

History of Cheese Production in Chautauqua County

Information provided by Chautauqua County Historical Society Trustees Michelle Henry, Sharon Howe, Bob Johnston, and Jason Sample with Assistance by Sheridan Historical Society and “The History of Cheese Making in New York State” – a book by Eunice R. Stamm

Presented at
Wine & Cheese Pairing Event at Liberty Vineyards in Sheridan, NY
Wednesday, Aug. 16, 2017

CHEESE: AN INTERNATIONAL FOOD

- Cheese is thousands of years old – before recorded history.
- Cheese can be produced from the milk of cows, buffalo, goat, horse, and even camel.
- Approximately ten pounds of milk is required to make one pound of cheese. Your yield will be approximately one pound per gallon of milk for the hard cheeses and **two** pounds per gallon for the soft cheeses.
- The Romans gave cheese making a special status - they had community fairs where people brought their produce, including WINES AND CHEESES, to be judged for quality.
- There are more than 2,000 varieties of cheese available worldwide; mozzarella is the favorite around the globe and the most consumed.
- People in Greece consume the most cheese worldwide. Average Grecian consumes 27.3 kg (60 pounds) of cheese every year, three quarters of which is feta. That's 1.15 lbs of cheese per week, or 2.6 ounces every day of the year.
- Pizza Hut is the largest cheese-using fast food giant. Uses 300 million pounds annually.
- Last week of June is National Cheese Week.

EARLY CHEESE PRODUCTION IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

- Prior to its incorporation, Chautauqua County was part of Genesee County – which comprised the area of New York State located west of the Genesee River. Cheese making was one of the first practices by those early settlers, many of whom arrived from New England and brought their trade with them to the new, unsettled area.
- Some land contracts drawn up in 1789 contained a provision allowing payment of up to one-half of each debt in salable ox or cow beef at market prices or in other goods (ie – cheese) sent to the West Indies at prevailing prices. In 1791, 201,901 pounds of American made cheese were exported to the West Indies and by 1795, the amount had grown to 2,343,093 pounds, making it the principal market for domestic cheese outside

the United States.

- Charles Williamson, a land agent originally from New England, wrote a series of articles in 1799 describing the region. He said that no part of America was better for dairying than Genesee County, an opinion echoed by countless New Yorkers for the next hundred years. The climate and rich pasture land proved favorable for raising dairy cattle. Farmers Established dairies of twenty to thirty cows brought from New England or Canada or as far away as Kentucky.
- “Genesee cheese sold for sixteen cents a pound in 1800.
- Zachariah Noble is credited with having the first cheese press and making the first cheese in the town of Hinsdale in Cattaraugus County around 1807. Cheese sold for five cents a pound in Buffalo, but some cheese makers exchanged their product, pound for pound, for flour at country stores.
- Cheese makers who settled in the Chautauqua region set to work soon after they cleared their land. Enterprising farmers built separate cheese storage houses. In the early 1800s buyers from New York City made their way to the county where they eagerly made their selections from large lots of fine cheese for five to ten cents a pound.
- Cheese making began in the spring and ended in the fall because that was when milk was available. [I don't have a clear explanation about milk being seasonal – did cows' milk production drop in the winter, so there wasn't excess? Or were they not milked at all til spring when they would give birth?].
- Making cheese was a good way to use excess milk, which was very perishable. Through the first half of the 19th century, cheese production was a home industry – done by women. On some farms, a structure was built close to the house, or the kitchen was expanded, making it easier for women to handle their other domestic duties in addition to making cheese. The cheese was stored until fall, when cheese buyers would come and often buy the entire stock and ship it to east coast cities.
- Before cheese was made in factories, it was a home industry, primarily done by women (in addition to all of their other domestic responsibilities). Making cheese was an effective way to preserve milk. It was a complicated and labor intensive process, requiring a great deal of skill.

