

The Rise and Decline of the Dairy Industry in Yolo County

By Dennis Dingemans

An era ended March 21, 2009, when Rick Plocher sold all 310 milking Holsteins and closed his family's dairy cattle enterprise long-located near Roads 96A and 18A. It was the last of the county's often-distinguished local-family dairies. Just two herds remain – the University's 103 milking cows on the Campus and Cache Creek Dairy's 2000 cows at Road 26 east of I-505. This article gives highlights of the history of dairy farms and creameries in the county and reports interviews with retired dairy farmers.

The county's first dairy farm was that of Ohio-native Jerome C. Davis who began selling milk to Sacramento from his West Sacramento land during the winter of 1849/1850. Within a year he moved 12 miles west and assembled there by 1858 a 12,000-acre diversified farm judged by the state Agricultural Society to be the best in the state. Though not even the core of his main grain/beef operations, he was milking 250 cows and had a big milking barn and two dairy houses holding 120 wheels of cheese weighing 60 pounds each.

But, by 1870 when the Western Shore Gazetteer surveyed dairying in the county, the Davis farm was no more. Then, the five biggest dairies milked just 100 cows each (Mike Bryte's in Bryte; Sessions Enos's, George Swingle's, and Ransom Carey's, all just east of Davisville; and Gwinn's in the Delta) and most of the county's 3837 dairy cows were in smaller enterprises. The typical big dairy farm grazed cattle on the tules to the southeast or (less common) on the grassy foothills to the southwest. The 1870 Census records our nearly 4000 dairy cows as 2% of the state's total, but Yolo's agricultural emphasis was on its 83,087 sheep (2% of the state's), its 26,855 pigs (6%), its 8,739 horses (5%), its 8,448 non-dairy cattle (2%), and its mules (7%).

By the 1900 Census dairying was widespread, and 918 (56%) of the county's 1641 farms sold dairy products. About 2% of the state's dairy (milk, cream, butter, cheese) came from Yolo County's 5946 dairy cows. Alfalfa crops and barley were vital supports for our dispersed dairy farm pattern. Forty years later, the 1940 Census records that only 289 farms (22%) of the 1339 Yolo farms sold any milk, and just 119 of those were considered to be specialized dairy farms. Concentration of Yolo County's dairy industry into fewer and specialized farms was advancing, but the county's share of California's total wasn't growing. More important to the county economy than its 4351 dairy cows in 1940 were each of its other main animal enterprises: sheep, pigs, beef cattle, and poultry.

The decades before 1940 had some notable highlights, the equivalent of Jerome Davis' distinguished dairy production in the 1850s. In and near Woodland the A. W. Morris (and sons) dairy and creamery enterprises stood out with nationwide and worldwide acclaim. The Morris family invested in prize-winning cows and bulls, buying and selling at top prices. They posted national-record and world-record annual milk-production figures a dozen+ times from prize Holsteins. The best of Morris's award-

winning cows, Tilly Alcartra, went on interstate publicity tours and in 1920, when national champion, was shown in newspaper photographs with the awards-banquet tables in San Francisco's Palace Hotel. There were over 300 milking cows in the Morris herd by 1913 and the several Morris ranches usually totaled over 1000 acres between 1891 and 1941. Milking was on "Tule Ranch" (now Conaway Ranch) or near Knights Landing where family settled in the 1850s. In Woodland were dairy processing and sales operations. Their "Sanitary Dairy" was well known at 604 Main Street, its creamery in the back and soda fountain in front. The creamery moved to 1021 Lincoln where its fleet of 8 snub-nosed delivery vans parked in 1950s/60s. A drive-in dairy stand at 1011 Lincoln replaced the Main Street booths and stools.

Another dairy operation bringing national and world acclaim to our county was the University Farm herd and creamery. A Dairy Industry creamery was built in 1908 and 1911's first graduates completed a three-year curriculum requiring work with the farm's growing herd and practice making butter and cheese. Ice cream equipment arrived in 1912/13. A more-impressive Dairy Industry Building arrived in 1922 where students and staff produced great quantities of milk, butter, cheese, and ice cream for commercial distribution. The campus built a diverse herd of highest-quality cows, winning awards at national competitions.

