Factory System Followed
Farmers' Cheese House

The development of the factory system followed the farmers' cheese house and early accounts, first published in the Monroe Evening Times in 1915, reveal Nick Gerber as the founder of the first farmers' cheese factory in Green county.

This was in 1868 and the next twenty years covered the most important growth in the pioneering period of the industry.

The founding of New Glarus was followed by the arrival of many newcomers and the opening of cheese factories offered added incentive drawing Swiss immigrants, an influx of foreign population that continued until restricted immigration laws were enforced. Every fall through the eighties these immigrants came in groups, men, women and whole families, sometimes occupying their own day coach enroute from New York.

Experienced cheesemakers were necessary and while skilled makers were brought from Switzerland many youngsters in their teens went into the work in the factories with their elders and became makers capable of operating their own factory. Their accumulations enabled them to buy farms where they shared in the prosperity dairying was bringing the farmers. Thus they contributed qualities of stability, energy, honesty and thrift to the farming community of Green county.

Although coming too late to have part in the pioneering necessary in the founding of the industry there was need for them to maintain the progress under way as the business was extended.

There was land to be had in unsettled country. As the industry developed land values increased. Farms were in demand and settlers went into debt to buy them as they learned to use their credit to make money. They were financed by farm mortgages, which was no reflection upon the farmer, as he valued his credit and his mortgage was regarded as gilt-edged security. Increase in land values helped make the earlier farmers wealthy.

Began as Home Enterprise

Where the cheese business was a strictly home enterprise at the beginning, it began to attract notice and outsiders appeared on the ground. New competition entered into the transactions between farmers and dealers and dealers and their established trade rela-
tionships. Milk condenseries came to compete in milk prices with farmer owned factories. Some survived and took the place of cheese factories while an organization like the Borden in operation 35 years in Monroe finally moved out, sacrificing a costly plant. There are still successful condenseries, among them the Pet company at New Glarus, operating on a large scale as the chief industry, successfully overcoming cheese factory competition years ago.

Mr. Gerber was a native of Switzerland, born in Canton Berne in 1836. He learned cheesemaking there in 1856 and came to America in 1857. He located at Booneville, Oneida county, N. Y., and introduced the manufacture of limburger cheese in New York state. He operated this factory six years. Then he moved to Wheeling, near Chicago, but a factory he opened there did not prove successful. He came to Green county in 1868 and built and equipped a limburger factory in the town of New Glarus on the farm of Albert Babler. This, it was stated by the Monroe Evening Times, was the first farmer cheese factory operating in Green county.

The next year, in 1869, Mr. Gerber started the first Swiss cheese factory, which was located on the Dietrich Freitag farm in Washington township.

Mr. Gerber was familiar with the operation of the factory system in New York and Ohio and persuaded the settlers to build factories and cellars and deliver their milk to the factory for outright purchase.

Farmers Opposed Factory System

Farmers at first did not respond favorably to the factory system plan of making cheese. Many had made Swiss cheese for years on their farms from the milk of their own herds and were satisfied. Besides, the peculiar process of making Swiss cheese, which had not varied for centuries, made them believe that it was impracticable to work up the milk in large volume. Experiments proved that these opinions were wrong and that cheese of better quality and greater uniformity could be made by the factory system.

Factories were first operated as a string, the farmers selling the milk, the maker and supplies being furnished by the buyer of the milk. The price paid at the beginning was as low as 40 cents a hundred but as the product began gaining a market in the large cities the price started stepping up to 50 and 60 cents and finally to 75 cents, but this was not until years afterward.

Gerber Started Factory Chain

Nick Gerber in time was conducting six or eight cheese factories in New Glarus and Washington townships, and he was buying the
cheese from others so that the industry at that time could be considered as being fairly launched on a basis that was proving helpful to the farmers. Times had been very tight and money that came into the districts for cheese aided immensely in putting the farmers on their feet.

