

NTOWN

Stories of Battery Dairy provide glimpse of past

BY EDWARD M. GILBRETH

I'm starting to realize that one of the nice things about writing a column is looking into topics about which I know little, if anything. That way I get to educate myself in the process and hopefully you, the gentle (I'm assuming) reader.

With that in mind, one of my favorite ladies whom I see professionally (as one of my patients, I mean) is Mrs. Jonnie Rivers. Her son is Dr. Dale Cannon, a local boy whom I got to know years ago before medical school and who is now a prominent cardiologist in the Midlands.

Mrs. Rivers stopped by the office the other day for a visit and provided me with some materials that she thought might be of interest. Enclosed in an envelope was a synopsis of the so-called Battery Dairy written up by one of the historical societies. That was certainly a welcome surprise, because I know nothing about it. Of greater interest to me was what I found attached to the synopsis: a couple of vintage Ashley Cooper articles from August 1971, addressing the same subject matter. I'll see if I can put it all together halfway intelligently so a few of us can learn a little something.

The Battery (aka Lawton) Dairy was located at 43 South Battery, about four doors west of King Street, just a little removed from the Fort Sumter parking lot. (Remember that the Fort Sumter was a hotel at the time.)

The dairy's roots go back to at least 1865, when it was owned and operated by W.W. Lawton, following his return to James Island after the war. Lawton died in 1916, at which time his widow, with the help of their son, St. John Alison Lawton, took charge, but

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not without hiring managers to do some of the work.

The Lawton family owned the Lawton Bluff Plantation for 100 years, until it sold in 1947. The plantation stocked the cows that provided milk for the dairy. The milk was transported by boat across the Ashley River to the Battery Dairy dock, and then moved the short distance to the dairy proper, where it could be processed and distributed.

A writer to Ashley Cooper who identified himself only as JVN mailed in a colorful description about how the clanging of cans and the tinkling of bottles were disruptive to some of the residents in the immediate area surrounding the dairy.

He also added that a gap in the seawall marked the former site of the dairy's dock, which was apparently the only one off The Battery other than the city dock where the harbor cruise boats landed. JVN then seemed to recall that "the permit to build the dock was granted as a concession to obtain permission from the Lawtons to build Murray Boulevard. All of this was B.Z. — before zoning."

From what I gather, a fair amount of bottling was done right there at the plant. But interestingly, another reader by the name of May S. Tuten suggested that some of the milk was transported around town by horse-drawn carriage in large metal vats, and then dispensed to customers in whatever containers the latter had conveniently handy.

I think that's quite fascinating. Can't you picture a rickety wooden carriage straining under the weight of all that milk as the at-

tendants scurried around shooing the flies and keeping the horses in line?

An intriguing side feature of the dairy was its utility as a men's social club. Mrs. Howard C. Prettyman described in a letter something called the "Rats Nest ... a very exclusive man's club started by my father. A group of his friends got together and rented the upstairs over the dairy, fixed it up, and it was enjoyed by them very much. Among them were Tudor Chisolm, Bill Morrison, Norman Welch and Simms McDowell. . . ."

Wow! I imagine there was a fair amount of revelry among that group and would like to wish that Mrs. Prettyman is still around to tell us more.

The dairy apparently did well until the 1929 crash, at which time it, like so many other businesses, experienced financial ruin. Sold to the West End Dairy sometime in the early to mid-1930s, the site apparently continued to operate for a short while before being sold to the Fort Sumter Hotel, and then later resold as a private residence.

According to a diary kept by Mrs. W.W. Lawton, wife of the founder, the Battery Dairy is supposed to have been the oldest in the South. As I said, I don't recall ever hearing a thing about it, and I know there's lots more to the story than what you see here.

Be that the case, however, I want to thank Mrs. Rivers again for providing me with a glimpse into the past that, for the most part, escapes contemporary recognition.

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