

Alfred Turner, Sr. Tells of the Rigors of Milk Hauling

"When you started out each morning, it was an expedition," recalls Alfred Turner Sr., who began hauling milk for the former Page Milk Company more than seventy years ago.

Chains on tires were the only help in traveling over unplowed roads and bucking snow drifts. There were weeks of wallowing in the mud of miles of unpaved roads each Spring.

"I was stuck in lots of places," says the 97-year-old Turner with a grin. "I'd walk to the nearest farmer and have him pull me out with a team of horses."

"In the winter time when the horses hadn't been working, they didn't have the pulling power. I got stuck one time in snow drifts south of Finn Corners (in the town of Pine River). It took us about four hours to get through."

Turner began hauling milk from the town of Texas (Marathon County) and town of Pine River farms starting in 1926 with a Page Milk truck. He purchased his first Chevrolet the following year for less than a thousand dollars to continue a quarter-century career as a trucker.

"Roads would be knee deep in mud in the spring," he remembered. Even highways 64 and W had sink holes. Highway W, the Wausau-Merrill route on the east side of the Wisconsin River, wasn't blacktopped until it was relocated in 1948.

"I hauled lots of times in the winter with a sleigh and horses and in spring with a wagon and horses. I had a long box wagon."

Turner recalled once coming upon an old farmer also hauling milk with horses. One had fallen into a sink hole atop Big Eddy hill and Turner couldn't get around it.

The farmer was standing there wringing his hands wondering what to do. One horse was lying on its side and wouldn't get up. We tied a rope on it's feet and it rolled over.

"The horse jumped up. I thought the farmer was going to kiss me he was so happy. He said he'd never haul milk again."

Milk haulers used what were considered "ton and a half" trucks, with a platform and stake racks. "I sold the milk route to Richard Nissen in 1951 when we had to have enclosed box trucks," Turner said.

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"Lincoln County bought the first two trucks with snow plows in 1928," Turner said. "That was the beginning of the end for sleighs." In the early years only highways 51 and 64 were plowed. Turner's milk hauling route was generally south of highway 64.

"I was kind of a spare hand; my route was short. If someone else got stuck in the mud or snow or broke down I had to go help haul."

Milk production dropped significantly during the

winter months. "Some farmers wouldn't have hardly enough milk for their personal use and maybe have only one or two cans a day for Pages," Turner said. The condensed milk plant would sometimes purchase milk from a cooperative at Antigo.

"One spring, when weight limits were in effect, Ed Oberg built a trailer like a wagon and they hitched it behind my truck. What a trip; the roads were knee deep with mud," Turner remembered.

Milk was picked up at farms in 10 gallon cans weighing about 80 pounds full. "We had to lift them up onto the truck platform. Today I couldn't lift an empty can."

Cans were covered on the truck only by a canvas tarp and sometimes milk would begin freezing by the time Turner got to the Sturdevant Street plant. "They would run the cans through a hot water bath to thaw the milk."

Turner recalled once coming upon milk cans left by a farmer who had earlier hauled them to a meeting point. The milk had frozen, popped off the covers and rose from the cans like mushrooms.

Haulers often wore a leather apron to insulate their legs from the cans. "We'd boost the cans onto the truck with our knee."

Turner recalled once slipping and falling on his back with the full can of milk alongside him.

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"The cover came off and about five gallons of cold milk ran down my neck. It was about 20 below zero. Oh was that cold! I was glad I wasn't too far from home to go change clothes."

"On the Ted Gehrke farm they'd put the cans in a spring. That was a great place to keep the milk cool but a hell of a place to get the cans out of," Turner recalled.

Milk was hauled seven days a week. "There was a period of 2 1/2 years where I never missed a day; ill or well. Sometimes my brother, Edward, would drive to give me a day off." Later one of his sons would occasionally substitute as the driver.

What was the pay for a milk hauler? "I think it was 20 cents a hundred (100 pounds of milk). It went down to 15 cents during the Depression (early 30's).

"Payments were deducted from the farmers' milk checks and Page Milk sweetened that a bit (with supplemental payments).

"It was tough going during the depression and drought years or the 1930's. A lot of people didn't have 'wheels' (a car or truck)." Trucks weren't available during World War II even if one had the money.

"I bought a truck in 1939, just before the war. I still had it when the war ended; it was haywired together," Turner said. "Oh my!"

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After finishing his milk route he'd remove the stake racks and haul timber. "Every day I'd haul a load or maybe two loads."

The flatbed trucks could haul about three cord of pulpwood. Often Turner would haul log "bolts" from area farms to Merrill Woodenware or Merrill Box Company factories.

There was always firewood to haul from farms. Businesses like Merrill Woolen Mills had boiler furnaces using 4-foot-long kiln wood, so named for wood cut to fire brick kilns in earlier years.

Many 4-H members in the Pine River area remember Turner hauling their livestock to the Lincoln County Fair and back home in an era when few farmers had a truck or trailer or vehicle to pull it.

Turner remembered moving a family to Mercer when only a few miles of Highway 51 around Merrill and Tomahawk was paved. "It was almost all gravel; I thought we'd never get there."

Turner, his wife Grace and their five children, first lived in the 2200 block of East Main Street in Merrill where they also operated a small gas station until the World War II era. Grace taught in one room schools in Marathon and Lincoln counties, before and after their marriage.

"The farm I got (at T14636 Highway W in the Marathon county town of Texas) was for sale at the beginning of the war. I thought it was our patriotic duty to raise things so we moved out there.

There was only an old shack of a house on the property when we bought it in 1942. At first we'd just go out there in the summer and sort of camp while we planted and harvested crops."

Piece by piece a house was built during the war years when lumber wasn't available for civilian use. "If someone had some pulp for sale I'd buy it and take it to Jerry Barrett's sawmill at Big Eddy. He also had a planing mill. That's how I got all the 2 by 4s."

By 1944, the house was sufficiently completed to be occupied and the Turner house in Merrill was sold. More than a half century later, Turner still resides in the town of Texas farmhouse.

Written by Dewey Pfister from interview August 19, 1997 by Wayne Schultz and Beverly King.