Swiss Cheeseland—No. 1

Gerber’s Factory Launched Industry in County in 1869

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the most significant event in Green county history, the opening of the first farmer factory for the manufacture of Swiss cheese.

It was the start of the factory system and the pioneering step in production of regular Swiss and limburger types in Wisconsin.

Changes have come with the years and the old frontiers have been driven back in places but the general geographic locale, with Monticello and Monroe as concentration points, gives promise of holding firm as the greatest centralization for specialized cheese production in dairy history.

The steadfast resistance to encroachments is a tribute first to the vision of Nick Gerber, who founded the first Swiss factory in 1869, and to the dairy minded settlers from Switzerland who occupied the area which became known as “Bilten,” a district without definite limits but settled by people of unlimited capacity for knowing how to put the land to work.

Nick Gerber introduced manufacture of limburger in the Mohawk valley of New York state before coming here. He never realized upon the enterprise he fostered in Green county, but the residents of Bilten and the contiguous area, with Monroe as its hub, went on to build an industry to which the county owes much of its comfortable condition of today.

Mr. Gerber’s first limburger factory in Green county on the former Albert Babler farm, New Glarus township, and the first Swiss factory on the Dietrich Freitag (now the Nick Freitag) farm in Washington township, disappeared long ago. Nothing remains today except a portion of the latter building, now a machine shed, and two markers erected by the Green County Historical society ten years ago.

His third factory, however, started in 1870 in Washington township for limburger making flourishes today as the Wittenwyler-Burgy factory, producing a delicate brand in a greatly improved plant.

Best picture of Green county’s old Swiss cheese frontier is found in a 25-mile radius north of Monroe, including Monticello, Washington, New Glarus and Monroe townships. Anyone who has an interest in what has been happening amid these hills for the last eighty years can see the story of Swiss cheese, of Bilten settlement and the modern day perfection of dairying and factory production in a brief afternoon’s ride in the colorful countryside.
It will be a ride revealing in striking contrasts with methods of the past and yet giving full evidence of the unchanged strength of the people and the system which made the Swiss and limburger industry flourish.

Driving north from Monroe, one finds that Monticello is the threshold for entry into the land of cheese. It is a village which, as a center for the immediate cheesemaking area, reflects the character and enterprise of the families who came from Switzerland more than a century ago.

In that century the lands have been farmed diligently but with care. There are no signs of neglect or deterioration. Everywhere in the farmlands and in the village there is a Swiss air of prosperity.

In 1847 Monticello was unnamed and not recognized as a stopping place by the government mail carrier between Monroe and Madison. Now it has all the indications of modern community progress, meanwhile retaining architecture of foreign derivation.

On the village's main street are two structures of rough stone exterior with rounded line and tower effect. The names “chateau” and “chalet” further suggest Switzerland. These buildings are of native limestone quarried from the hills from the same underlying bedrock known to impart desired qualities to milk products.

Monticello was dependent on stage coach transportation until the Illinois Central was built through from Monroe to Madison in 1888, the same year that the Milwaukee road extended the Brodhead branch connecting Monticello and New Glarus.

The first brick building block was erected in 1888 by J. C. Steiman who was long an influential citizen of Monticello and a county official. He was familiar with the cheese industry from its infancy. His sons and grandsons followed in the building profession with advanced ideas of architecture in home, business structures and modern cheese factories.

On reaching the end of the main street, the tourist may turn briefly to the right to see the Monticello North Side Swiss factory, one of the larger producing units in the area.

But it is to the left from the main street that the threshold to the pioneering cheese county lies. A modern hard surfaced road leads out of the village in a sweeping turn cutting through pasturelands into the valley known as “lange” where Brown Swiss cattle have grazed these many years. The silver tones of their bells can be heard throughout the outdoor grazing season as they welcome the tourist into the land of the Swiss.

A mile or so off Monticello's main street is the Nick Freitag farm. It is identified by buildings on both sides of the road.

And one of these buildings on the right was the cradle of the Swiss cheese industry in Green county. A stone marker with a bronze plate, on the left almost at the driveway to the house, tells the story.