

The History of the Dairy Industry on Mount Desert Island

Upon Abraham Somes arrival on Mount Desert Island in 1761, America had no dairy industry. The colonists brought cattle with them from the very earliest days of settlement. However, cattle were used specifically for beef, milk was only a by-product of beef cattle. Even so, the quality of the beef cattle was very poor and there had been no systematic attempt at breeding to improve the stock.

When the first cow was brought to Mount Desert Island is unknown. However, Abraham Somes and James Richardson, the islands first settlers, most likely brought cattle with them or soon after. Like the rest of the American colonists, the Somes and the Richardson's did not depend on the products of cows to make up a substantial portion of their diet.

In 1796, after the Island had been settled for over 30 years, the town of Bar Harbor could boast of an average of three head of cattle per household. However, there were no herds to speak of and even the biggest land owners had at most 13 head of cattle, and this was very unusual. The only available feed for the cattle was marsh hay and possibly pasturage created after many years of hard work clearing the woods. Very little grain was grown on the island and little could be spared to feed cattle. The cattle of Mount Desert Island in the early years of settlement were most likely not well fed and therefore would have produced poor quality milk.

What little milk the cows produced was available only part of the year. A cow was freshened (given milk because a cow had calved) in the spring and continued to give milk until the calf was weaned in the fall. Too much grain was necessary to keep a cow producing year-round. The milk remaining after the calf had its fill was used for production of cheese and butter. The by-product of butter making, clabbered milk (buttermilk) was sometimes used as a beverage, but most often in cooking. Drinking fresh milk was unusual.

Scientists had believed since the early 18th century that fresh cows milk was a nutritionally complete food and in its purest state very good for humans. Unfortunately, fresh milk was also an ideal breeding place for germs and disease. Raw fresh milk was know to be absolutely deadly in some cases. There was no way to preserve the milk and there was very little understanding of sanitation. Nevertheless, the idea of milk as a nutritionally complete food gained more and more popularity in the first part of the 19th century and in the second half, great interest arose in the sanitation of the milk supply. In the United States, with the population boom in the large cities and the lack of wet nurses, infants who could not be breast-fed were fed cows milk despite the chance of milk being infected by disease. Infant mortality rates among babies fed on cows milk were extremely high, particularly in the cities.

On Mount Desert Island and other rural areas, babies whose mothers could not feed them, were more likely to have a neighboring mother who could feed them or to have access to a safer supply of cows milk, then was available in the cities.

It was not until the advent of the tourist industry on Mount Desert Island that using cows a source of fresh milk was even considered. The visiting rusticators were up on the lates scientific findings, that cows milk was nutritionally complete, but still had grave concerns about the safety of city milk supplies. The city cows, with which they were familiar, were packed into large cow sheds, often attached to breweries where they were fed from the brewers slops. The laborers who milked the cows were often disease ridden and there was no attempt at sanitation in the barns. Rural milk supplies on the other hand were believed to be much safer.

Rusticators visiting Mound Desert Island would have been more inclined to sample the fresh milk of the boarding house cow.

As the tourist industry began to rise on Mount Desert Island the prospect of making a living from the dairy products of cows was encouraging for farmers.

As well, in the mid-nineteenth century the first of the cattle that would become known as the best dairy cows were imported into the United States, the Guernsey, the Jersey and the Holstein. The first report of the registered cattle on MDI came in 1878 when Samuel S. Wasson. A member of the state Board of Agriculture, reported that J.H. Clark of Tremont had registered Jerseys.

The breeds had been improved since they had been introduced to the United States 40 years earlier. The milk of Guernseys and Jerseys, originally imported from the Channel Islands was known for high butterfat content. The Holsteins produced less butterfat, but produced more milk overall.

Slowly farmers increased their dairy herds. In 1882, Harry Bordeaux opened Bordeaux Dairy and began milk delivery, primarily to Northeast Harbor. Other farmers, especially in Bar Harbors Emery District, began supplying fresh milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables to summer hotels and cottages. Eventually there were well over 40 dairies or dairy farms on Mount Desert Island averaging 16 to 20 cows each.

While no major outbreaks of disease during the summer season were ever traced to the islands milk supply, the threat of infection was ever present in the urban visitors mind. Milk reform was a major issue in large cities, especially in New York. At the turn of the century, with the formation of the Village Improvement Societies, attention was turned to the health of the community. These Societies, formed largely by summer residents, were greatly concerned with the safety of Mount Desert Islands milk supply. The Seal Harbor Village Improvement Society, and members of the Rockefeller family who were involved in the milk reform movement in New York City, took the lead in investigating the Islands dairy industry.

Most urban dairies had already begun to pasteurize milk and that was the standard the summer residents expected from Mount Desert Island farmers as well. Many farmers, while taking sanitation of their farms seriously, had not yet fully modernized their farms. In the early 1920's, an inspection by the Seal Harbor Village Improvement Society of one farm with 29 cows found that while the cows were healthy and men milking were free of disease - that some unhealthful conditions existed on the farm. The water was supplied from a shallow well, the barn drainage was limited and the milking machines were at risk of contamination from being placed on the barn floor. The inspector noted that the barn was clean and that facilities existed for sterilization of utensils and equipment, but that the floors were made of wood and sanitation would be improved by replacing the wood with concrete.

The milk inspector advised the farmer to clean and properly enclose the well. He also recommended that the water supply be tested by the state. A few of his other suggestions were that the milking machines be kept off the floor when not in use, that a drainage be installed and that the milk house be screened from flies. He expected that these changes would result in a lower bacterial count in the milk.