- Cheese was made from raw milk (unpasteurized) until the 1940s. Flavor is more intense and robust. Usually, the cream would be skimmed off to make butter and then the rest of the milk was used for cheese.
- Cheese making began in the spring and ended in the fall because that was the time when milk was available. Families would keep cheese in cheese houses on their property until the weather became cold. Cheese buyers would come and often buy the entire lot for five to ten cents per pound. Much of the cheese produced in this county was sold to distant markets in New York City. The sale of cheese from even small and isolated producers helped dairying become a viable full-time occupation.
- In 1845, the first shipment of cheese from Chautauqua County was sent to New York City over the Erie Canal. The shipment included 7,000—8,000 pounds of cheese from the Terry farm in Gerry. By 1850, half of the nation's cheese was produced in New York State.
- Early census records prove that a great deal of cheese was produced on family farms in Chautauqua County. In 1855, farmers in the town of Arkwright alone produced 231,661 pounds of cheese from the milk of 344 cows (Asahel Burnham Jr produced 6,900 pounds and Henry Tarbox produced 8,500 on their farms). Total cheese produced in the county was 1,198,361 pounds, ranking us 12th in the state!
- The County's two cheese box manufacturers, Calvin and Joseph Davis, were both in Pomfret.
- As soon as cheese factories were established, home production began to drop off. The first cheese factory in the United States was opened at Rome, NY in 1851. But in 1870, after factory cheese producers become more prominent, a significant amount of cheese was still being produced at home. The federal census reported that 773,830 pounds of cheese were made on individual farms. In 1879, 355,634 pounds of cheese were made at home. In 1909, only 5,476 pounds were produced on the farm.
- One of the most popular housewarming gifts of the 19th century was a pineapple cheese—cheese molded into the shape of a pineapple. The process was patented by Lewis Norton in 1810. By 1888, his family was purchasing one million pounds of milk annually to produce their pineapple cheeses. This cheese was available in two-, four- and six pound sizes for 35 cents, 65 cents and 85 cents, respectively. The business was

eventually sold to Kraft Cheese Company which sold the products until 1931.

CHEESE FACTORIES IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

- Asahel Burnham is credited with organizing the first extensive cooperative system of cheese manufacturers in New York State in the town of Arkwright. Shortly after Burnham established his factory in an old shingle mill, he heard about the advantages of dairy cooperation as practiced in Herkimer County. After Mark Tarbox, a local resident, traveled to Herkimer Co. for details, he and Burnham erected a three story factory at Burnham's Hollow on Canadaway Creek. It was called the Canadaway Cheese Factory in 1861. This factory was operated as the first cooperative factor in the county. Asahel Burnham was the first to establish the cooperative system in the manufacture of cheese on a large scale. [The date in our histories is recorded as 1861, but land and tax assessment records suggest it may have been 1864/1865.]

1894 Fredonia Censor column - **50 Years Ago, Jan 27, 1864**

"The **Canadaway Cheese Factory** is now in process of construction in the town of Arkwright, by A. Burnham, Jr and H. M. Tarbox, composing the firm of A. Burnham and Co. The building situated on the premises of the former, on the road to Cherry Creek, and formerly used for a Shingle Mill, is being remodeled for the factory. The milk from 500 cows is engaged and the establishment will possess facilities for manufacturing the milk of 1,000. Mr. Burnham is also reconstructing his mill, which will consist of three stories, to be used as follows: the lower story as a shingle mill; the second for sawing lumber, and the third for the manufacture of cheese boxes for the factory. A new engine of 30 horse power, constructed by Greenleaf at Silver Creek, has been procured for the establishment, costing with a new tubular boiler, nearly \$2500."

- In 1865 Burnham built a factory at Sinclairville that was the largest in the state at the time. The building was 252 feet long and covered over half an acre of ground. The store room was 120 feet long, three stories high, and could hold 10,000 cheeses, averaging 64 pounds each. That year, 4.3M pounds of milk was manufactured into cheese in the Sinclairville factory. The milk came from 120 patrons, 1450 cows, and produced 7,200 cheese wheels each weighing 60 pounds. Farmers delivered their milk to the factories in 30-40 gallon cans. At Canadaway, the cans were placed on a track to the vats. Later improvements enabled them to pipe the milk directly to the vats from the milk cans after they were weighed. After the cheese was pressed, it was pulled in a two-wheeled cart to the curing room. In October 1865, Burnham claimed to have used 3,000 yards of

cotton cloth for swathing the cheeses at his factories.

