

# Ag economics fueled county's early dairy industry

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June is Dairy Month in America's Dairyland and Langlade County is part of the story. From some of the county's first farms to current world class, prize-winning cheese producer Sartori, cows have had an impact on our history and economy. The dairy industry in Langlade County also witnessed a case of agricultural economics in the 1930s that was unusual in its day.

In the early 20th century most of the commercial milk went towards production of butter. Starting in about 1915 cheese production began to gain in importance and by 1923 it was the most important dairy product in the county. Most of the production occurred at the family farm or in small, local, neighborhood factories. During that time the number of county factories varied between 16 and 33. Total production rose from 500,000 to 3,000,000 pounds of cheese annually. Some factories were privately owned, some were local co-ops, but all were basically neighborhood operations. Local, small cheese producers would sell to local or outside buyers. The C.E. Straubel Company operated a cheese warehouse in Antigo and purchased local cheese which it distributed.

In 1923 a major change in cheese production occurred. At the time there were 31 small cheese factories in Langlade County. Kraft Cheese, based in the Chicago area, expanded and purchased a small Antigo-based creamery. Kraft expanded production, took over the closed Antigo

Brewery (due to Prohibition) and grew into the world's largest cheese producer. Kraft began purchasing milk at prices slightly higher than what small local factories were offering. Within two years it is estimated that about half the milk produced in the county went to Kraft. Kraft bought out Straubel creating concerns among farmers and local businessmen of a monopoly.

A group of local farmers visited Barron County and the Barron Creamery Cooperative. They found it to be a small but successful operation and decided to use it as a model for establishing a co-op in Langlade County. County agent John T. Omernik was instrumental in planning and organizing meetings of potential participants. The group approached the Agriculture College at the University of Wisconsin which was initially skeptical but was eventually convinced to offer assistance.

