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THE IMMIGRANT EDGE

Reshma Memon Yaqub

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Special Report

Backstory: Radio Flyer

How immigrant Antonio Pasin created the little red wagon that became an icon of the American childhood--and how his grandson is taking the company to the next level.



The 25 Most Audacious Companies

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The Classic: Radio Flyer has sold millions of these steel wagons. It even trademarked the shape.

Courtesy Company



It's hard to imagine a 1950s suburb without a little red wagon on the corner, filled with a pile of kids who would mentally transform it into a spaceship or stagecoach. Radio Flyer, based in Chicago, has sold more than 100 million wagons since its founding nearly a century ago. These little wagons were the creation of Antonio Pasin, who came to the U.S. from Italy in 1914, at 16. Pasin, the son of a cabinetmaker, settled in Chicago and started a business building cabinets for phonographs. But the wooden wagon he built to cart around his tools proved to be his most popular creation. Customers kept requesting one for their children.

Pasin named his new business Liberty Coaster, after the Statue of Liberty. After receiving a big wholesale order for 7,000 wagons, Pasin opened a factory in Chicago and began making the wagons from steel. He used techniques--and scrap metal--from the booming auto industry.

He named his first steel wagon Radio Flyer, in homage to the newly invented radio and the dawn of air travel. Never mind that those words had nothing to do with wagons. "They were simply buzzwords of the day," says Antonio's grandson Robert Pasin, who now runs the company. Had Antonio been naming the wagon today, muses Robert, he may have called it Cloud Computer. The wagons came in many colors, but red always sold the best.

Even as the company grew, the poor immigrant boy in Antonio still felt desperate to prove his worth, says Robert. In the midst of the Depression--and against the advice of nearly everyone he knew--Antonio took out a \$30,000 loan, risking his business and his family's security on a publicity stunt at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. "Grandma said it was the only time she ever saw him really stressed and unable to sleep," recalls Robert. Antonio commissioned Coaster Boy, a 45-foot-tall art-deco statue of a boy riding a wagon. Beneath Coaster Boy was a shop that sold mini souvenir wagons for 25 cents. Fortunately for Antonio, the souvenir sales generated enough cash to repay the loan and enough buzz to make his company a household (or at least a sidewalk) name.

Sales of children's wagons grew along with the baby boom. When Antonio was in his 70s, his son Mario Pasin took over and renamed the company Radio Flyer. In an attempt to broaden the company's customer base, Mario launched a line of wheelbarrows, garden carts, and outdoor furniture for adults; many of these products were sold under private labels such as Sears Craftsman. He handed the business to his own son, Robert, in 1997. Since then, Robert Pasin has tried to pull Radio Flyer into modern times. He has introduced new products, including scooters, tricycles, and training bikes. Now, customers can design their wagons online, tricking them out with canopies, padded seats, and engraving. Robert built his own Coaster Boy of sorts--a 15,000-pound replica of the original Radio Flyer that sits outside the Chicago headquarters. He also closed the Chicago factory and outsourced production, in 2004. Last year, Radio Flyer's sales hit \$76 million.

Antonio died in 1990, at 93. His now-104-year-old widow, Anna, still lives in their suburban Chicago home. A little red wagon sits on her porch.

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