

THE NEW YORK MILK STRIKES

Edythe Ann Quinn

STRIKE!

It is a word people hardly ever associate

with the dairylands of America. Instead, they usually picture idyllic scenes, contented black-and-white cows pastured on green hillsides, neat red barns, and satisfied farmers urging us to "Drink Milk."

Angry mobs; state troopers firing at fleeing strikers; protesters staging demonstrations; union organizing, with the most radical members being Eastern European immigrants; union leaders accused of Communism; strike votes splitting families and setting neighbor against neighbor: These aren't the usual images of the dairy industry, but indeed these are images reflecting a long history of labor struggles on the part of milk producers. From the late 1800s to the current crisis in dairy farming, milk strikes — at times accompanied by violence — have erupted in the dairylands, including those New York counties federally designated as part of the Appalachian region.

An Unholy Alliance

In June 1894, New York City Milk Shed farmers went on strike. The milk shed is the multicounty region from which milk flows to the huge New York City market. It was not the first milk strike in the Empire State; a small local action had occurred in 1883 in Orange County, which at the

For over 100 years, dairy farmers in Appalachian New York have tried — and failed — to find a way to earn a living wage.

time served as the milk shed for the city. But the 1894 action encompassed more territory and producers as the railroads extended the borders of the milk shed into central, northern, and southern tier counties. Many in the milk shed were descendants of Yankee farmers from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Others were long-established German and Irish immigrants, while still others traced their history to colonial settlers. Although the strike failed due to the strikers' poor organizing skills and duplicitous penetration by the dealers, it sent a clear message: To succeed, dairy farmers must be effectively organized. Beginning in 1882, the dealers, those middlemen between the farmers and the consumer, had organized themselves and, despite some court-ordered reorganizations, grew ever stronger and bolder in their demands and control of processing and prices.

Thus in 1916, when the farmers found the dealers' price unacceptable, the Dairymen's League, organized in 1907 and reformed in 1916, called another strike. On October 1, the League ordered its members to withhold their milk from the market. After two weeks dedicated to drying up the milk supply flowing to New York City, the League got its higher price. After this initial victory, the Dairymen's League (Dairylea) gained official status as the farmers' cooperative. But Dairylea quickly fell prey to politics and dealer



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. Courtesy of New York History, Cooperstown, N.Y.

Milk strikes began with a small local action in Goshen, N.Y., on March 19, 1883.

manipulation and became, in fact, a milk dealers' company union.

In his 1941 *Seven Decades of Milk*, an autobiographical account of the New York dairy farmers' struggles, John J. Dillon blasted the unholy alliance of the Big Three: Borden's Milk Company, Sheffield's Milk Company, and The Dairymen's League. The crusading editor of *The Rural New Yorker*, Dillon excoriated the conspirators, among whom were New York governors and politicians, who sold farmers and consumers down a river of milk.

A Losing Proposition

Throughout the 1920s, the milk price paid to the farmers was often below production costs. As Dillon put it, "The things farmers had to sell were not on a parity with the things farmers had to buy." In a 1933 letter, a dairy farmer described the economic woes the dealers created by refusing to pay the milk producers a decent price: "We are just now in desperate straits. Our taxes and interest on the mortgages are past due. Our feed bills are unpaid. Our credit is exhausted. We have no money to buy seed or other essential supplies and the spring season is near. Every can of milk we sell," the farmer wrote, succinctly summing up the situation, "leaves us further in debt than we were before we produced it."

The Milk Control Board was originally formed in 1933 to protect the producers, but in practice, the Board protected the dealers. After it became apparent that the dealers had co-opted the Milk Control Board and that both New York Governor Lehman and the state assembly had abandoned them, farmers were left with nowhere to turn. In August 1933, dairy farmers in 27 counties called a strike (seven of those counties were in Appalachian New York). They withheld their milk from market, hoping to force the dealers to pay a better price by creating a scarcity in the New York City supply.

Staging a milk strike is no easy matter. Dairy cows must be milked twice a day, strike or no strike, so farmers had to employ drastic means to handle the ever-constant milk supply. To deal with this problem and to create publicity, they often dumped milk in public, pouring it down the streets of their towns, for example. They also relieved nonstriking neighbors of their milk supply, either while it was being transported or at the milk plants. The strikers attacked the dealers' tank trucks, shooting holes in the glass liners or stopping their passage with downed trees or spiked planks across the road. These illegal actions provoked angry responses from antistrike

From New York: A Guide to the Empire State. Courtesy of New York History.



