Swiss Cheeseland—No. 6

Gerber Was Casualty Of Early Cheese Battle

There has been nothing spontaneous about the development of the Swiss cheese industry in Green county. The infant, fathered by Nick Gerber, had to battle for its life almost from the cradle.

For twenty years the settlers had been raising wheat with notable lack of success. Milk was skimmed for butter and the skim milk went into cheese for home use. Identify as to type was completely lacking until Gerber founded the first factories in 1868 and 1869.

Consumers were tiring of skim milk cheese and the demand was for cheddar or American type. Some even went abroad to London but heavy expense and losses cut off this market.

Swiss and limburger cheeses were new and demand had to be created. Curiously enough it was New Glarus, center of the first Swiss settlement, which almost struck the death blow to the struggling industry. In 1870 an American cheese factory was opened in the village which never had a Swiss cheese plant. The factory was supplied by 400 cows.

Dayton began manufacturing American cheese with 180 cows and American factories also were started in Mt. Pleasant township, York and Albany. By 1873, there were 4,260 cows in the American cheese production picture as compared with 1,300 cows supplying Gerber’s factories.

Gradually, however, the arguments of Gerber for foreign type cheesemaking began to gain notice. He claimed 250 pounds of Swiss cheese to the cow and that his four limburger factories averaged about 300 pounds.

“Still we are not happy,” he admitted as he argued with the farmers being influenced against his venture.

He gained further support, however, from Farmers Grove, Adams township, where Jacob Karlen, Monroe, began opening limburger plants. The size of the checks Gerber was receiving from buyers in the east also began to interest the farmers.

Gerber’s Green county factories numbered eight, including one in Mt. Pleasant where he made cheese and resided with his family. He bought the milk from farmers and had his own cheese outlets. As new factories appeared, he also bought cheese and the industry was considered to be fairly launched on a basis helpful to farmers.

Gerber met with financial reverses. He spent ten years in pioneering before a serious market slump and new competition caught

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up with him. His resources were swept away and his Green County Cheese Manufacturing Co. failed. He went to eastern Iowa to make a new start but after a second unfortunate ending in 1882 he retired from the cheese business and returned to Monroe where he died May 9, 1903.

Karlen, John Boss, Jacob Regez and the many others who followed went on to promote and foster growth of the foreign type industry which now has Monroe for the trading center.

New Glarus later lost its only factory when the condensery business came into flower. Condenseries now operating at New Glarus, Albany and Browntown have had the effect of pressing inward on cheese factory milk sources, as well as moving outward to take the milk of adjacent counties.

In 1948, these condenseries produced 45,543,000 pounds of evaporated milk, 2,255,000 pounds of powdered skim milk and 2,043,000 of powdered whole milk. Butter production was 3,329,000 pounds.

There was some indication last year, however, that cheese factories were more than holding their own.

While the condenseries and butter plants showed declines from the total of 58,600,000 pounds for the former and from the 4,067,000 pound butter output in 1945, cheese production made a healthy gain from 1945 to 1948.

Green county factories had set a new high in Swiss production in 1945 of 13,095,000. The total had climbed to another record of 14,569,000 in 1948.

Limburger production in 1945, however, of 2,538,000 pounds was above last year's 2,265,000. Brick was up slightly from 1945's 255,000 pounds to 266,000 in 1948. Green county American output in 1948 was only 322,000 pounds.

The soaring Swiss production has resulted despite the dwindling number of factories. There were 152 plants in Green county twenty years ago producing 16,000,000 pounds of all types of cheese, half of it Swiss.

The factory figure had dropped to 125 ten years ago but Swiss output climbed to 10,655,000 pounds. Last year 80 factories produced a total of 17,903,000 pounds of all types of cheese, including 14,569,000 pounds of Swiss. This is 33.7 per cent of the total Swiss output in Wisconsin.

This bespeaks constant improvement of factory efficiency and techniques, more modern plants, improved herds and farm practices. The higher production came from fewer factories, a narrowing milk land area due to inroads of other dairy products plants and in some cases fewer but more productive cows.

These changes, including streamlined factories, however, have not entirely erased the marks left over by pioneers of Bilten area who had the strongest faith in the cheese industry.
TWO OF COUNTY'S FINEST—The Town Hall factory (upper photo), west of Monticello on county trunk C, and the Monticello North Side Swiss plant are prime examples of the recent trend toward remodeling or replacement. The former, with Sam Bahler as maker, replaced four older units and started production in July, 1948. The Monticello factory, one of Green county's large producers, completed remodeling and expansion last year. The Escher brothers, Fred and Arthur, are makers, having succeeded their father, Emil. (Times staff photos).