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ALFRED HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Monograph No. 3

October 2, 1968

CHEESE FACTORIES OF ALLEGANY COUNTY
by Clifford M. Potter

At the turn of the century cheese making was one of the main industries of Allegany County. According to statistics, in 1865, 1,655,776 pounds of butter and 1,325,748 pounds of cheese were made in the county. I believe that, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, more cheese than butter was made per year. Cheese factories were seen, separated by only a few miles, on most of the roads in the county. There were several cheese dealers in the county. Phelps and Sibley in Cuba was the largest. They had a sale, where the ruling price of cheese was established, every week. The Reynolds Cheese Company, owned by Calvin Reynolds, was located in Alfred in the building that is now Ide's grocery store. The company used all three stories of the building. The business was taken over by Mr. Reynold's sons, Fred and Raymond, when Mr. Reynolds died. The cold storage plant at Alfred Station was built by the Reynolds Company and was its location during the last years of its existence. Another dealer was Sam Helmer in Almond.

Some of the cheese factories were maintained by organized groups of farmers which hired the cheesemakers. Other factories were owned by an individual or a company which hired the cheese made. Still others were owned by the cheesemaker himself.

The following are the locations of factories within a radius of about twenty-five miles from Alfred. The "Tinker Town" factory between Alfred and Alfred Station about opposite the "Squirrels Nest" Motel, was owned and operated by E. P. Fenner, grandfather of Richard Fenner of the Alfred Bank. About one-quarter of a mile, on the road that leads to Hornell from the intersection of roads on the top of Hartsville Hill, was the Hartsville Hill factory owned and operated by George M. Grow, Mrs. Potter's father. After Mr. Grow

retired, it was sold to Judson Palmiter, grandfather of Judson Stearns who runs "The Little Red Hen" restaurant.

A cheese factory was located on the McHenry Valley road toward Five Corners about four miles from Almond. The Five Corners cheese factory was located about one-half mile north from Five Corners on this same road. It was originally owned by G. West. Later by E. P. Fenner from whom my father Efner Potter, bought it about the year 1900. When he retired in 1935, he sold it to Clifford Ormsby of Alfred Station. He hired a cheesemaker to run it for a few years before the milk supply from the county was mostly shipped away.

The Vandermark cheese factory was located about three or four miles toward Scio from Five Corners. My father and Martin Beebe, father of Max Beebe of Alfred, both made cheese there. There was another factory on this same road about three miles from Scio. These last two factories were owned by George Dodge. There was also a factory in Scio.

A factory on Knights Creek, a few miles from Scio, and another in Inavale were, at different times, operated by Mr. Beebe.

There were three factories on the road from Almond to Angelica. One in Karr Valley, about four miles from Alfred, operated by Adelbert Braisted, another in West Almond and the third one about two miles from Angelica on a short road connecting the County Home road with the Birdsall road. Efner Potter made cheese in both the West Almond and Angelica factories. Raymond Reynolds owned the one in West Almond the last few years it was operated.

On the road from Five Corners to Belmont there were two factories, one in Phillips Creek, operated at one time by a man named Baker, and another one in Withey, operated by Alvin Hall, uncle of Dr. Paul C. Saunders of Alfred. There was also a factory in Belmont, operated by Heddon and Beach.

The Fords Brook factory on the back road from Wellsville to Yorks Corners, was at one time operated by Martin Beebe. The Beach Hill factory, about four miles up the hill from Yorks Corners, was, at different times, operated by Martin Beebe and Efner Potter.

Factories in Hallsport and Greenwood were both finally owned by Raymond Reynolds.

The Independence factory was operated by Charles Potter, my great uncle, who taught my father, Efner Potter, to make cheese about the year 1890. The West Union factory, east of Independence, is where my father made cheese and where I was born in 1894.

At the intersection of West University Street extension and the road connecting it with Randolph road was a small factory. We living old timers never saw that building. Another factory on Kenyon Road, at the foot of the hill opposite the Carlton Green farm, was owned and operated by Alvin Baker, father-in-law of LaVern Kenyon of Alfred. The Shoemakers Corners factory in Elm Valley, on a dirt road across the Erie Tracks, was operated by Charles Wright, uncle of Nate Tucker of Alfred. Alvin Hall, in the early days, operated a factory on the Wadsworth Hill road which leads from the Five Corners-Belmont road to Scio.

There were also several cheese box factories in the county where they made boxes in which the cheese was shipped. There was one in Alfred, on or near Mill Street, owned and operated by J. S. Kenyon. E. P. Fenner also made boxes for sale in his "Tinker Town" cheese factory. Many of the cheesemakers made their own boxes.

As you can see from the above report, I was subjected to the goings-on in a cheese factory more or less from 1894 to 1935, so I may as well add a description of the process of making cheese.

Many of the cheese factories did not run all the year. The season ran from around March 1 or 15, to November 1 or 15 in the fall. The first thing to do in the spring was to have a cheese meeting with the farmers to agree on the price per hundred pounds of cheese which the makers would get for making it. Next, all the equipment had to be examined for defects, the necessary repairs made and materials ordered.