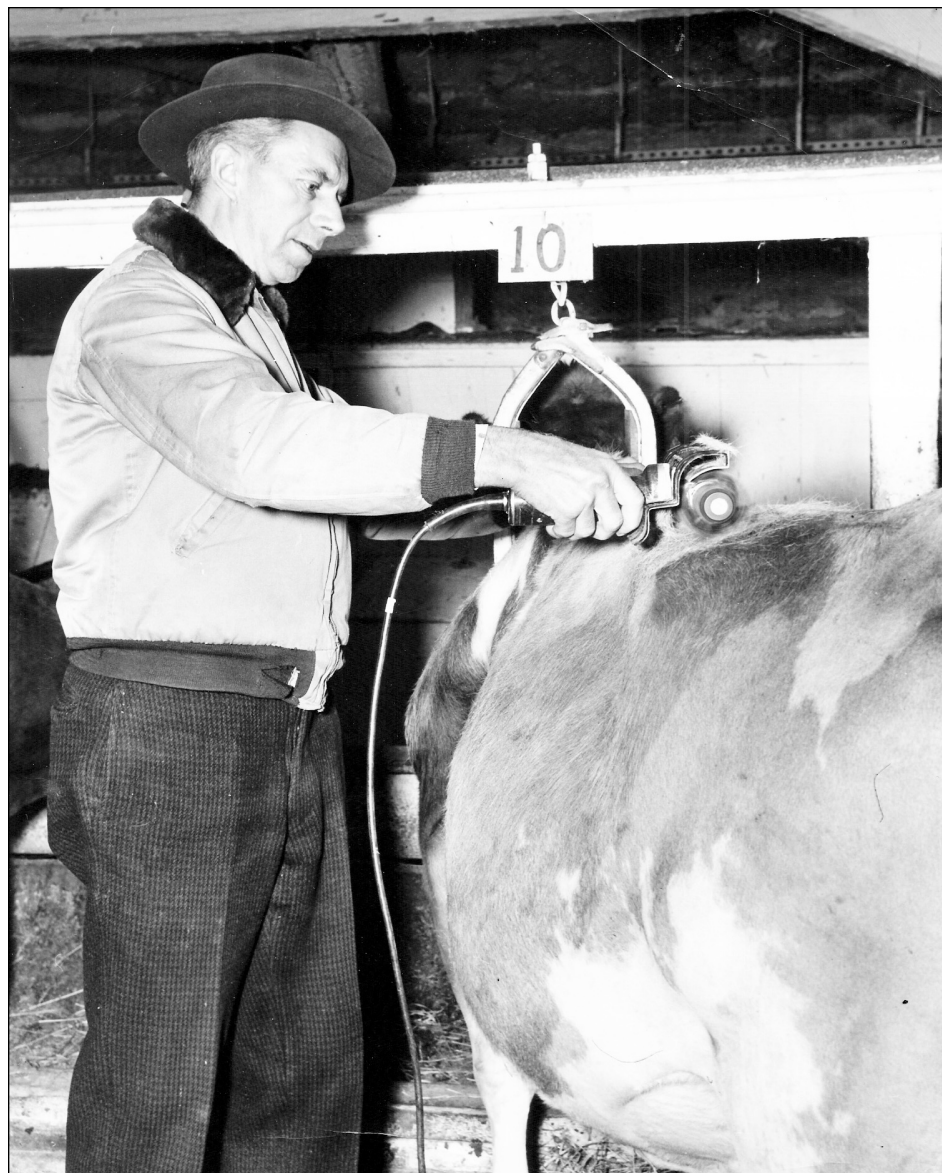
In January 1930 an organizational meeting was held and the Antigo Milk Products Cooperative was formed. About 400 farmers agreed to contracts with the Co-op. A board was selected. It approached Land O' Lakes, a cooperative sales agency, for advice and the hope that they would be distributors for the Co-op's products. Local businessmen lobbied the hesitant Land O' Lakes and the Co-op gained support. Since about 75 percent of the milk produced in the county came from within 10 mile of Antigo and Antigo had excellent rail connections, it made sense to house the Co-op in Antigo. A plant was organized so that milk could be diverted to whatever products might benefit the farmers most.

Establishing contracts with farmers was full of potential pit-

## Antigo Is Praised For Purity of Milk

MADISON, Wis., April 13—(Special)—Special recognition of efforts of the Antigo Milk Products Co-operative, Antigo, to collect only clean fluid milk from its patrons has been made by the department of agriculture and markets, Charles L. Hill, chairman of the department, revealed today.

In a 1938 story the Milwaukee Sentinel noted the purity of the Co-op's milk after members agreed to standards set by the Chicago Board of Health.



Dairy farmer members of the coop agreed to higher standards for cleaning cattle, barns, and equipment in order to gain access to the Chicago market.

falls but, with help of the University of Wisconsin and expert legal advice, an effective business structure developed. The Antigo Milk Products Cooperative was an outstanding organization, almost unprecedented in Wisconsin dairy manufacturing. A plant operating on a large scale, serving an entire county, was highly unusual. The Co-op turned out to be very successful in spite of a number of unanticipated setbacks in its early years.

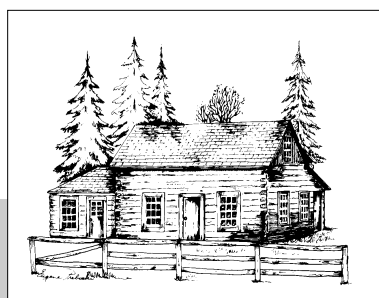
Plant construction began in August 1930 and was completed Feb. 20, 1931 at a cost of \$65,000. The first milk delivery was on March 1931 with 20,000 pounds of milk. Some small factories remained open with a coordinated effort to close more as the Antigo Co-op geared up to handle more milk. Once operating, 75 percent of the milk came from farms within 15 miles of Antigo. As small

local factories closed producers were given priority in jobs at the Co-op but many chose to become haulers instead.

