

## POUND PUPPIES

POUND PUPPIES was a popular toy line introduced in 1984 and would later inspire an animated TV special, two animated TV series, and a feature film. Since its introduction, POUND PUPPIES have generated over \$1 billion of retail sales. POUND PUPPIES and POUND PURRIES sold over 200 million units worldwide.



The POUND PUPPIES property was created by Mike Bowling who, at the time, was an 18-year Ford assembly line employee. The pay was good, he had seniority and medical benefits but, unfortunately, he disliked his job. While driving with his young daughter, he became fascinated at how attached she was to her doll. She took it everywhere. To her, it was real. Bowling began thinking about the strength of that attachment, comparing it to that of a person and pet and the idea for POUND PUPPIES was born.

There were plenty of plush dogs in the marketplace at the time. What he did with POUND PUPPIES was to create their own identity within the category. Marketing and the name were what it was all about. They were POUND PUPPIES, so they came from a specific place! They did not have an identity, though, until the child picked it out, brought it home, and then determined the pet's sex, name, and personality, usually mirroring their personalities.

Even if you had two identical white, long-eared POUND PUPPIES on the shelf, a boy could come up and pick it and call it Spike, and a girl could pick it and call it Susie. Other companies wanted to create breed-specific dogs and give them a name. Bowling felt that you could not do that and succeed.

Bowling had no money, no experience, and no directional map to success. He hired a patent attorney and toy consultant. "You can't sell an idea," Bowling said, "but you can sell a patent, a copyright, and a trademark."

He found craftspeople to create a professional prototype based on a floppy-eared stuffed dog. Its design featured forlorn, expressive eyes and promoted holding and hugging the puppy. (Loveable! Huggable!) Bowling created original handmade POUND PUPPIES which he sold to fellow workers at the Ford plant. He signed them and told his fellow workers they would be worth a lot someday when POUND PUPPIES became a huge success.

Even with a professionally crafted toy with packaging that looked like a dog carrier from the pound, the idea was rejected by 14 toy companies. Most of the toy companies that turned Bowling

down did so strictly as a marketing decision. They were not looking for a plush toy that year. They might have already had a plush toy they were ready to introduce.

Mike's favorite story of rejection was when he presented POUND PUPPIES to the president of Ideal Toys at their offices in New York City. Bob Steiner, Mike's agent consultant, arranged the presentation, stating he had given the gentleman they were meeting his first job in the toy industry. Subsequently, the man shot up quickly as a star in the industry, becoming president of Ideal Toy. So, because of Bob Steiner's relationship, he told Mike, "We have a great "in" for this presentation!"

Mike shares it this way, "We had a one-on-one presentation in the Ideal conference room. Once the presentation was over, he looked at me and said, "That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen ... it looks like its squatting to pee!" Then he said he had a meeting to go to and walked out! I looked at Bob and said, "I am sure glad you had an 'in' with this guy!!"

Bowling was persistent and determined from the start to succeed, even if he had to make some handmade toys himself and build them slowly to become a craze. He knew about the CABBAGE PATCH success which was a craze before it hit the toy market. It was slow-rolling and kept going and going. Had all the toy companies turned him down, Mike said, "I would have made my own and built it that way."

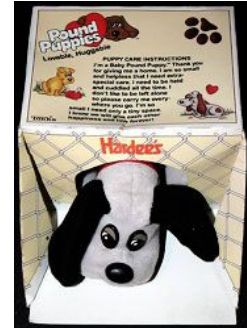
Irwin Toys from Canada were the first to say yes and acquired the licensing rights in 1984.

Bowling said he never worried about being able to make a living. While employed at Ford, he collected his weekly paycheck plus benefits. Very few people are willing to pursue their ideas and dreams because they are reluctant to risk losing their comfort and security for a dream that could fail. But Bowling had the courage of his convictions and truly believed in himself. What makes this story particularly interesting and his choice even more poignant is that at the time Bowling had a child with cerebral palsy. Leaving Ford with decent pay, a health insurance program, and other strong benefits to journey out on his own with POUND PUPPIES could not have been an easy decision. Trading security for something as risky as launching a new toy product was difficult, but Bowling saw POUND PUPPIES as an opportunity to succeed, get out of the factory, and be able to take care of his daughter in any way, shape, or form. It has proven to be true.

After it finally reached the marketplace, Bowling recalls that he went to Canada for a business meeting. On his return, while waiting at the airport, he found himself sitting across from a little girl with a POUND PUPPY—the first one he had ever seen in the marketplace. He said that he sat quietly

watching her hug on it and beamed, knowing that his struggle to take his idea to market was truly worthwhile.

Things exploded in 1985 when Tonka, wanting to expand its brand past toy trucks, licensed the U.S. rights. By that time, Bowling was \$85,000 in debt. With the \$100,000 advance from Tonka, one of the greatest joys of his new career was depositing that first check and paying back every one of his creditors. In 1985, Tonka sold more than 2.5 million puppies, leading to an animated TV series based on the characters. POUND PUPPIES made Time magazine's "All-Time 100 Greatest Toys" list. One of the unique features of the property was that it was the first truly unisex toy. Bowling said girls make up 60% of the sales and boys the other 40%.



POUND PUPPIES was a hot promotional property. In 1987, in four weeks before Christmas, Hardee's restaurants offered a series of four different POUND PUPPIES to purchase with their children's meals. They did this promotion for two years and sold 28 million in a total of eight weeks! This was followed up with other successful promotions with Pizza Hut, Dairy Queen, and Long John Silver's.

A TV special based on the toy line was released in October 1985 by Hanna-Barbera which ran in syndication, and a videotape line was released in 1986 by Family Home Entertainment. A POUND PUPPIES television series was broadcast on ABC from 1986 until 1989. A second television series produced by Hasbro Studios premiered on the Hub Network (now Discovery Family) in 2010.



In 1988, TriStar Pictures released a POUND PUPPIES movie entitled *POUND PUPPIES and the Legend of Big Paw*.

The POUND PUPPIES toy line continued to be popular through 2002 when it was discontinued, only to be revived in 2014 by Funrise. In 2019, a new line of POUND PUPPIES was introduced by Basic Fun which went back to their original design. They have proven once again to be a big hit!

One of the biggest rewards for Bowling is the many, many, many stories he has heard throughout the years involving POUND PUPPIES. People love sharing their personal stories of how POUND PUPPIES were such an important part of their childhood. One man told him that he was driving his family home from a vacation out west when his daughter realized she had forgotten her POUND PUPPY at the last hotel they had stayed in. The daughter said, "You have to go back and get my POUND PUPPY!" He offered to buy her a new one, but she said, "No! You can't leave my POUND PUPPY behind!" So, he had to turn

around and drive two hours back to the hotel to retrieve her POUND PUPPY. That is how much it meant to her!