A cheesemaker's day started early in the morning. The first job was to "fire" the boiler which furnished all the steam and hot water for the day. The cheese made the day before were taken out of the hoops and placed in the curing room. The other cheese, left in the curing room after the last shipment, were all turned from end to end so that they rested on each end no more than twenty-four hours at a time during the curing process.

After breakfast, sometimes before, the first of the patrons began to arrive. The milk was carried in large cans with handles on the sides. The weighing platform was about three feet above the platforms of the wagons. The cans of milk were hoisted up by means of a hand-operated crane, dumped into a large weighing can resting on platform scales, weighed and allowed to run into large vats by gravity. At this point, the cheesemaker needed a keen sense of smell to detect any odor which might affect the quality of the cheese.

The vats consisted of a rectangular wooden tank, on the edges of which rested a wooden frame to which was fastened a tin container that just fitted into the tank. The bottom of the container rested on removable wooden slats nailed to cross pieces, underneath which were the steam pipes to heat the contents. These vats came in various sizes with capacities up to five or six thousand pounds of milk.

When a vat was full, the milk was heated to the proper temperature and the correct amount of rennet, mixed with water, was stirred into the milk.

Sometimes a "starter" of sour milk was also added. When the mixture had curdled to the proper consistency was determined by sticking the forefinger into the mixture, lifting it up and touching the top of the bulge with the tip of the thumb. If the mixture separated with a clean break, the mixture was ready to be cut into curds.

This process was accomplished with two cutters. One of these cutters consisted of wire strung from the top to the bottom of a frame about ten inches wide and long enough to reach above the top of the mixture when placed in a vertical position. The wires were spaced about $3/8$ of an inch apart. It was operated by a handle on the top section of the frame. The other cutter had knives placed in a horizontal position of a frame of the same size with the space between the knives the same as that of the wires in the vertical cutter. The vertical cutter was first run through the thickened mass, once lengthwise the vat and once across the vat. Then by running the horizontal cutter through once, the mixture was cut into curds about $3/8$ of an inch square. The curds began to separate from the whey. The steam was then turned on and the condensed steam and water which was already under the tin vat heated the mixture. The whey and curds were stirred constantly, with a short-handled hay rake, until the proper temperature to cook the curds was reached. After that it was stirred at intervals to keep the curds from settling to the bottom of the vat and forming a solid mass. To determine when it was time to separate the curds from the whey, a small amount of the curds were squeezed together and applied to a hot iron. If the curd stuck to the iron and "haired" out into fine hairs about a quarter inch long, it was ready to "dip."

The whey was siphoned off and allowed to flow into a large wooden vat down by the road, where each patron could dip his portion of the whey into

his empty milk cans and take it home to feed his pigs. The curd was then dipped, with a flat-sided pail, into the curd sink. The sink consisted of a rectangular boxlike affair, about 5 feet wide by 15 feet long and 14 inches deep. It was mounted on legs which made the top edge waist high and on large casters so it could be moved around. The bottom was covered with wooden racks made of slats nailed about 1/2 inch apart, on cross pieces. Over these racks was placed a piece of cheese cloth, large enough to cover the whole sink with some hanging over the sides when the cloth was pushed down onto the racks by the weight of the curd. There was an outlet in the sink which allowed the whey, which drained from the curd, to be piped into the whey vat.

After the curds were dipped into the curd sink, it was spread around until about 3 or 4 inches thick and allowed to settle into a solid mass. It was then cut crosswise and lengthwise into strips about 6 or 8 inches wide and half the width of the sink in length. These pieces were then all turned over so that the top sides were next to the cloth. The curd was then allowed to stand for a while. It would then be in the form of smooth slabs about 8 inches wide and 2-1/2 feet long. These slabs were run through a curd mill, turned by hand crank or steam engine. This cut them into small pieces about 1/2 inch on each side and 2-1/2 inches long. The proper amount of salt was sprinkled on and stirred in by hand. The whole mass was then allowed to drain for a while.

The curd was then transferred into collapsible steel hoops which had already been "dressed" with the proper tubular cheesecloth bandage and a cap on the bottom end. A cloth was placed over the top, a cover put on, the top section pushed down as far as possible by hand and placed in the frame of a

gang press. After the curd had all been put into the hoops and placed in the press, they were all resting on their sides in a horizontal position. The screw head of the press was then placed against the end of the last hoop and they were all squeezed together as far as possible by means of a long lever attached to the screw by a ratchet. Before gang presses came into use, vertical presses were used. Each cheese had to have a separate press where these presses were used. The screw on the press was tightened several times while the workmen were cleaning the vats, curd sink and other utensils used during the day.

The last job of the day was to release the pressure on the press, turn each hoop so the top was up, pull up the bandage which covered the sides of the cheese so it covered part of the top, put a circular "cap" on the top, put the cover back on, place them back in the press, and again tighten them as far as possible. They were tightened a few times more before bedtime. The cheesemaker was then ready to start the same process all over again the next morning.