

# The Rise of Dairy Farming

## *Wisconsin Historical Society in Wisconsin*

Wheat was the earliest and most important of the cash crop for white settlers in Wisconsin. It required initial capital investment and was fairly easy to grow, allowing farmers to harvest two crops year. The high rate of financial return made wheat an especially attractive crop for homesteaders during the middle of the 19th century.

Wheat provided a way for new immigrants in Wisconsin to farm cheaply and to deliver a product that many people needed. From 1840 to 1880, Wisconsin was considered "America's breadbasket" because one-sixth of the wheat grown in the nation came from Wisconsin. The early success of wheat farming helped Wisconsin's agriculture develop more rapidly than it did in other states.

Despite its appeal, wheat also had risks and disadvantages. It was hard on the soil, which it quickly depleted of nitrogen. Depending on the vagaries of the weather and insect infestation, yield could vary substantially from year to year. By the late 1850s, the price of wheat began to drop as Wisconsin yields and quality diminished and competition increased from farmers in Iowa and Minnesota. Disaster struck in the 1860's when tiny insects known as chinch bugs began devouring Wisconsin wheat crops.

To meet these challengers, farmers began experimenting with a variety of alternatives to wheat. Feed crops, rather than cash crops, were better suited to Wisconsin's soil and climate, and came to characterize the state's agriculture in the late nineteenth century. Charles Rockwell was one of the earliest cheese makers in Wisconsin, beginning production at

Koshkonong, near Fort Atkinson in Jefferson County in 1837. Dairying emerged as the most viable alternative to wheat. By 1899, more than 90 percent of Wisconsin farms raised dairy cows.

Much of the success of Wisconsin dairying can be attributed to the efforts of William Dempster Hoard, who tirelessly promoted the industry for nearly 50 years. The University of Wisconsin School of Agriculture also played an active role in encouraging dairy farming throughout the southern part of the state.

The dairy industry expanded rapidly in Wisconsin for several reasons. Many of the enterprising dairy farmers who settled in southern Wisconsin in the 1840s and 1850s were New Yorkers. At the time, New York was the leading dairy producer in the nation and they brought with them the skills needed for commercial dairying and butter and cheese production. Although it was more difficult to produce, most of the earliest dairy operations made cheese rather than butter because it kept longer.

Dairying was also helped by the University of Wisconsin, which actively promoted the industry in the late 19th century through scientific research. The first professor of agriculture, William A. Henry, used the university's farm to experiment with new dairying methods. The university also, promoted the use of cylindrical silos for storing feed for cattle during the winter. Professor Stephen Baccock developed the first test for butterfat content in milk, which allowed high quality butter and cheese to be manufactured consistently, and the university's College of Agriculture pioneered testing for

bacteria that led to practical methods of milk pasteurization.

In the 1870's leaders, of the growing Wisconsin cheese industry organize several professional organizations to promote their product and to overcome farmer opposition to the cheese industry. The transition from wheat husbandman to herdsman had been difficult for many farmers, and the adjustment to the more regulated and confining routine of the factory supplier had proved especially trying. Among the most famous of the organizations was the Wisconsin Dairyman's Association, founded in Watertown in 1872. Though primarily a marketing association, the Dairyman's Association also provided education in new dairying methods through its publication and meetings.

In the 1880s, the university began offering agricultural "short courses" and "winter courses" in Madison to educate farmers on the benefits of dairying. Its Farmers' Institutes, held around the state, also brought farmers and scientists together to share ideas,

Finally, the dairy industry was helped by the German and Scandinavian immigrant families who were quick to adopt dairying as a profitable way to farm. They also specialized in the European-style cheeses that appealed to consumers, and Wisconsin became known for its Swiss cheese. By 1915, Wisconsin had become the leading dairy state in the nation, producing more butter and cheese than any other state.

Today, the state of Wisconsin's dairy industry provides jobs, food and public services to the state and contributes 43.3 billion dollars to the state's economy.