- Burnham also built factories in adjacent towns. Mr. Burnham handled a large portion of all cheese made in Western New York. He was called the “Cheese King, or King of the Curd.” He retired to Kentucky in 1884.
- By 1866 there were more than 500 cheese factories in New York State; by 1870 there were more than 1000. In 1875, 90% of the cheese in NYS was made in factories. The factories employed women as well as men, (women brought experience and knowledge of the process to the factories).
- Cheese production continued at the Canadaway under the new owner, Captain John Griswold, an experienced cheese maker. Although factory cheese making suffered as a result of the demand for fluid milk in the region, George Frost and Bert Chase in Cassadaga maintained a profitable cheese making operation at their farms as late as the 1940s.
- A factory at Clear Spring (town of Arkwright) was built in 1867 and in 1880 cheese from this plant was displayed at the State Fair and there was awarded the first premium. At one time there were six factories in the town of Arkwright. Burnham also built a cheese box factory nearby to provide his own containers. For many years the cheese cooperative business was successful – Burnham claimed to have made \$25,000 in his first year of business!
- **July 7, 1915; Fredonia Censor column “Griswold Letters”**
The **Canadaway Cheese Factory** was purchased by the Arkwright Center Grange and has been torn down to be rebuilt into a Grange Hall at Arkwright Center. Sorry to see the old landmark go. This factory was built by Asahel Burnham and H. M. Tarbox and was the first cheese factory built in Chautauqua County. The same summer the **Cold Spring factory** was built near Cowden’s corners in Arkwright, but it was not in operation until later than the Burnham factory.
- Sheridan Cheese Factory (From Sheridan Historical Society)
Factory has been built at Sheridan by R. E. Chapen, P. d. Warren and J. E. Warren.
Factory is 25 x 80 ft; bldg for curing and storing cheese is 25 x 40 ft & 2 stories high.
Lrg fountain of cold water abt 6 rods from bld conveyed to heater

Mr. J. E. Warren and Miss O. Day of Herkimer Co have been engaged to superintend the making of cheese. Both have several years' experience in Herkimer Co.

- According to an 1888 report from the New York State Dairy Commissioner, of the 463 butter and cheese factories inspected in the 14 counties of Western New York, 20 percent (1 in ever 5) were located in Chautauqua County.
- In 1900, the County had 42 cheese factories that produced 4,064,700 pounds of cheese, making us the 9th largest cheese producer in the state.
- Just two years later, the county's 35 cheese factories made 3,307,938 pounds.
- In 1903, the Sinclairville Board of Trade (which had been established by Asahel Burnham in 1871) announced that they had offered for sale 1,840 boxes of cheese: 350 boxes sold at 10 1/8 cents per pound; 1,222 sold at 9 7/8 cents per pound, and 148 sold at 9 3/4 cents per pound. The 350 boxes came from the Sinclairville, Scotch and Centralia factories.
- In 1906, Robert McCubbin of Fredonia leased three large factories: Canadaway, Centralia, and Sinclairville, that were under foreclosure actions. He was well respected as a manager of cheese factories.
- Frank Horton, Sr. summarized the history of the growth of cheese factories in Chautauqua County in 1938 and published his research in the Fredonia Censor. Horton was the owner of the Arkwright Center Cheese Factory, and specialized in making Washed Curd Cheddar that was sold to chain stores in New York and Pennsylvania. He witnessed the raising of that factory in 1871 when he was a small boy, not knowing he would eventually own the business.
- Once cheese factories were established in the county, home production dropped off dramatically. Women may have gladly given up the chore of making cheese at home, since it required so much time and labor. Some historians have speculated that cheese factories allowed women to pursue social causes with their newly found free time (Temperance, Suffrage, labor reform, etc).

PRODUCTION RECORDS OF THE EARLY CHEESE FACTORIES

The cooperative factories published their production results in the local newspapers, for the benefit of their patrons. They reported the amount of milk purchased, the volume of cheese produced, the fee paid to the cheesemaker, and the sale price of the cheese.

- **Feb 5, 1869, Jamestown Journal**

Cheese Factories' Reports

The following are reports of operations last season in two cheese factories in this Co;

Report of the **Sinclearville cheese factory** for 1868: commenced making cheese April 27th closed October 31st. Whole number of pounds of milk received 1,969,587 (246,000 gallons?). Whole number of pounds of cheese made 203,567; average price received per hundred pounds for cheese \$15.27 ½. Whole amount of money received for cheese \$31,190.40. Whole number of cows' milk sent to factory 813; average number of cows 560. Average number of lbs. of milk to one lb. of cured cheese, for the season 9.6 lbs. Price received for making cheese, 2 cents per pound.

