

# REMEMBERING EARLY FARMERS

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

Westward migration in the early 1800s necessitated establishing industries related to agriculture for survival. As an example, sheep provided food and wool for cloth; milk was a necessary food as was cheese; maple sugar provided a small luxury.

The census of 1800 showed 1,788 persons in what is now Otsego County. By 1810, there were 33,667 persons listed. Saw mills, grist mills, tanneries, distilleries, asheries, wood working shops and cheese factories were springing up along Ocquionis Creek, Canadarago Lake and nearby areas. In 1842, one hundred persons were engaged in manufacturing and trade in this township. Let's explore some of these early industries.

In 1859, cheese making was an important industry from early spring until late fall. Hiram C. Brockway (1829-1908), pioneer in the local cheese industry and owner of seven cheese factories which, in 1877, produced about 700,000 pounds of first quality cheese, commanding the highest market price. George T. Brockway (1857-1932) succeeded his father and conducted the business until modern machinery hastened the change in production. The Brockway cheese factories were located at Wilmurth (now State land in the Town of Exeter), Huntly, West Exeter, Brainard's Corners, Pleasant Valley and Monticello.

Other names associated with the cheese making industry were Frank Miner, Martin Bennett, Frank Stewart, Lewis Cross, Arnold Johnson and Pearl Light. Claude Hinds (1870-1944) made the big round boxes in which the cured cheese was packed for shipment to market.

A farmer would deliver the milk which was then dumped into a vat and weighed by the cheesemaker. There was also a large vat full of whey from the previous day's cheesemaking from which the farmers could help themselves to take home to feed their pigs. The milk was then placed in long narrow vats with hoops and lined with cheese cloth. This was pressed overnight. The next morning the product was removed and placed on shelves where it would be stored until ready to be weighed, boxed and sold.

Before shipment, each batch was tested with a 'trier' which drew a small core from the side of several cheeses. Mr. Brockway personally supervised the process and judged the quality of texture and smell - never by taste. Each Monday he traveled by train (later by trolley) to Utica to arrange to market the cheese. The farmers were paid every two weeks at a rate in proportion to the amount of milk delivered to the pounds of cheese produced. It took a great deal of figuring and bookkeeping in days when it was all done in long hand.

An item showing the importance of this industry to the area appeared in the March 1902 issue of the MERCURY: H C. Brockway's cheese factory opened in March and closed in November. Pounds of milk received - 2,196,662; pounds of cheese manufactured - 208,645; pounds of butter - 1,267; money paid to patrons \$18,827.95.

Another industry in the area at the time was that of sheep raising. John Robinson was a leading farmer and sheep raiser in this area for many years. Herds of Merino sheep were introduced in this country from Europe, brought from Spain in the 1790s. This is still a popular strain and Merino wool is the basis for grading the product.

In 1865 there were 76,674 sheep in Otsego County and in 1876, the county is said to have had the largest number of sheep of any county in the United States. The town of Richfield, in 1865, had 2,064 sheep. The killing of hundreds of the animals by wild animals discouraged the industry. For several years, sheep from the Robinson farm were turned onto the Richfield Golf Links each spring to graze and keep the grass nibbled short in the days before the motorized lawn mower.



A Dairy Farm near Richfield Springs, N.Y.

Fun was always combined with the hard work involved in farming. One such event was the 'sugaring off' at the Starr sugarbush each spring. The young people would come to the bush for jack wax and maple cream served with sour pickles, combining the taste of sweet and sour. This combination was supposed to be a symbol of prosperity and sweet abundance. Gathering the sap in buckets and boiling it in an open kettle in the woods was a back-breaking job before modern equipment, but the resulting syrup and sugar made all the effort worthwhile. Walter Starr (1847-1935) and son Howard (1891-1985) operated the bush for many years.

The month of June was designated as 'National Dairy Month' in 1939, to honor farmers and promote the drinking and use of milk. The movement was started by a group of chain stores in order to promote the use of milk during the month when cows were turned out to pasture and the supply increased. Approximately ten pounds of milk is used to make one pound of cheese; twelve pounds of milk will make one gallon ice cream; twenty-one point eight pounds of milk will make one pound of butter.

George D. Caney, in 1889, purchased a milk route from Philip French and under the name of Fern Croft Dairy, established with Jay S. House as manager, a milk route that included the residents of Richfield Springs who did not have access in other ways to milk.

At the beginning, he drove a one-horse conveyance. The milk was carried in a large can having a faucet at the bottom. The housewife or hotel needing milk was warned to have their milk pail at the door, ready for delivery. Mr. Caney would draw from the can in his wagon into a measuring cup and empty that into the container furnished by the customer. He announced his presence by a ringing bell. During the hot summer months, milk was delivered both morning and evening. A few years later, evening delivery was discontinued as better refrigeration facilities made it unnecessary.

Business improved. There was a demand for bottled milk and it was delivered in glass bottles to those who preferred. Some still wanted it dipped into their own container at one cent less per quart. Delivery was now made in a 'modern' milk wagon drawn by a team.

Due to State legislation, dairies were required by the 1930s to pass a test for tuberculosis; stables were subject to inspection and sterilization of utensils was required along with the sanitary cooling and bottling of milk. By then, delivery was made by motor truck and the once looked for milk wagon was consigned to a place in the shed by the side of the outmoded buggy.

The last delivery on the Fern Croft milk route made by Mr. Carney was on February 28, 1939, after fifty years of service.