But there were unanticipated problems. Kraft refused to accept milk from producers contracted with the Co-op. They also increased what they paid farmers (but still less than the state average) so that those contracted to the Co-op saw their potential profits reduced.

Also, 1931 saw the beginning of a drought. The Co-op was prepared to handle 200,000 pounds milk daily at peak yield season but only received 100,000. In addition there were problems with a new, first of its kind, milk dryer for powder milk manufacture. It was costly but not effective. A fire in the dryer caused a lengthy shutdown and \$6,000 damage. Waste products proved more difficult to

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**Our History**

Continued

## Our History

dispose of than planned. Eventually the milk dryer was repaired and made more efficient, waste products were reduced but dry milk powder prices remained lower than anticipated.

These early setbacks caused some contracted farmers to try to pull back on their agreements to supply the Co-op. Court cases arose and farmers were compelled to deliver milk for 5 years. Interestingly, after the five years were up only 2 of 23 farmers who tried to back out stopped working with the Co-op.

Setbacks continued into 1932 with drought and lower production. The Co-op adapted by installing equipment to make Swiss cheese. By 1934 the Co-op was beginning to show profits and

dividends were paid to stock holders. About 200 new patrons joined those already under contract.

In 1935 a milk shortage in Chicago opened an opportunity for the Co-op to temporarily ship milk to Chicago. Once the shortage eased the Co-op was told it must meet Chicago Board of Health standards to continue sales. It was a profitable venue and so the local farmers agreed to the regulations. Two local farmers were trained and then taught others on necessary procedures involving brushing and clipping cattle, thorough cleaning and whitewashing of barns, lining barn floors, and improved washing and sterilizing of equipment for collecting and storing milk. Farmers had previously been reluctant to implement some of these changes when requested by Kraft but the Chicago market was too lucrative



This small family operated dairy products factory in Phlox was one of many in the county that became absorbed by the Co-op.



One of the Antigo Milk Products Cooperative buildings, on South Dorr Street, now serves as administrative offices of the Antigo Unified School District.



The Co-op worked closely with Hyland Dairy to distribute milk to consumers.

to ignore and so they agreed to meet Chicago Board of Health standards.

In 1970 the American Milk Producers Incorporation (AMPI), based in Kansas, organized many Midwest coops and the Antigo Milk Products Coop merged with it. The plant later was repurposed to produce whey and dog food and operated as Universal Foods until 1984. In 1985 the building of the plant was donated to the Antigo Unified School District where it still serves as administrative headquarters.

Dairy farmers in Langlade County, for over 30 years, benefited from this unique cooperative business arrangement. The costs to farmers in its early years were considerable and often beyond their control—the Great Depression, falling milk prices, drought, and problems with the Co-op plant. Still, within five years the Co-op was an unqualified success and the Antigo Milk Products Cooperative served as an example of how farmers, who often work as individuals, could cooperate to gain better prices and expand their markets. For decades the Co-op was able to offer Langlade County farmers more for their milk than the state average. Their motto was “By helping others we

can help ourselves.” And they were highly successful in living abiding to that motto.

Much of the material in this article comes from: An Experiment in Cooperative Dairy Organization by Richard Delwiche: Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1936. The thesis is in the museum archives.

*(Look for the display of the old days of dairy farming at the Langlade County Historical Society table at Breakfast on the Farm to be held on Sunday June 10, from 8 a.m. to noon at the Maly Farm on Hwy O, Bryant.)*

Continued

## Hessedal

Ingredients:

- 3 cups seedless watermelon, cubed and chilled
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta, reduced fat
- 7 oz arugula (about 4 cups loosely packed)
- 1/4 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- kosher salt and fresh pepper to taste

Directions: Wash arugula and dry well. In a large bowl whisk vinegar, olive oil, salt and pepper. Toss with the remaining ingredients and serve.

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