

Abplanalp -- Tycoon of Aerosol Spray

New York

A banana split awaits the crowning touch. One squirt of the aerosol can and out comes whipped cream.

A Pekingese snaps at the mailman. One squirt, and the dog is subdued with aerosol spray. Subway cars are spattered with graffiti, written with aerosol paint.

And so it goes in the world of the aerosol process — the suspension of fine solids or liquid particles in gas — hair sprays and shaving cream, deodorizers, sun lotion, even aerosol air.

From a slow start after World War II in "bug bombs" that rarely worked, the aerosol industry has grown to such magnitude today that sales are rapidly approaching \$3 billion a year.

Right now, 300 different products battle for shelf space and unsung chemists search for new formulations to add to the ever-widening list.

INVENTOR

The man that made it all possible is Robert H. Abplanalp, a college dropout who is widely credited with making an aerosol valve that really worked at a price no one could refuse.

"I don't want to compare him with Henry Ford, but in a way the comparison is valid," an admirer of Abplanalp said of him the other day.

"You've got to give him credit," a competitor observed. "He's made more money than the rest of us."

"Nobody gave it to him, though," he added. "He got it by working his tail off."

"He's a genius when it comes to engineering," a third acquaintance said. "He made the first good valve."

A millionaire at least a hundred times over, a recognized inventor, a modern Horatio Alger hero, Abplanalp was once practically an unknown outside his own circle.

KNOWN

Even today he is known not as "the father of modern aerosols," as he would like to be known, but as one of President Nixon's closest friends and the man who lent the President more than \$1 million dollars to buy and fix up his estate in San Clemente, Calif.

Abplanalp is also president, chairman, chief executive and sole owner of the Precision Valve Corp., a company that makes half the valves used in the aerosol business today.

He first met the future President early in 1961, a few months after Mr. Nixon lost the presidential election to John F. Kennedy by a thin margin.

He simply wrote Mr. Nixon a letter saying he was a strong supporter and would like to meet him.

When they met a short time later at Mr. Nixon's home, Abplanalp told Mr. Nixon that he would be glad to be of service.

FIRM

By the time Mr. Nixon lost his race in 1962 for the governorship of California, Abplanalp had retained the California law firm Mr. Nixon had joined.

When Mr. Nixon joined a prominent New York law firm — known today as Mudge, Rose, Guthrie & Alexander, but which once began with Mr. Nixon's name and ended with that of former attorney general John N. Mitchell — Abplanalp moved his legal business, too. When Mr. Nixon left the firm, so did Precision Valve.

Abplanalp's office in Yonkers has four framed photographs taken of himself with Mr. Nixon and a fifth with the President, Mrs. Nixon

and Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, another of Mr. Nixon's friends.

A resident of Bronxville, N.Y., Abplanalp and his wife, Josephine, have been hosts to both Mr. and Mrs. Nixon.

A well-to-do executive, Abplanalp has a swimming pool, a new white Cadillac every year and an unlisted phone, but no servants at the moment.

Abplanalp is normally a very private person, and the unwanted publicity he has because of his friendship with Mr. Nixon has estranged him from the media.

As the sole owner of a private company, he is not required to make his financial statement public.

PROBE

Two years ago, Abplanalp was faced with the possibility of having to disclose something more substantive of the company's operations.

At the time, the New York office of the Justice Department's Antitrust Division recommended an investigation of Precision Valve's pricing practices.

Justice Department files, however, indicate that the proposed investigation was called off by Walker B. Comegys, deputy to Richard W. McLaren, the head of the Antitrust Division at the time.

Barry Grossman, assistant chief of the division's evaluation section, the only official involved in the case who would comment on it, said he was unaware of any outside pressure to stop the investigation. He said the investigation was not undertaken because it could not be justified.

A spokesman for Precision Valve said that the company knew nothing of the government investigation.

VALVES

Precision Valve, which was started in 1949, today employs 800 people in plants in Yonkers and Chicago. It turns out one billion valves a year.

Valves account for only part of the company's \$60 million in sales in the United States. Other aerosol parts and special services for customers account for the balance.

The company's sales from ten foreign plants are believed to be at least as large.

The aerosol industry has not been without its problems. Last year, one of Ralph Nader's study groups charged that the makers of aerosol cans were creating explosive devices. An industry group responded that most cases of exploding cans were due to carelessness or misuse.

Last October, the New York City Council passed an anti-graffiti bill specifically barring anyone from carrying an aerosol paint can into public buildings.

PRODUCT

The typical aerosol product consists of a can (under less pressure than a soft drink, according to the Chemical Specialties Manufacturers Association), a valve assembly, a propellant and the product itself.

Propellants in use today include nitrogen, nitrous oxide and several trademarked fluorocarbons, such as Freon.

Although aerosol products work differently, depending on whether they come out of the can as a foam, spray, mist, droplets or a stream, the most popular — a hair spray — calls for both the product and the propellant to go into the can under pressure.

When the valve button is pushed, both come out together. The propellant quickly turns to vapor and in turn breaks up the hair spray into tiny droplets.

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