

NECCO Company History

THE CONTINUING SWEET SUCCESS OF AMERICA'S FAVORITE NOSTALGIC VALENTINE'S CANDY

Whether you're 9 or 90, odds are you've received Sweethearts® Conversation Hearts on Valentine's Day. After all, there are plenty of the much-loved Sweethearts Conversation Hearts to go around, as New England Confectionery Company (NECCO), America's oldest multi-line candy company, turns out 8 billion of the sweet treats each Valentine's Day season.

If you are, in fact, a nonagenarian, the colorful hearts were probably as much a part of your childhood as they are for today's kids, since they met with instant success when first manufactured in 1902. While many of the 100-plus ways of saying "I love you" featured on the hearts have changed, especially during the '90s, the candy's formula and the way they are produced at NECCO, remain virtually the same.

"Many of our products have deep historical roots," said NECCO president Domenic M. Antonellis. "One of the ways we preserve the same quality Valentine's Day taste treat Americans have enjoyed throughout this century is by not tampering with what works."

Nothing brings back feelings of nostalgia like candy. Adults love to recapture the pleasures of their youth, and what better way to relive good old times, than with their favorite candies. Sweethearts Conversation Hearts have been passed down from generation to generation, and that is the secret to their success.

How a Candy Icon Got Started

The concept of Sweethearts Conversation "Motto" Hearts dates back to the late 1800's when printed sayings on colored paper were placed in "Cockles," small crisp candies formed in the shape of a scalloped shell. In 1866, Daniel Chase, brother of Oliver Chase, who founded NECCO in 1847, invented the process, which allows the sayings to be printed directly on the candy.

The modern Sweethearts Conversation Hearts, which has become an American icon, dates back to the early 1900's. Cut in various shapes, such as postcards, baseballs or horseshoes and embossed with curlicues, the original hearts had room for much longer sayings, enabling would-be lovers to send messages such as "Please send a lock of your hair by return mail," or "How long shall I have to wait? Pray be considerate."

"Today's sayings have to be short and to the point," said Lory Zimbalatti, NECCO marketing manager. Some of the original sayings still used today include "Be Mine," "Be Good," "Be True," "My Man," "Kiss Me," and "Sweet Talk."

In the early 1990's NECCO decided to add new sayings each year. Hundreds of suggestions are compiled all year long from romantics, candy lovers and school kids around the globe. "People have a genuine interest in the heart sayings and look forward to each year's new introductions," said Zimbalatti. "Some old-school romantics have been slow to embrace the new sayings but on the whole, our fans welcome the updates."

One thing Sweetheart lovers can count on each year is the candy's simple formula. Since the hearts inception, the recipe has remained basically unchanged. Both Sweethearts Conversation Hearts and the familiar NECCO wafers use the same batter: 90% sugar, a dash each of corn syrup, gelatin, gums and artificial colors and flavorings. The company uses approximately 20 million pounds of sugar per year to make the two candies. Once the dough is rolled out, imprinted with a saying and then stamped out in the familiar heart-shape, it goes through a 45-minute drying cycle to reach its semi-hard consistency.

To meet demand for its Sweethearts Conversation Hearts, NECCO produces approximately 8 billion throughout the year. The entire production – roughly 100,000 pounds a day – sells out in just six weeks. Plants in Louisiana and Wisconsin supplement the candies made at the Revere, Mass. plant.