The interesting volume of Green county history written by Miss Helen M. Bingham in 1876 touches upon this budding industry that was due to spread over the county in a way that establishes the large part Mr. Gerber played in it at that time. He is credited with three factories in Washington and New Glarus townships producing 227,900 pounds of Swiss cheese. Jacob Karlen had three factories making 24,000 pounds, John Boss was making 24,000 pounds in one factory and G. Beller 22,000 pounds in one factory. There were four limburger factories with production of 39,000 pounds as follows: Jacob Freitag 5,000, Paulus Kundert 6,000, George Legler 8,000 and Stauffacher & Weiss 20,000.

"From the very first," Miss Bingham wrote, "the Swiss made cheese to use at home and sell in the county, but its manufacture in large quantities was delayed until five or six years ago when Nicholas Gerber started two factories in southern New Glarus and one in Washington. At first only Swiss cheese was made but of the two lines of industry the manufacture of limburger cheese is now the more important."

14 Washington Factories in 1876

Washington had 14 factories and was then distinguished for its cheese, according to Miss Bingham’s history. The output in 1876 was 225,000 pounds of Swiss, sold at an average of 12 cents a pound, and 775,000 pounds of limburger at 10 cents a pound.

D. and H. Freitag and M. Zimmerman had Swiss and limburger factories; G. Wittwer, R. Karlen and J. Zimmerman Swiss factories, and N. Gerber, Jacob Karlen, G. Beller, C. Theiler, John Boss and Miller, Frautschy & Company had the limburger factories.

Outside of New Glarus and Washington townships there were 15 factories making Swiss and limburger in the county, four in Exeter, four in Clarno, one in Sylvester and six in Mt. Pleasant. Monroe had no cheese shippers at that time.

These figures, while not bearing upon the point of origin, indicate that dairying was going forward in the seventies. Mr. Gerber’s part in the change that was coming in the farmer’s situation was recognized and appreciated, although rivalry in the business in the years following deprived him of some of the credit he deserved for it was due to his earlier efforts that dairymen continued to derive benefit in being able to sell their cheese and receive cash for it.

Children of the first dairymen still living hereabouts have pleasant memories of this kindly man as he traveled the country by horse
and buggy to his cheese factories, as this was the only way he had of keeping in touch with them. The struggling dairymen welcomed his visits as they were mutually interested in an improvement of conditions and relations existing between them were the best. Mr. Gerber wore a long black beard and always drove a white horse hitched to a single buggy. He made regular trips over the road in New Glarus and Washington townships where he carried on his principal operations.

**Gerber's Reward Inadequate**

There are still traces in some of the neighborhoods or among those of the younger generations now grown up who came from his factory districts of the affection farmers held for him at the time when he was alone in the field. His nursing of the infant industry did not permit of the financial reward his efforts deserved, and although his influence and activities were productive of results there were others to participate in the benefits resulting with enlarged development as they became competitors in producing and marketing.

The years were eventful because of rapid expansion which brought on a critical period that almost proved disastrous. There was a slump in prices that created a problem in distribution because there was not sufficient outlet for the product of all the factories engaged in making.

When there were only a few factories producing a small amount of cheese it could be easily disposed of but new markets had to be found as the production mounted. As the market became glutted, prices went down to the point where farmers suffered losses, even where they were selling their milk under contract. However, the farmers had a taste of the better times and willingly sustained losses in order to help the buyers who were seriously pressed and on the verge of ruin and being forced out of business. Then, as new markets could be opened, prices advanced again and the permanence of the industry appeared to be definitely established.

**Wittwer's Tragic Death**

Unfortunately, Mr. Gerber did not recover the losses he met with in 1878 at New Glarus when the cheese industry suffered a severe blow resulting in hard times. He was one of the organizers of the Green County Cheese Manufacturing company Jan. 22, 1878, with Gottlieb Wittwer, Gottlieb Beller and Edward Ruegger, which failed after the tragic death of Mr. Wittwer in a Denver hotel Feb. 23, 1883. Money was tied up in cheese and there was no movement because of market slump. Mr. Wittwer's trip to the west was
made in an effort to find sale for the cheese. Mr. Wittwer's death, presumably suicide, precipitated the failure of the company with losses that fell heavily upon all who were interested. The cheese in stock had to be sold in the settlement of affairs. Limburger was sold as low as 3 cents a pound in order to convert it into cash.