Report of the **Canadaway Cheese factory** for 1868: Commenced making cheese May 3rd, closed October 31st. Whole number lbs milk received 2,484,091; whole number lbs cheese made 358,348. Average price received per hundred for cheese \$15,401.10. Whole amount of money received for cheese \$33,778.32. Whole number of cows' milk sent to factory 868. Average number of cows' milk sent to factory 840. Number lbs. milk to lbs. cured cheese, 7.86 lbs.; average number lbs. milk to one lb of cheese 9.62. Price received for making cheese 2 cts. Per lb.

- **Jamestown Journal, Jan 15, 1869**

"We copy from the Fredonia Censor the following interesting exhibit of the **Clear Spring Cheese Factory** for the season:

Commenced making Cheese, May 26; closed Oct 10th.

Am't of milk received – 719,756 lbs.

Am't of cheese made – 68,368 lbs.

Am't of milk per lb. of cheese – 10,027 lbs.

Am't of butter made – 532 lbs.

Our first sale of cheese comprised all made up to June 21st; price 14 cents per pound. It was delivered the last of July. Our second and last sale was delivered Nov 5th at 16 cents per pound. Commenced making butter Aug 24th, and ceased September 25th.

When the milk was brought to the factory but once a day, the patrons skimmed one

mess of milk each day and made butter themselves. While making butter at the factory we skimmed one mess, the night's milk, on the following morning.

On account of the extremely dry weather the yield of milk has been very light, and the amount of cheese has also been much less than would have been made from the same amount of milk in a favorable season. The largest number of cows contributing to the factory at one time was 410; the average number 334. Respectfully submitted, S. a. Farrington, Manufacturer."

- **July 20, 1870 Fredonia Censor**

Cherry Creek Factory has nearly 800 cheeses on hand, weighing about 65 pounds each. Twenty two such are made every day from about 12,500 pounds of milk.

Same issue: **Maple Grove Cheese Factory** – We visited this new establishment last week. It is on the old plank road near Henry Wilson's and is in charge of Miss Jennie Bush, who has had experience in the business in the **Clear Spring Factory**. There are 15 contributors, who supply the milk of 270 cows. They make 8 cheeses of 60 to 65 lbs. each per day. Operations commenced June 2d, and they have over 300 cheese on hand. The arrangement and machinery of the establishment are very complete, and *Miss Bush is demonstrating that competent management of such an establishment is not limited to the masculines.* The water is conducted from a spring in pipes, with so much fall that the boiler is supplied without pumping. The water, after passing under the vats to cool the milk during the night, is conducted to a small water wheel, which moves machinery by which the milk is kept agitated during the night, and is reduced to about 60 degrees in the morning. The arrangement is very convenient, and it is bound to be a success.

- **1889 Buffalo Courier**

Maple Grove cheese factory - They pay N. G. Dunham for manufacturing cheese \$1.20 per hundred for all sold at 10 cents and under, over that price \$1.25

DISPUTES OVER FEES

Occasionally there were disputes over the fee paid the cheesemaker:

- **March 23, 1879 Silver Creek Local**

The first strike of the season occurred at the **Sheridan cheese factory** on Saturday last, the patrons having struck for a reduction of rates in making cheese. A meeting had been called to arrange for another year. Mr. Hubbard the proprietor stated that he could not make the cheese for less than \$1.10 per cwt. (hundred-weight). A motion was

made and carried to pay him \$1.00. The meeting immediately broke up and it was expected that there would be a lock out, but I understand that Mr. Hubbard has reconsidered the matter and called another meeting with a view of accepting the terms of the patrons. [in Little Valley, the price was \$1.25 per cwt]

- **April 6, 1883 Silver Creek Local**

The patrons of the **Sheridan cheese factory** held their annual meeting Saturday afternoon, March 24th. They pay the proprietor Mr. McAdam \$1.20 per hundred for making cheese. Factory opened Monday, April 2d.

Some patrons tried to stretch their milk by adding water. When caught, they were fined and subject to criminal prosecution.

- **July 20 1870 Fredonia Censor:**

A Sheridan man who patronized **Clear Spring Cheese Factory**, has been detected in the act of adding water to the milk he brought to the factory. He put in about 60 pounds of water to each milking of eight cows. A prosecution was commenced, but the offence was finally settled by the scamp paying \$100 (see Fredonia Censor issue July 27, 1870).