Most of the University Farm Creamery milk was purchased from a growing cluster of dairy farms around Davis. One eastern group included Haussler, Mello, and Simmons Dairies. The main group was 5 miles west Davis between Roads 98-94/32-27. Ed Beoshanz lived all his life in that region and in retirement is a docent for Heidrick Ag History Center. A recent Sunday at the museum Ed effortlessly recalled a dozen dairies as former neighbors. Many were German and Swiss families and the farms were modest in size. Most specialized in dairy because the University provided a market for milk. Scientific research by the highly regarded Dairy Industry faculty is summarized in a 40-page 1966 memoir by Professor E. L. Jack --"History Of the Department of Dairy Industry". In 1959 his department merged with food science, on-campus production of dairy products stopped, and their building (Roadhouse Hall) was soon demolished. A reduced-size campus herd remains, shipping milk 150+ miles to Hilmar's cheese factory.

The Yolo County Department of Agriculture since 1937 annually reports the value of agricultural products including the value of marketed milk. When expressed as the "% share of all county ag production that is milk", figures slide from peaks in the 1940s when milk was 2.9% of the county's agriculture. In 1958 it dipped to 1% for and in 1965 milk fell to .5 of the county's agricultural output. Since the low of .2% in 1974, the figures moved up a bit (to .6% for most of the 1980s & 1990s). With the 1999 arrival of Cache Creek Dairy's first 1000 cows, milk's share tripled and in 2007 (with 2000 cows in that new dairy) milk is at 1.6%. One mega-dairy, revived Yolo's dairy farm production, but in a very different starkly-simplified pole-barn form. Its owners, the Dutch-heritage Kasbergen family, own others in the West and Southwest.

Davis resident **Rose (Mello) Banninger** grew up on the Mello family dairy farm and shared with me her family's story in a February interview. Her parents were Portuguese immigrants from Terceira, Azores. Dad, Giraldo Mello, came to the USA in 1914 at age 19 and learned the dairy business on the Lopez Dairy near Benicia. Son of a whale harpooner, Giraldo never learned to read or write. Moving to Yolo County his first

farm was on Road 27 near Willow Slough Bridge. There his diversified farm raised a few dairy cows and sold milk to Woodland creamery when there were 3 on Main Street. By 1927 the Mellos moved to the edge of Davis and converted a 40-acre pig farm to a specialized dairy farm. He had McGuire build his dairy barn and added to his herd. His “grade B dairy” sold “manufacturing milk” to the university and then to Crystal. Rose remembers all four kids working at chores, feeding the cows and fetching them from pasture, but she never did milking. She worked the irrigation system for the alfalfa and gathered figs and other fruit to feed her favorite cows as a treat. She would ride with her dad to Woodland’s sugar beet mill to get pulp for cattle feed. Family illness led to the sale of the 36 dairy cows in 1951, but Rose notes that her father and family also were trouble by increasing regulations that challenged her father’s ability to cope. Rose notes with pride that their barn was used at times for Vet School horse-related demonstrations. About ten years after the dairy closed, the 40 acres were sold and subdivided -- Claremont, Spruce, Pacific, and Mello are streets on Mello’s 40 acres. Rose’s brother lived in the farmhouse on Claremont but died last year and the home’s contents were sold.

Jim Becket grew up on his family’s 80-acre dairy farm on the west edge of Woodland (along Cottonwood, Main to Cross). His grandfather’s diversified farm in the Wildwood area (Road 2 near 85) included horses, barley, and cows. Sometime before 1910 Jim’s grandparents bought the Woodland property and their renters (the Lawsons) built a dairy barn. Jim’s father had been a student at the University Farm where he took courses in modern dairy cow management, graduated in 1915, and after service in WW-I lived on the family farm at Wildwood. Jim’s dad married in 1922 an employee of their Woodland tenants the Lawsons. Then the Becketts took over the Woodland dairy in 1929, bringing with them their three children, a few cows from the Wildwood farm, and the expertise of his University Farm education. Jim remembers that only 20 cows of mixed breed (Holsteins, Guernsey, and Jersey) were milked and they sold Grade B to Sanitary Dairy and to Crystal Dairy. Much of his activity on the farm involved raising the barley and the alfalfa hay for the cows, but their land sometimes grew tomatoes and sugar beets. The family loved the farm and only with reluctance did they sell the herd in 1951 due to health problems and gradually sold off their 5 fields for development.

When interviewed, all stressed the hard work and rigid discipline of owning a herd of dairy cows. Rose Mello, Ed Beoshanz, Jim Becket, and Rick Plocher told of the long and prescribed hours to do the milking and maintain the required cleanliness. There wasn’t much flexibility of scheduling in this life style. All told of their family affection for life on the dairy. Becket added a note of realism: “The not so good memories come from cows and mud in winter. You have not lived a full life until you have been hit along side the head by the muddy, manure laced, tail of a cow while trying to milk her - and she, all the while, either eating or placidly chewing her cud as if she did not have a care in the world.”