The farmer replied that in the past few years he had made \$1,000 in updates and that his money was very limited. He addressed all of the inspectors concerns and believed that his farm had been misjudged. He listed the recent improvements being an enlarged stable room, milking machines, facilities for heating water and sterilization, installed a cooler and electric

refrigeration, doubled size of his milk house, installed a steam boiler and installing running water.

Ultimately, simply sanitizing the barns, cows, laborers and tools was not enough. Farmers had to provide pasteurized milk or risk losing their customers and possibly even their farms. This led to the formation of a dairy called the Mount Desert Island Dairies in 1932. A group of Island farmers joined together to form the co-operative. The farmers invested in modern processing equipment that including pasteurization equipment for the new plant they built in Bar Harbor. The few Island farmers that did not join the cooperative either invested in the pasteurization equipment on their own or sold their milk to processors such as the Hancock County Creamery in Ellsworth or Clarks Southwest Dairy in Southwest Harbor. The pasteurized milk products were not only safer for the consumer, these products kept longer on the store shelves and in the consumers refrigerator. Raw milk however, continued to be requested by a few customers and was advertised and sold as a specialty.

The early 1930's was a difficult time for dairy farmers not only because of costly milk sanitation requirements but because the country was reeling from the Great Depression. Many of Mount Desert Islands wealthy summer visitors had been hit hard by the stock market crash in 1929. While a number of families continued to journey to Bar Harbor in the summer, the free spending days of the 1920's had come to an end.

Many small dairy farms owed their survival to summer resident William Pierson Hamilton (great grandson of Alexander Hamilton) who established Thirlstane Ranch, Inc. in the midst of the Depression. Pierson had a passion for farming and breeding horses, cattle and other farm animals. An article about Hamilton in the Lewiston Journal in 1938 explained, "his purpose is to help the other fellow". And "Such enterprises make relief work unnecessary". Hamilton bought out over 40 working farms on Mount Desert Island, Lamoine and Trenton. The owners of many of the farms were allowed to continue to live on the farms rent free and to manage the farms. Thirlstane Ranch bottled milk under the name Frenchman's Bay Dairies. The processing plant was a model of the modern dairy. Cows were milked behind glass and visitors were encouraged to observe. The Lewiston Journal reporter explained that "Mr. Hamiltons intention was not to make a profit but to have a show place and a hobby". Meanwhile Hamilton employed over 150 people. But after only a couple of years, in the late 1930's Thirlstane Ranch dissolved and many of the individual farms were returned to their previous owners.

In the 1940's there was a short term dairy farm revival on Mount Desert Island. While the war years saw a high demand for milk, gas rationing made it necessary for the government to regulate milk delivery. Home delivery was allowed only three days each week. Wholesale delivery of milk to markets was allowed six days a week. Many people had to buy their milk from a grocer. After the war however the marketing of American Dairy industry began in earnest. After a century of believing that milk was a highly nutritional food, but concerns about disease, the sanitation issues had finally been solved. Milk was marketed heavily as Natures Perfect Food. It was thought that drinking pasteurized whole milk ensured that children would grow to be strong health adults. The American public was convinced that children who did not drink enough milk would be undernourished. Mount Desert Island residents, like most Americans, depended on the daily visit of the milk man for most dairy products milk, cream, yogurt, sour cream and other products.

At some point in the 1950's, Clarks "Southwest" Dairy was the only processing plant left

on Mount Desert Island. Clarks Dairy was a milk processor only, they never had a herd but purchased raw milk from local farmers (pasteurized, homogenized and bottled it) until that wasn't possible as the small local farms closed up shop. By the 1960's Clarks eventually ended up buying milk from as far away as Aroostook County. The main competitor for Clarks Dairy was Bordeaux Dairy, the oldest dairy on the Island. By this time Bordeaux Dairy (now a distributor only) also did not have a herd or a processing plant, they had Hancock County Creamery or Clarks Dairy bottle milk for them. By the 1970's, Clarks Dairy mainly supplied milk to the west side of the Island, while Bordeaux supplied milk to the east side of the Island and Brad Gray - distributor of Old Homestead Dairy milk, held on to much of Bar Harbor. Bordeaux Dairy had bought out small farmers routes for years up until the early 1970's to build up their customer base.

By the 1960's, large grocery chains began to open all over Maine and eventually in the Ellsworth and Mount Desert Island area. Large dairies, such as the Hancock Country Creamery in Ellsworth (a co-operative owned by farmers) and Grants Dairy out of Bangor could provide the stores with large volume and therefore extend lower prices to the consumer. People were eventually attracted to the lower prices at the chain stores. Small dairy processors like Clarks Dairy became more and more unprofitable in this economy of scale scenario.

The few local farmers left on Mount Desert Island who sold their milk to the two local processors couldn't afford to keep cows with the economics of the dairy industry in flux. In the 1980's, the Federal Government sought to cut back on the country's milk surplus in order to help some farmers get a higher price for their milk. Many farmers were given the option of selling their herds to the government for slaughter. In 1986, Rocky Porter a dairy farmer in the Emery District of Bar Harbor submitted a bid to the United States Government to sell his cows. His bid was accepted and his cows were slaughtered. His was the last commercial dairy farm on Mount Desert Island.

Cows are still seen in some Island fields. On the Crooked Road and also on Bartlett's Island, the late Peggy Rockefeller cows graze. She was a pioneer in cattle breeding and while the farms were her hobby, she took farming seriously.

Dairy farming may not be history yet, however. In the last year, plans have been made to use the former Fogg Dairy Farm on the Crooked Road, as an organic Dairy. Bringing back a Dairy Farm to the Crooked Road is just one more positive step towards preserving the Islands rural lands.