mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “How did cotton candy get its name?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! I have here in front of me what might be the saddest piece of cotton candy I've ever seen in my life. It came from a package, so it's all squished and it's not very fresh. It's not like what you'd find if you go to a carnival, you know, next to the Ferris wheel and all the games. You've probably seen someone making fresh cotton candy.

Well, someone named Noah has a question about cotton candy. Let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Noah!
- I have a question for you. How did cotton candy get its name?
- That's a great question.

Before I say anything more, how do you think cotton candy got its name?

Now would be a good time to pause the video and discuss.

Okay. You ready?

It's amazing to watch cotton candy being made. They twirl a stick over a machine that's shooting out these long, thin threads made of sugar. As they spin the handle, it builds up into this puffy,

cloud-like dessert. But who invented such a thing? Well, would it surprise you if I told you that dentists had something to do with it?

You see, cotton candy hasn't always been something that every person could enjoy. It used to be that only people who were very rich could afford it. A long time ago, in the country of Italy, chefs would heat sugar into long threads they called spun sugar, and then they'd weave those threads together into sculptures that they'd make for dessert. It was expensive and it took a long time to do. The people who got to eat it loved it, but it cost too much for almost everybody else.

A person named William Morrison thought he could come up with a way to make this treat more easily. Now it just so happens that he was a dentist. You might be wondering, "Why on earth would a dentist want to make treats made of pure sugar?" Maybe you've heard the idea that too much sugar causes cavities. But at that time, it wasn't known that sugar was bad for your teeth. So it was just a coincidence. William Morrison just happened to be a dentist who was also interested in inventing things.

He teamed up with a candy maker and they invented a machine that could make sugar threads more easily and quickly. And so that made it a lot cheaper for them to sell. They brought their new invention to a large celebration called the World's Fair, which that year was taking place in St. Louis, in the United States. They set up their machine and they gave this sugary treat a new name. They called it fairy floss, and it was all yours for the cost of just 25 cents per box.

And it was a huge hit. In fact, their fairy floss was so popular that other people wanted to start making it, too. There was a race to make even better machines, and one of those competitors was yet another dentist. His name was Joseph Lascaux. He was a dentist from New Orleans,

and not only would he make this stuff, but he'd also sell it to his patients. Imagine leaving your dentist's office with a new toothbrush and a huge clump of sugar on a stick!

Now Joseph Lascaux was the one who called it cotton candy. He thought that was a good name since to him it looked like a big ball of cotton. In the United States, that name stuck and that's what Americans call it today. However, that name didn't spread everywhere.

Cotton candy is still known as fairy floss in Australia. And in the UK, New Zealand, and Ireland, they call it candy floss. And then my personal favorite—in France, they call it, la barbe à papa, which translates to papa's beard. Food names have a certain way of changing from place to place, but cotton candy has grown beyond its name.

Today, there are cotton candy eating contests. In the *Guinness Book of World Records*, they record a single treat made of cotton candy that was almost a mile long. And on YouTube, you can find videos of people spinning cotton candy while doing some pretty amazing dance moves.

So in summary, whether you call it candy floss, fairy floss, papa's beard, or cotton candy just remember, when you eat it that you have dentists to thank!

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Noah, for asking it!