Farmers dump milk in protest at Mount Upton in Otsego County, N.Y., in 1939.

farmers and unsympathetic community members. They also brought out local law enforcement officers and state troopers who were, according to Dillon, "armed with helmets, tear gas, masks, clubs and some with guns."

The most famous attack by the state police on striking dairy farmers occurred just outside Appalachian New York in Boonville, Oneida County, on August 1, 1933. During "The Battle of Boonville," the state police assault resulted in 17 men and boys being injured. Social and literary critic Edmund Wilson, whose family's summer home was in the area, recounted the battle in *The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Twenties and Thirties*. The state troopers, he reported, "chased people into fields and woodsheds, rushed up and beat them over

the head when they got stuck in the barbed wire fence. I saw many broken heads and bruises. There was one man who had had a gas bomb fired point-blank into his back, injuring him severely and setting his clothes afire. The troopers yelled at the farmers that they were sons of bitches, rats, Reds."

Although the farmers gained some relief through the 1933 strike, their small victories were short-lived as the dealers regained power and continued to manipulate the milk market to their profit — and to the farmers' extreme disadvantage. Strikes continued throughout the 1930s, culminating in the 1939 Milk Strike.

From Coal to Cows

The 1939 Milk Strike introduced a new player: the Dairy Farmers Union (DFU), founded in 1936 by Archie Wright. Wright's labor experiences included membership in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). The DFU attracted the smaller, poorer farmers, especially Eastern European immigrants who had moved from the anthracite and bituminous coalfields of Pennsylvania and West Virginia to the dairylands in the 1920s.

These relatively recent arrivals to the region had heavily mortgaged farms located on less desirable, hilly lands and were handicapped by being immigrants in a nativistic period. Their family farm and land ownership threatened, they were very willing to use their only available weapon — milk — and their best means — the Strike.

The Slavic dairy farmers seem to have become radicalized from their experiences either in the coal mines or, for some, in the textile



Watertown Daily Times. Courtesy of New York History.

Archie Wright.

mills. More than a few could trace their family's political activism back to "the old country," especially those who came from the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. The bottom line was that these struggling immigrant farmers—like many of their poor WASP neighbors—were economically destitute.

In a 1996 *St. Lawrence County Historical Association Quarterly* article, political scientist Thomas J. Kriger, who has written extensively on Wright and the DFU, quotes a Delaware County, N.Y., farmer's testimony before a New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Milk Industry.

"Present returns are enough for not more than a mere existence," claimed the farmer. "Farm families may apparently be well-fed," he explained, "but many are near destitute of suitable clothing, shoes, and other present-day necessities of life."

Neighbors or Criminals?

DFU strike activities followed the now-established pattern of the strikers' withholding their own milk, dumping that of recalcitrant neighbors, and engaging in all possible means of disrupting delivery to New York City. When the strike severely slowed the flow of milk to urban consumers, an anxious and angry Governor Lehman reacted. As historian Lowell Dyson recounts in his 1970 *New York History* article, "The Milk Strike of 1939 and the Destruction of The Dairy Farmers Union," Lehman "wired the sheriffs of the eleven most affected counties, instructing them to maintain order even if it required hiring a large force of special deputies." Lehman placed New York state troopers on special alert.

The governor's public statements about the strikers' "criminal violence" may have encouraged local law enforcement officers to see their neighbors as criminals. However, at least one sheriff saw the strikers as neighbors whose economic hardships had forced them to adopt extreme measures.



A NEW MENACE over Every Dairy Home! was the message the Dairyemen's League tried to project in this September 16, 1939, *American Agriculturist* ad.

members and leaders, women could be found on the picket lines and in demonstrations. In historian Linda G. Ford's 1994 *New York History* study of farm women and agrarian activism in the 1930s, she recounts the story of Frank and Gertrude Trinkaus, Slovenian immigrant dairy farmers of Fly Creek, N.Y., in Otsego County. Fly Creek is a community with many Slovenian immigrant dairy farmers, some originally from the coalfields and lumber camps.

The Trinkauses joined the DFU. In August 1939, state troopers arrested Gertrude for disorderly conduct, which consisted of dumping milk from "scab" trucks. Although she was not imprisoned, her "male comrades" served several days in the Albany County jail. As in previous strikes, neighbors—and occasionally families—split over whether to withhold or to ship their milk. Bitter feelings lingered for years, affecting community relations.

