

Dairying in Colebrook

Cattle came to the new world with each arriving ship from Europe. The predominant breed of English cattle was the Devon, a sturdy, dark red and white-coated bovine. It is still possible to see samples of this hair around here. Plasterers used to use cow hair as a binder, so when an old house is being renovated, look at the plaster debris, and you will in all probability see dark red hair. Something to bear in mind when doing this, however, is to observe the lath upon which the plaster was seated. Early in the nineteenth century lumber mills around here began to manufacture individual lath strips, which were packaged in bundles of 100 and sold. Prior to that, the builder would take thin strips of lumber, some of which might not have been more than two feet long, and by the use of a hatchet, alternately split one end and then the other, nailing each end as they did so. This created an accordion pleat effect, which could more than double the width of the original board, at the same time creating cracks and crevasses for the plaster to adhere to. There was a transition period during the 1820s and 1830s when both methods were employed, but the cost factor soon eliminated the old hand-made method.

We have found in a book entitled Rural Life in Litchfield County, written by Charles Shepard Phelps and published by The Litchfield County University Club, Norfolk, Connecticut, in 1917, which best sums up farming procedures of the nineteenth century. Some excerpts from this follow:

“Dairying was the chief branch of farming throughout the county. Up to about 1880, the making of cheese in factories and the home production of butter and cheese were the chief branches of dairying, even 10 nor 15 years later, with the exception of farms near railroads, cheese was an important dairy product in the county. Co-operative creameries were started about 1880 and these, within a few years, almost entirely supplanted the cheese factories and home manufacture of cheese and butter. From 1880-1895 co-operative creameries increased in the state from less than half a dozen to over sixty. Starting about 1900, there began a constant decline in butter making and a constant increase in the shipping of milk.

Changes also occurred in the type of cattle in Litchfield County. The opening of the American west made Connecticut no longer competitive in raising beef and sheep, so the farmers switched to the purely dairy type of cattle.

Prior to 1870 the shorthorn and Devon breeds were prominent in Litchfield County, but with the lack of profit in beef, and with cheaper horse labor, these breeds no longer filled the requirements of our local farms.

Jersey cattle were introduced in 1851, but it was not until about 1865-1870 that this breed and the similar Guernsey began to be noticed in the annals of state agriculture reports. Milk shipped to the New York market was for many years ungraded, meaning that the butter fat content percentage was not established, although local laws had established 4% for milk sold within the boundaries of the state.

Cattle breeds such as Jersey, Guernsey and Ashshires produce high quality medium quantity milk, but with the large New York market right on our doorstep, the fact that no butterfat minimums had been established, set the stage for the introduction of Holstein cattle to the county. In a very short time they became the dominant breed.

Holsteins produce large amounts of milk, but with low butterfat content. Farmers who needed to maintain the 4% butterfat required by law, added a few Guernseys or other high butterfat breeds to their herds.

There used to be a joke that all farmers hereabouts knew that went like this: Two dairy farmers meet. One is a dyed-in-the-wool Guernsey man, who was fully aware of the superior quality and high butterfat of his milk. The other owned nothing but Holsteins, and produced infinitely more pounds of milk per head than any Jersey or Guernsey could ever hope to. Each in his own way felt superior to the other.

“You know”, said the Holstein man, “If you take a twelve quart milk pail out to the barn and place a .50 cent piece on the bottom, then milk your best cow into that pail, and if the milk doesn’t quite cover the .50 cent piece, you know you have a Guernsey”.

“Well”, said the Guernsey man, “you can take that same twelve quart pail and the same .50 cent piece and go out to the barn and milk your best cow into that pail and if you fill it to the brim and can still read the date on the .50 cent piece, you know you have a Holstein”.

Another dairyman’s joke at the expense of Holstein farmers goes like this” A Holstein farmer hires a new man. Soon the time came when the farmer needed to go into town and wouldn’t return in time to feed, so he left these instructions: Each cow gets a fork of hay and a scoop of grain. As an afterthought he said “And give my best milker an extra large scoop of grain”.

When feeding time came around, and all the cows were fed, the hired hand poured an extra large scoop down the well!