Wife of Early Colonist No Doubt First Cheesemaker

Green county histories written up to the present time do not record the beginning of the foreign type cheese industry which has made Green county an outstanding dairy district, not only in Wisconsin but in the entire country.

It is known that cheesemaking in Green county had its inception when the Swiss settlers in New Glarus township were driven to it in desperation after repeated crop failures, but the writers of the time did not anticipate that some day there might be appreciative public sentiment in favor of honoring the pioneers in the cheese industry, who laid the foundation so well that the prosperity of the county in the years to come was built thereon, by erecting suitable tablets to establish for all time the exact location of the first cheese factory that began turning out a product with a cash value in the outside market.

Where would one go in Green county to erect a tablet to mark the spot and honor the achievement as well as the memory of men who are entitled to credit for their vision in launching the cheese business in a practical way so it might grow until there was developed here in Green county what is now recognized as the center of the Swiss cheese industry in this country—and here in Monroe, the Swiss Cheese Capital of the U. S. A.?

The history list of "first things" in Green county published in 1884 does not include the first cheese factory. Indeed, it may be that even at that time it was not realized that a highly specialized industry was taking form as the chief operation of the farming section here.

Review of the history of the early days of commercial cheese making reveals the fact that it is now nearly 70 years since the first cheese factory was put in operation in Green county. Cheesemaking started long before that and the first cheesemaker was doubtless the wife of some Swiss colonist, for the first cheese presses were in the kitchens of the homes.

Skimmed Milk to Make Cheese

As soon as the colonists had cows they had cheese, for they were accustomed to cheese in Switzerland. However, it was not a whole milk cheese for they skimmed their milk for butter. The use of butter was considered extravagant and butter was traded at the market with the eggs for necessities or money that was needed for taxes.
The skim milk was used to make cheese that was bluish in color and
tough in texture but it served as food and was eaten with bread in-
stead of butter, or with boiled potatoes. People now living still re-
member that skim milk cheese. This cheese was made for home
consumption and for that reason is not easily forgotten. The princi-
pal merit of this cheese was in the quality that made it lasting in the
memory of the people who as children were obliged to eat it.

But on the point of the exact location of the factories that were
built for the purpose of making Swiss, limburger and brick cheese
in Green county, nothing very definite has ever been printed beyond
the generally accepted belief that dairying was introduced by the
Swiss colonists who came from Switzerland and founded New Glarus
in 1845 and who in the years following when their efforts at farm-
ing failed, turned to dairying.

Chinch Bug Pest Ruined Crops

This was not until nearly a score of years had passed, for Conrad
Zimmerman, writing the history of the town of New Glarus in 1884,
said:

"The town of New Glarus has been a wheat growing district for
many years. Those hillsides and plateaux have in many instances
stood the abuse of being plowed and sowed with wheat for 12 or 15
successive years. Little else was raised during the time of 20 years,
from 1850 to 1870. But when the price of wheat came down after
the close of the war, when the hillsides were cut up by numerous
ditches, when the arable portion of the fields was washed away in
many places, and above all, when the chinch bugs appeared and ate
up the wheat crop year after year, then the farmers were forced to
think of the next thing on the program.

"Either cheese or nothing, and happily we got cheese. The old
wheat fields were seeded with clover and grass. Cows were put on
them. Cheese factories were built. After the fact was proved that
there was a ready market for cheese, it only took five or six years
until cheese making was the main branch of work for the whole
farming population. It not only pays better but the farms are con-
stantly made more productive."

A pailful of skimmed milk, a stove kettle and a wooden hoop
split from a sapling, it was stated, was the extent of equipment for
the first cheesemaking in the homes. The cheese was round and
the size of a milk pan and was flattened by heavy weights used to
press out the moisture.

Home cheesemaking was carried on to greater or less extent and
as operations enlarged, it became necessary to use what was called
the cheese house, usually an addition like a small shed where a
copper kettle might be used, with fire boxes of brick or stone, with a
crane constructed to swing the kettle on or off the fire.

Eighteen factories were operating in New Glarus township at that time, 1884.

First Cows Came in 1846

Drovers from Ohio came to Exeter in the spring of 1846 with cows and these were purchased in sufficient number to give each family one, it was written by Judge John Luchsinger in his history of the colony. The cost was $12 for each and was paid out of an unexpended balance of $1,000 aid that had been sent from Switzerland.

"The colonists excelled in the care of the cow and here the Switzer turned to his benefactor in the old country," he said.

In 1846 the livestock inventory of New Glarus township was 1 bull, 18 cows, 15 heifers and 25 calves.

Dairying as a business was certainly in its infancy at that time.

Colony's Situation Desperate

Even until after the civil war the Swiss colonists were in desperate circumstances, being obliged to go to the length of their immediate resources for their own existence since they had little money and lived almost entirely upon the things they were able to grow, the wild game, such as deer and rabbits and the fish in the streams. They traded the best of their produce for flour and sugar.

The rennet starter was made from the stomach of calves, cured at home and salted down for future use and it was long afterward that rennet was imported from Switzerland.

