

## Dairying in Colebrook

Those of us old enough to remember when there were numerous farms scattered about these hills, remember dairy farms mostly, with an occasional horse farm thrown in for good measure. Cattle came over with the very first colonists, and were not only indispensable to the colonists, but became an element of their economics from the very beginning, supplying butter and cheese to the West Indies trade for Massachusetts Bay Colony. Records indicate that Massachusetts had more than 100 vessels so engaged by 1638. In addition to dairy products, the colony also exported grain, meat (mostly beef and pork), fish, etc.

By 1645, the Connecticut Valley towns of Windsor, Hartford and Wethersfield were shipping thousands of bushels of grain to market. Cattle were driven to Boston in such numbers that the town in 1648 petitioned the general court for permission to have two fairs a year, one for cattle alone.

Prior to 1870, the Shorthorn and Devon breeds were prominent in Litchfield County, but the lack of profit in beef, and with cheaper horse labor displacing oxen; these breeds no longer filled the requirements of our local farms. During the nineteenth century, 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 or 15 years later, with the exception of farms near railroads, cheese was an important dairy product. Co-operative creameries were started about 1880 and these, within a few years, almost entirely supplanted the cheese factories and the home manufacture of cheese and butter. This scenario was enacted perfectly in Colebrook – the Phelps family built a new cheese factory built to the very latest English specifications in 1874. They had no way to foresee that in 5 short years the economics of local dairying would be such that they would have to close the brand new facility and swallow their losses. At the October 1888 town meeting, it was voted on a motion of Reuben Rockwell “that should a creamery be organized as now talked of at Robertsville and erect a building, that the selectmen be instructed to abate any taxes that may be assessed to them for five years”. (Although no such motion was made when Phelps erected his cheese factory- politics, most likely.)

From 1880-1895, co-operative creameries increased in the state from less than half a dozen to over 60. 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 kept 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.

Jersey cattle were introduced in 1851, but it was not until 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. (This has since been reduced to the current 3.5%.) Cattle breeds such as the 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-producing breeds to their herds.

From the very beginning, farms around here tended to be much smaller than the last remaining ones that we remember. One to three cows, a horse and one yoke of oxen was the norm. As the nineteenth century got underway, the turnpike era allowed for greater mobility, and consequently greater productivity of farms, both dairy and produce.

Here are two farms as listed in the Colebrook tax book for the year 1812 that could be considered dairy farms; one small, the other one of the town's largest:

Daniel Deming (Riverton Rd., opposite the new bridge over Sandy Brook.) had 5 cows, 4 two year olds, 2 oxen, 2 horses, 1 one year old colt, 5 acres of plowed land, 15 acres of cleared pasture, 26 acres of bush pasture, 35 acres of wild land (third rate) (this means forest land), and 14 sheep. With 5 cows and 4 young stock, he certainly was producing saleable dairy products, as opposed to the farmer who had only one or two cows, indicating that the output was used on the farm for the family, with any surplus being used for calves or pigs.

Our example of a large dairy farm belonged to Samuel Cowles, Jr. of Colebrook River. Cowles had 2 oxen, 26 cows, 2 horses, 3 acres of plowed land, 50 acres of clear pasture, 45 acres of bush pasture, 30 acres of wild land and 20 sheep.

That year of 1812, there were 152 heads of families in Colebrook who owned 145 oxen, 982 cows plus 187 young stock, 170 horses and 1,867 sheep.

Other dairy farmers having the largest number of cattle were Nathan Bass with 17, Henry Bass with 14, Timothy Babcock 15 (He was the Baptist minister in North Colebrook.), Timothy Baldwin 18, Samuel Eno 21, Edmund Howel 19, Rufus Holmes 26, Harvey Marshall 20, Seth Marshall 22, Roswell Marshall 17, Samuel Mills 15, Arah Phelps 41 (of which 16 were heifers), Reuben Rockwell 20, Martin Rockwell 18 (plus 8 oxen), Daniel & Osborn Stillman (for whom Stillman Hill is named) 20, Robert Stillman (who lived on the farm now owned by George Wilber) 25, Appleton Stillman 25, John Whiting 18, Seth Whiting 16 and Moses Wright (for whom Wright Brook is named) 16.

These 21 farms having a total of 429 head contained 40 some-odd percent of the dairy cattle in Colebrook, the other 95 farms owning at least one cow contained the remaining 740 head, which averages 7.7 head per farm.

All milking prior to the twentieth century, and indeed in some locations not until 1946, when electricity came through, was done by hand. The milk was put into 40 quart milk cans that were picked up by truck once a day, or in the case of the farms located in the Millbrook section, the cans were transported into Winchester and placed in the shed named "Colebrook Station" to be picked up by the train. At strategically located road intersections there used to be found heavy wooden platforms where two or more farms would combine to deposit their 40-quart cans, each having the farm's number painted on it for tallying purposes.

As the smaller farms were phased out, the remaining larger ones obtained holding tanks in a refrigerated milk house that were emptied into tanker trucks to be transported to a central facility for pasteurizing and bottling.

The realities of modern production methods and the economics of our times dictate that our town can no longer compete in the dairying industry.