

Wallowa History Center *Preserving Our Past for the Future*

*The Wallowa History Center works to save the memories, stories,
and photographs that define the history and culture of the places we call home.*

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Wallowa County Dairies

By Herbert H. Bushnell
(1871-1960)

Note: The following account of dairy farming in Wallowa County first appeared in the *California Dairyman* of December 20, 1958. The county's last dairy operation, belonging to Gary Willett of Wallowa, closed in 1980.

Hours, minutes even, made the pattern of agriculture in the early 1890s. Did the farmer and his household have time after the work in the field to milk a few cows? The number of cows was fixed by the leftover time. I picture a typical farm of my boyhood. A stream ran through a native grass pasture, and cows stood knee-deep in it or lay in the shade of some willows or cottonwoods, monotonously chewing their cuds. In the evening, a small boy and a wise dog directed them to the barn to be milked.

The barn was a catch-all for rusty machinery and broken furniture. Dust sifted down from the hay loft and danced in streaks of late sunshine. The milk pails had strainers, and through them the milk was poured into stone crocks set in the spring house. When the cream had risen, it was skimmed off with a shallow wooden ladle, and after souring, it was churned in a wood churn with a dasher. The skim was drained off and fed to the pigs, and the butter was worked with salt and placed into wooden molds of approximately a pound each. Eggs were gathered out of mangers or under lilac bushes and other hidden places, and on Saturdays the butter, eggs, berries, and seasonal fruits were taken to town and traded for groceries. They tided the farm over until the grain was harvested and sold.

It seemed a fixed way of life, but it was changing. The genius of what we like to call “American” was altering the pattern. The walking plow became a riding plow. Hand-cranked separators ousted the skimming ladle, and the cream went to the newfangled creameries. The new barns are tailored for speed and convenience in milk production and handling. Dry corrals hold hundreds of cows on a few acres. Hay and feed is bought; replacements are purchased from auction yards; even the cows compete, for if they do not measure up to a high production they go to the butcher. The dairyman doesn't milk by hand by lantern light after other chores are done. He is an executive with a specialized operation, and the product of his milk factor goes in insulated tanks to huge creameries that dissect the milk. Oh, there are dairy farms still, but most of them are plants for purebreds.

However, there is a secluded spot in northeastern Oregon where a wild jumble of mountains enclose tortured valleys laced with icy streams, and dozens of lakes nestle in conifer forests. It is isolated by Nature, and here the Nez Perce Indians used to live under the elder Chief Joseph and his greater son.

This is Wallowa County, with mountains up to 10,000 feet, and hunters find deer, elk, bear, cougar and, it is said, a few bison and mountain sheep. The waters teem with fish. Farms stretch across the valleys, and the soil is black and rich. Many sheep graze, and there are plenty of swine. But dominating the landscape are the Herefords, and one sees many Angus cattle.

Dairy cattle are not wanting. One sees Holsteins, Guernseys, Jerseys, and a strong leaven of Brown Swiss. The latter should do well in a land where one of the mountains is named the Matterhorn. But the dairy pattern harks back in some ways to the past. This is due to long, cold, snowy winters and transportation difficulties. The farmers are apt to “hole up” and venture to town only when necessary. They dry up their cows in the fall and wait for spring.

It is a good dairy country. Alfalfa hay and barley grown here are of high quality. And yet dairying has been on the downgrade. Elgin M. Cornett county extension agent, feels this is due to transportation troubles, and also to the fact that it has been more profitable to raise beef cattle.

R.L. Lively, manager the Wallowa County Creamery Association, thinks that as long as beef prices bring in more than butterfat, this will continue, but ultimately this will change.

“Slim” Bohna, who is on the board of directors of the Wallowa County Creamery Association, credits it to a failure on the part of the small dairyman to accept the trend of the times, to surrender independence and either “get big” or become a little cog in a great machine.

There are a fewer grade A dairies than there used to be. Among those still operating are A.J. Hammack of Lostine, and Tom Willett and Woodward & Sons of Wallowa. The Wallowa County Dairy at Enterprise pasteurizes and bottles milk for sale in local stores. A cheese factory once operated in Enterprise but has folded its wings. Mr. Lively thinks one trouble has been too many dairy enterprises for the volume of milk.



Wallowa County Creamery Association in Wallowa, 1940s. At its peak, the creamery provided processing for approximately 215 county families, whose dairy herds each consisted of from 8 to 20 cows. Although butter was the main business of local creameries, they also manufactured cheese and ice cream, as well as enough skim milk to make the county Oregon's leader in hog production.



Wallowa Creamery, established before 1907 and located near the junction of Whiskey Creek Road and today's Highway 82. Flour mill is in background at right. Bridge is still there, but millrace has been filled in.

