

The Passing of Colebrook's Dairy Industry

January 2001 marked the end of an industry that has been an integral part of Colebrook's fabric since the 18th century, when George Wilber closed his Beech Hill Farm.

This last dairy farm in Colebrook was a victim of the times; I guess you could say. A successful dairy farmer these days needs a herd of not less than 100 milking head, and needs to rely on feed in the form of hay, silage and grain, most of which must be purchased. The original hill farms in this area were self sufficient, or at least the communities were. Large herds, indeed large anything, didn't exist. Pasteurization hadn't been invented yet, and thus milk couldn't be shipped far. Industrial communities such as Torrington and Waterbury hadn't yet reached the size where a demand for dairy products was sufficient to support dairying. A farm might have 1 to 4 cows and perhaps a bull. The excess milk, butter and cheese was traded or bartered to neighbors in exchange for cider or wheat or work. Cheese and butter were the most durable dairy products, and the breeds of cattle reflected this.

Prior to 1870, the types of cattle kept in Litchfield County were predominately Shorthorn and Devon breeds. These gave fairly small amounts of milk, but had a high butterfat content, and the animal itself provided high quality beef and hides. With the opening of the American west, Connecticut no longer was 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 about 1865-1870 that this breed and the similar Guernsey began to be noticed in the annals of state agricultural reports.

Milk destined for the New York market was for many years unregulated, meaning that the butterfat content was not established, although local laws had established 4% for milk sold within the state. Breeds such as those already mentioned, as well as Brown Swiss and Ayshire, produce high quality and medium quantity milk, and with the huge New York market, with no minimum quality established, sitting right on our doorstep, a change in the type of milk cow occurred. The black and white Holstein, or Frisian, was introduced for this purpose. These are physically large cows with more bones than meat, but their purpose in life is to produce large amounts of milk, although with less butterfat than the state law required. Here is where smaller dairy farmers found a niche in the market. With a relatively small number of cattle, they could produce very high quality milk. When this product was taken from the farm in large tankers to the pasteurizing and packaging plant, it could either be added to (and improve) the Holstein milk, or perhaps sold by itself as a high quality milk.

Today, marketing and transportation technologies, once the ally of the small farmer, now become his enemy. It is more efficient to have several hundred head of milking cattle at one central location in upstate New York, or Wisconsin, where they are closer to the grain and hay supply, and where there are no constraints such as stony fields and narrow, twisty roads, all of which are miles from rail lines and interstate highways.

In the last few years, the cost of maintaining and feeding a small herd of Brown Swiss has steadily increased, and the cost of doing business constantly went up, not the least of which are the taxes. The price of milk products did not increase proportionately, and the end of the twentieth century marked the point where these two factors, if

considered to be graph lines, net and crossed. Colebrook could no longer maintain a dairy herd.

Abandoning a lifestyle must, by its very nature, be a traumatic event, but when animals are involved, it takes on a greater intensity. There is very little understanding of cows among the general population. Horses, we relate to, as well as sheep, but there is a misconception that a cow is an impossibly dumb creature with the personality of a rock. It is simply not so. I grew up on a small farm, and my friends and neighbors included several farmers, some of whom were dairy farmers, and I know otherwise.

The last half-century has seen the passing of several well-run dairy farms in town, here are some I well remember:

Homer Deming's farm in Robertsville was among the best, Homer's breeding lines were among the best in the state; his bulls came directly from the State Agricultural College in Storrs.

Gray's farm on Sandy Brook Road. (Although then it was named School House Road). Purchased in 1893 by Isidore Jasmin, I remember it being operated by his son-in-law Bill Gray, later by his sons.

Godenzi's farm on the Old Colebrook Road near the Winchester town line. Standing in front of Adrian Godenzi's farm and looking south across the town line presented an over view of Bernie Passini's dairy farm. This was the only location that I recall where two farms were adjacent, or nearly so. The Godenzi's had come to this country from Switzerland, so it was appropriate that their cattle were Brown Swiss.

William Lawrence's farm on Pinney Street, now the home of Ellen Fredsall. This farm had been in existence for a long time. When the railroad was put through in 1871, its nearest point to this farm was on the east end of Danbury Quarter Road. It wasn't what you would call a station, as it consisted of a small, three-sided structure made specifically to hold milk cans, but it had a name – two names at various times, actually. One was Colebrook Station; the other was Lawrence Station, attesting to the importance of the farm.

What we refer today to as the Hale Farm at the intersection of Conn. 182 and 183 was considered to have been a good one, which had arguably the most picturesque location. It also had a 33-foot ceramic silo, the only one of its type that remains in town today. Today it belongs to the Colebrook Land Conservancy, and is operated as a research and passive recreational facility.

The farm at the southwest corner of Rt. 183 and Bunnel/Sandy Brook Rd., diagonally across from the Rock School, was owned by Miss Terry and operated by John Lugg. His herd consisted of Jersey cattle.

There were others, but the point is that they are all gone now, and I for one miss them. It marks the end of an era, one less thing that you can relate to from your youth. The Wilber family had to do what economics dictated, but it had to have been the most difficult decision they ever made.