The 1939 strike succeeded in bringing the producers a better price, in bringing Wright's DFU new members and status—and in bringing down upon the union and its leader the wrath of the milk dealers and their powerful allies. During the strike and in the years following, the dealers, especially the Dairyemen's League, mounted vicious attacks on the



Carol Seelman shows her support for farmers at the milk dumping in 1991.

DFU, "redbaited" Wright, and claimed that the union was a tool of CIO radicals and the Communist Party.

Critics used the DFU's support from organized labor against them — especially that of the CIO and its leader, John L. Lewis. With the onset of the Cold War, the DFU's opponents used anti-communist propaganda to try to fracture Eastern European immigrant support. That tactic often succeeded among Eastern Europeans, many of whom were staunchly Catholic at a time when the Iron Curtain regimes were aggressively suppressing the Church.

Under attack from without and splintered from within, the DFU steadily disintegrated. As Dyson concluded, "The disruption of the DFU effectively crushed the idea of direct collective bargaining between producers and distributors in the milk shed."



Gary Fountain, Utica (N.Y.) Observer Dispatch

Dairy farmers, angry with an inequitable pricing system for their milk, protest by dumping the milk in a cornfield in October, 1991. The pricing structure currently used dates back to the 1930s.

Dumping Milk

During the post-World War II years, much of the nation prospered. Although the dairy farmers always lagged behind urban, industrial prosperity, they followed the advice of Cornell and other agricultural colleges and went into debt to expand and modernize their operations. Then milk prices collapsed in 1986 — and New York dairy farmers responded by again calling "Strike!" and dumping milk.

It was a familiar response for some participants. For Stanley Konchar, a Fly Creek Slovenian immigrant who was 75 at the time of the 1986 action, it was the third strike in which he had participated in his 52 years as a dairy farmer. Others, such as Konchar's neighbor Clifford P. Brunner, were new to action.

Brunner released his milk into his cornfield, joining milk producers on strike throughout the New York Milk Shed as well as those in Maine and Wisconsin. This small strike led to a slight improvement in premium prices. By the time dairy farmers called a strike in August 1991, Brunner was an old pro at dumping milk and organizing. He gave me a copy of the strike pamphlet, which read in part: "It can be said that we are already 'dumping' out milk. We're 'dumping' it in the wrong place, the handlers. They're gaining at our loss."

Hard Times

On Tuesday, January 21, 1997, I attended a strike organizing meeting in Chenango County called by the Progressive Agriculture Organization (Pro-Ag). The Pro-Ag representative spoke of the enthusiastic reception he had received from Pennsylvania dairy farmers the week before and how disappointed he was with the weak response in Appalachian New York, an area that was economically depressed and losing its dairy farmers at an alarming rate. Not convinced that strikes work, the New York farmers looked to other means, such as lobbying for legislation to allow them to join the Northeast Dairy Compact. The compact permits New England dairy farmers to set a fair price for

milk based upon actual regional production costs in contrast to the current complicated national system administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

On one thing, the dairy farmers do agree. Conditions are very bad, especially with the high cost of electricity and feed. The price of milk is so low, it doesn't cover the cost of production or offer a dairy family a living wage. Currently, the wholesale price of milk is under \$13 per hundred weight, about \$4.50 less than a year ago and far less than the cost of production in New York state, which Cornell University and the USDA estimate to be \$15.97 per hundred weight.

Among the very vocal activists is Ken Dibbell of South New Berlin, Chenango County. At the USDA National Commission on Small Farms hearing held in Albany, N.Y., last September, he testified: "The money is in the market price currently, but it is going into the corporate coffers instead of where it belongs — in the hands of the hardest working people of this nation — dairy and livestock producers."

At the hearing, one of three held that day across the nation, Helen Russ of Chenango County testified that she and her husband are making so little income from their family dairy farm that they qualify for food stamps. She said, "There is something wrong with a system where you are producing food for the nation and you qualify for government food."

For over 100 years, New York state dairy farmers have struggled to get their fair share of the dealers' profits, to be independent of the crippling control by the dealers, and to gain federal government guarantees for a fair pricing policy that provides a farm family a decent living. The concerns voiced in 1916 are echoed in 1997. Will the rolling hills again ring with the desperate cry of "Strike"? ^{NET}

Edythe Ann Quinn is an assistant professor of history at Hartwick College, Oneonta, N.Y. As Hartwick Scholar-in-Residence, she is researching the influence of Eastern European immigrant dairy farmers on the 1930s milk strikes in Central New York.