The Wallowa County Creamery Association—a member of Darigold, a marketing association in the Northwest—churns butter and is now making powdered skim milk. It has approximately 600 stockholders. Its board of directors is as follows: Tom Willett, Wallowa, president; Bernard “Slim” Bohna and Alvin Hawkins, Wallowa; L.D. Cherry, Lostine; Cecil Elder and John Freels, Joseph, and D.H. Davis, Enterprise. Its employees are: R.L. Lively, manager; Daniel Boyd, office

manager; Wallace Pruitt, L.F. Groves, Morris McClung, John Cox, Virginia Sasser, Reta Cox, and Marstella Bales.

There is a movement from Portland and other cities to Eastern Oregon because of high land values and heavy taxes, apparently on the principle that it is more economic to take the cows to the feed and ship milk products than to ship feed to the cows.

Well, there you are—a natural dairy country, isolated in the mountains. It lags behind its possibilities. It might be possible for it to take an important place in the great milk hierarchy. It might be a good thing if some of the dairymen or creamery representatives would come up here next spring and look it over. It might be very worthwhile.



Wallowa County Creamery crew, 1940s. Standing, from left: George Coleman, Mae Roop, Fisher Lively, Whitey Groves, Wallace Pruitt, Roberta Bird, Jake Silvers; sitting, from left: Gifford Botts, Bill Burett.

Dairy Timeline

- 1862** Louis Pasteur completes first “pasteurization” tests.
- 1878** Milk first delivered in bottles.
- 1886** U.S. Congress sets definitions and standards of butter.
- 1894** “World’s Largest Creamery” in St. Albans, Vermont, reputedly produces more than 12 tons of butter per day.
- 1895** Commercial pasteurization machines introduced.
- 1899** August Gaulin patents “homogenizing” machine that mixes cream with milk instead of separating it. (It will take another 20 years before homogenized milk is sold successfully.) U.S. produces 5 million gallons of ice cream.
- 1900** Almost 4 in 10 people employed in U.S. (38 percent) work in agriculture, and the average farm is 147 acres.
- 1906** Blue Mountain Creamery of Enterprise produces 2,600 pounds of butter per week.
- 1907** Blue Mountain Creamery in Wallowa begins making cheese.
- 1908** Chicago passes nation’s first compulsory pasteurization law. Half of all Americans live either on farms or in towns with populations less than 2,500.
- 1909** Nabisco introduces the Oreo cookie (which very likely spurred milk consumption across the country). U.S. produces 30 million gallons of ice cream, a 600 percent increase over the last 10 years.
- 1910** More than 3 in 10 people employed in U.S. (31 percent) work in agriculture.
- 1914** Tank trucks first used for transporting milk.
- 1915** A gallon of milk typically costs 36 cents, which would be almost \$8 in today’s money. An estimated 6.5 farms in the U.S. for a population of approximately 100 million.
- 1916** J.L. Kraft receives patent for making processed cheese.
- 1917** U.S. Army begins buying J.L. Kraft’s canned cheese.
- 1919** First homogenized milk sold “successfully” in the country. U.S. produces 150 million gallons of ice cream, a 500 percent increase over the last 10 years, and 3,000 percent over the last 20. *(Continued on next page.)*

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Wallowa History Center
PO Box 481 • Wallowa, Oregon 97885
E-mail: mburrows@eoni.com

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- 1920** Butterfat production per cow in U.S. is 542 pounds. Fewer than 3 in 10 people employed in U.S. (27 percent) work in agriculture.
- 1922** Congress passes Capper-Volstead Act, which encourages farmers to form cooperatives by exempting them from anti-trust laws.
- 1926** County creameries begin producing Swiss cheese.
- 1928** Velveeta Cheese invented, cutting into cheese market (and paving the way for the demise of the American cheeseburger).
- 1930** Per capita consumption of dairy products in the U.S. is 829 pounds—including almost 18 pounds of butter, 10 of ice cream, and 5 of cheese—almost 2.3 pounds per person per day (this will decline by more than 30 percent by 1950). Approximately 2 in 10 people employed in U.S. (21.5 percent) work in agriculture.
- 1931** Wallowa County Creamery Association forms, with office and plant in Wallowa, cream stations in Joseph and Enterprise; Association begins sponsoring annual picnic with free ice cream. In 305 days, a Jersey cow from Wallowa produces 12,594 pounds of milk and 553 pounds of butterfat.
- 1935** Addition built onto Wallowa Creamery; cold storage lockers added, and new boiler, vats and churn installed; butter production for year reaches 560,988 pounds, more than 5 tons per week.
- 1938** Wallowa Creamery Association lists 170 members, produce a combined 500,000 pounds of butter for the year. Bulk tanks begin replacing milk can on dairy farms.
- 1940** Fewer than 2 in 10 people employed in U.S. (18 percent) work in agriculture.
- 1948** Commercial ultra-high-temperature pasteurization introduced.
- 1950** Just over 1 in 10 people employed in U.S. (11 percent) work in agriculture.
- 1971** Wallowa County Creamery Association disbands.
- 1980** Gary Willett closes his Wallowa dairy, the last in Wallowa County.