Much of the earlier cheese was called Schab-Zieger. The cakes weighed a few ounces that became very hard in curing and was grated for table use. This was not a commercial proposition but served well the uses of the Swiss settlers. This variety of cheese, also known as green cheese, may be purchased in the local market at the present time, but it is now imported from Switzerland.

The fact is well established that the Green county cheese industry originated in the homes of the early Swiss settlers.

Washington Township Reference

There is reference to early cheesemaking in the history of Washington township.

Adam Blumer, native of Switzerland, came here in 1849, locating in Washington township, where he entered 240 acres of land from the government, erected a log house, purchased two pairs of oxen and put the oxen immediately to work as he commenced plowing and improving the land. He had been reared on a dairy farm in Switzerland and learned the art of cheesemaking. The first spring,
which was in 1850, he bought five cows and made butter and cheese, and branched out into grain and stock raising. He died in 1855 leaving a widow and five children. The youngest was Adam Blumer, who succeeded his brother-in-law, Jacob Hefty, in the brewery business in Monroe. The son married March 23, 1865, and located on the old homestead. He began making limburger cheese in 1868, keeping at that time 20 cows. He continued the manufacture of cheese and in 1884 had 75 cows, which was more than other farmers of that day thought of keeping. The farm was increased to 476 acres and as many as 80 to 100 cows were milked in later years, when he had as high as 150 cattle on the farm.

**Known as First Cheesemaker**

Rudolph Benkert, who came to Monroe in 1867, was known in after years as the first cheesemaker in Green county. He went to work the same year he came on the Martin Zumbrunnen farm in Washington township. He started experimental limburger making in a small building and the cheese was taken to the cellar of the home for curing. Cheesemaking up to that time had been carried on in a haphazard sort of way in the homes without commonly practiced methods and no thought of uniform shaping.

Mr. Benkert was born in Canton Berne, Switzerland, May 22, 1841. He was the son of John Benkert and when he came to this country with his parents in 1851 they settled in Oneida county, New York, where limburger was first made in this country. He learned something about it there and when he came here he began making limburger with moulds in the form of the small bricks. This work was carried on by him in a small way in 1867 and it earned for him the reputation of being the first cheesemaker in Green county.

**Also Made American Cheese**

When he was married to Catherine Zimmerman, of Washington township, Feb. 17, 1871, they moved onto a farm in Monroe township where he built a factory and made cheese from the milk of his own cows and milk delivered by several farmers. He did not buy the milk but they made it up as a company. He made cheese for 20 years or more, making both limburger and American. The American cheese he sold to grocery stores at Freeport at 8 cents a pound and the limburger only brought 6 cents. When limburger was up to 10 cents he thought he was making money.

He retired from farming in 1905 and moved to Monroe, where he died Feb. 20, 1918.

While living in New York he enlisted in 1863 in the 1st New York Mounted Rifles, under General Butler. He served to the close of the war. He was a dispatch carrier for six months. Although
wounded in each arm in a cavalry charge at Bontack, Va., he was incapacitated only two weeks during his enlistment. Mr. Benkert served as assessor in Monroe township for several years. He was a republican and much concerned in the welfare of the farmer.

Early Maker Still Lives

John Marty, one of the first cheesemakers in Green county, lives to relate his experiences as a cheesemaker in 1868. He is now 93 and with his wife by second marriage lives with his children on the old homestead in Mount Pleasant township, where he located in 1864. The stone building built in 1868 as the cheese house is still standing. It was enlarged by a stone addition when it was converted into a shelter for farm machinery. He was one of the honored cheesemakers in the 1935 Cheese Day parade.

Mathias Marty, oldest son, says his father made cheese in a small way, having his own milk and buying milk from Thomas Conway and John Jenny, who were his neighbors.

Tried “Hard Cheese” in 1868

First he made what was called “hard cheese,” of skimmed milk after the style of Swiss cheese but it did not work out just right. His building had two rooms which he figured would take care of the making and curing the same as in Switzerland, where he had seen the above ground factory, but the building was too warm and he had to move the cheese to the cellar of his home in order to keep it on the shelves.

He made round Swiss which he peddled in Madison with butter when there was no other market for it, continuing his operations until about 1885 when a cheese company was formed and Jacob Karlen bought the milk. A new factory was built in 1905 but it has been idle now for 20 years.

Uncles Owned Monticello

Mr. Marty’s uncles, Jacob Marty and Mathias Marty, bought the whole village of Monticello in the forties and owned much land in Mount Pleasant.

John Marty came in 1864 with his father, John Marty, and worked out the first two winters. Then he bought the farm from his uncle, Jacob Marty, who went to Texas for his health. The farm consisted of 300 acres, and is located five miles southeast of Monticello. Mr. Marty was born in Canton Glarus, Switzerland. He has eight children living; Mathias, Henry, Jacob and Mary, at home, Adam Marty, Monroe; Mrs. Anna Balziger, Spring Grove, John Marty, Janesville, and Herman Marty, California. Henry Babler, Monroe, is a brother to Mrs. Marty.