advertisements, to cookbooks, to food safety and nutrition materials.

- **What's in the Fridge?: 1960s**

Visitors can explore American foods and related social issues of the 1960s. This interactive activity set into a 1967 Admiral duplex refrigerator shows shelves brimming with frozen vegetables and prepared frozen foods, milk, meat, an iceberg lettuce salad, parfaits, and national brand soft drinks. Turning graphic panels explore topics such as the green revolution in agriculture, hunger in a land of plenty, and the early recognition of the African American market by frozen food manufacturers.

- **Refrigerator Magnets**

Visitors can explore early versions of familiar prepared convenience foods that have long histories; for example, the Kraft macaroni and cheese dinner that was introduced in 1937.

OTHER FEATURES

- **Video: Introducing the Refrigerator, 1930s/Celebrating the Freezer, 1960s**

Entertaining excerpts from promotional shorts, classroom films, and television ads—even Hollywood feature films—show how manufacturers pitched their products (General Electric was one of the first companies to have a product placement agreement with Warner Bros. many of whose films in the 1930s prominently featured GE's monitor top refrigerators). Clips are projected on the top of a classic kitchen table. The video production was made possible by History Channel.

- **Object Story Boards**

Within the "Object Project" are unique "gallery boards" that use advertisements, historical photographs, and intriguing primary source materials to encourage visitors to actively explore the history behind selected objects on view. Among the stories that will be available in this section: *Before the refrigerator got its hum* (ice tongs); *Every minute counts!* (kitchen clocks); *What's cooking?* (TV dinner trays); *An innovation in shopping!* (grocery cart); *Hunger in a land of plenty* (food stamps); *Sparkling delights* (ice cube tray); *Drink up!* (milk bottles); *Use it Up!* (leftover dishes); *Serious partying* (Tupperware).

- **Cookbooks**

Visitors can flip through authentic cookbooks from the 1930s to the 1990s to see what Americans were eating.

- **Hands-on Cart**

In facilitated activities, visitors will be able to handle authentic objects used for making and celebrating ice cubes and piece together the stories they hold.