Mr. Gerber moved in 1880 to Brooklyn to take advantage of improved shipping facilities, but he remained there only a year, coming to Monroe in April, 1882. He retired except for dealing in cheese factory supplies he received from Switzerland, at the same time engaging in the saloon business with Edward Ruegger, conducting what was known as the Spring hotel on South Jackson street opposite Spring square. Mr. Ruegger became sheriff in 1882 and Mr. Gerber remained in business alone, Mr. Ruegger later returning to the old stand while Mr. Gerber moved into the old McKeny block at the southwest corner of the square.

Cheese Pioneer in Iowa, Too

In 1893 Mr. Gerber left Monroe, moving to Luverne, Ia., where he again pioneered in the manufacture of cheese. He later engaged in the retail cheese business in Omaha but owing to breaking health he returned to Monroe, where he died May 8, 1903, aged 67 years. Mrs. Gerber, his widow, is still a resident of Monroe. Mrs. Sophie Alder, 2514 Tenth street, is a daughter by his first wife. Mrs. Alder was a child when the family located at Wheeling, near Chicago, where they remained while the father came to Green county to interest the farmers in the factory system. At last they were ready to move to New Glarus, but they were delayed by the fire that swept Chicago in October, 1871. Children still surviving besides Mrs. Alder are Mrs. Ed. Leibly, Rice Lake; Mrs. I. P. Harrison and Mrs. William Kempt, Winnipeg, Canada; Ed. Gerber, Kansas City, Mo.; Will Gerber, Los Angeles, and Henry Gerber, Council Bluffs, Ia.

Crude but Honest Poem Tribute

After the death of Nick Gerber in 1903, there was found among his effects a poem entitled, "A Song of Cheese," that was written by John Peter Luchsinger, of Washington township, Green county, in 1882. It was dedicated to Mr. Gerber, who 14 years previously had come to Green county from New York and started the foreign cheese industry on the foundation laid by the Swiss settlers. At the time the poem was published in 1903 it was agreed that Mr. Gerber really deserved this crude but honest tribute.

In translating the poem, which was written in German, effort was made to preserve the quaint ideas and the verses, the translation being as follows:

14
A SONG OF CHEESE

I will sing a song of long, long ago,
   A story old and true,
When oats and corn were failures
   And wheat, through chinch bugs, too.

Our needs were great, and interest
   Had gone to highest notch—
And farmers all around us thought
   That they had made a botch.

Our lands to us no harvest gave,
   The ground was almost bare,
Earth washed down from every hill
   And stones most anywhere.

A savior was surely due
   To help us in our need,
And he arrived, and then he said,
   "Change your affairs with speed."

"Bid all the chinch bugs go abroad
   "By seeding your acres down;
"Keep only cows and feed your hogs
   "I'll quickly change your frown."

"Plant only corn and nothing more
   "To feed your hogs and swine,
"Build better barns, milk more cows
   "And riches will be thine."

He started in and showed us how
   To turn the milk to gold,
With two or three cheese factories
   To which the milk was sold.

Then money soon commenced to flow,
   A full, great, golden stream,
Which all into our coffers came—
   It was just like a dream.

Nick Gerber was this hero's name,
   Who came to us from far,
Who was our teacher in this art,
   Who was our guiding star.

If cows could talk and have some sense
   How thankful they would be
And to Nick Gerber as recompense
   A monument you'd see.
But then the calves, they felt not so,
Of milk they always had their fill,
But now they bleat a tale of woe,
They're fed on whey and swill.

So let us then all thankful be
To Nick, who did this all,
For he it was, and none but he,
Who started first the ball

Which rolled us to prosperity
And to our wealth galore;
Therefore we can but grateful be
Now and forever more.

Of course I know that I will not
Reap thanks from everyone,
For there are some who claim that they
Did more than anyone.

But I don't care! Give praises to
Who praises does deserve,
I know that Nick, before them all,
Came here, and on his nerve

He started this; and now you see
Yourself what it became,
Therefore, I say, here's three times three
To Old Nick Gerber's name!