- **July 27, 1870 Fredonia Censor**

The Mayville Sentinel calls on District Attorney Skinner to prosecute the **Clear Spring Cheese Factory** patrons for having settled with the Sheridan milk waterer. We understand there was no agreement to "keep shady." The \$100 was accepted in lieu of all damages to be claimed by civil action. The criminal is still liable to indictment.

- **May 11, 1893 Jamestown Evening Journal**

The case of Wm. H. Scott et al vs. Ardes Loun et al, is now on trial. The plaintiff is treasurer of the **Maple Grove cheese factory** in Gerry and seeks to recover from the defendant for furnishing watered milk. Obed Edson appears for the plaintiff and A. C. Pickard for the defense

CHEESE FACTORY FIRES

Cheese factories were large wooden structures, with stoves that occasionally caught fire. Several cheese factories in the county burned and were rebuilt.

- **April 11, 1916 Jamestown Journal**

Cheese Factory Fire - The **Clear Creek cheese factory**, was totally destroyed by fire shortly after 1 o'clock this afternoon. It is believed that the blaze started from an

overheated stove in the cheese room. The building was an old one and burned like matchwood.

The household goods of Francis Cross, who lived in rooms in the front of the building, were saved and also all of the cheese in stock. No estimate could be given of the loss but very little insurance was carried.

- **May 18, 1995 Sherman News**

100 Years Ago, May 1895 – Fire destroyed a creamery near Sinclairville Tuesday night of last week on the site of **Maple Grove cheese factory**. It was insured for \$1400.

- **June 8, 1895 Jamestown Journal**

Sinclairville Commercial – Charles E. Denison has bought the **Warner cheese factory** building and moved it to a point midway between the Chautauqua Road and the road from Sinclairville to Ellington, to accommodate the inhabitants of the former road, many of whom were patrons of the Maple Grove cheese factory which was lately destroyed by fire.

- **Westfield Republication, Jan 7, 1920**

Cheese factories being turned into homes. High price of lumber causes vacant factories to be razed.

The Forestville Cheese factory has been torn down and the lumber piled along side of Water St. Some has been hauled to Dunkirk, to be used to build new homes. Some will be used to erect a new hall at Lincoln Ave and Tenny St.

Local factory has done service for nearly a century. Built of pine and hemlock in the old fashioned way and put up to give service. Three story building about 80 ft long and 30 ft wide. Was about the only way for farmers to dispose of their milk. Thousands of pounds of curd was made and the cheese factory was one of the main institutions in the village.

Contractors have purchased other unused factories at Gerry, Sinclairville, Balsom and South Dayton. All lumber will land in Dnk, to be built into homes for the working class. From the Forestville Press.

PRODUCTION DATA OVER THE YEARS

- Factory Production in Chautauqua County for selected years:

1845 – 974,474 pounds (10th in NY)

1860 - 1,198,361 (12th) **(this would have all been home production because there were no cheese factories in the county in 1860)**

1865 – 2,105,642 (13th), 13 factories, employing 28 men and 28 women

1892 – 3,201,027 (14th), 42 factories

1900 - 4,064,700 (9th), 42 factories

1902 - 3,307,938 pounds, 32 factories

1947 – 412,506 (25TH), 1 factory

1975 – 0

- French's Gazeteer – statistics for Chautauqua County
 - 1870 - 773,830 lbs. produced at home
 - 1875 - 90% of cheese in NYS was made in factories.
 - 1890 - Cheese sold for \$.07 per pound, no more than it sold for in 1865
 - 1900 - Cheese factories in state – 1081/ 194 factories making both butter and cheese
 - 1900 - Cheese production in NYS – 121,820,375 pounds [“full cream cheese”]

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY AND CHEESE TODAY

- Attempts to duplicate the success of an old cheese factory have been known to fail because new factories are very sterile and do not favor the growth of proper bacteria. Old cheese factories were wooden, allowed for different bacterias.
- Today, Chautauqua County dairy farmers produce enough milk to meet the dairy needs of nearly 700,000 people.
- Chautauqua County is ranked #1 in NYS in the number of dairy farms.
- Today, NYS ranks 4th in overall cheese production (716 million lbs of cheese), producing 8% of national total production.
- NYS ranks #1 in cottage cheese production.