

Whatever Happened to...the Blue Ribbon Dairy

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Throughout the history of Palmyra, more than a dozen dairies have come and gone. Perhaps the most recent and most remembered was the James C. Blankenberg Blue Ribbon Dairy.

James C. Blankenberg was born in 1896 in Williamson, and was destined to become a dairyman. He ran a milk route in Marion until January 1922 when he sold out to his brother-in-law, John Nortier. Blankenberg purchased a farm on Stafford Road in partnership with Fred DeCracker. Later, the dairy was moved to the west side of Stafford Street behind a family-owned duplex located between Main and Jackson.

After a few years, he purchased the dairy route from the DeBrine brothers. In December 1937, he bought the business of the former Lupold Dairy, which had been owned by Andrew C. Lupold. He ran the dairy with the help of two or three employees until his death in 1947. At that time, his son Gerald, who was serving in the Navy aboard the submarine, U.S.S. Bugara, came back home to help his mother run the business, and ultimately bought it. He remembers that he arrived home at 2 a.m. and then started out on the milk route at 4 a.m. the same morning. He was in the dairy business!

Many changes took place in the business during Gerald Blankenberg's career. He recalls that one big change occurred before he owned the company. His father had been using a dapple-gray horse named Dick to pull the milk delivery wagon on the daily route. Like many other delivery horses, Dick had a routine that he followed. He would pull the wagon a certain distance, stop to wait for the driver who was making the deliveries, and then proceed to the next stop. Another thing that he would do routinely was pull off Main Street, stop and listen for traffic, back into the street and continue on. One fateful day in 1935, Dick was replaced - by a 1935 Ford truck.

During that same era, the Great Depression had affected every business in town, including the dairy. In 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act was instituted to help rebuild the economy. Local business people were approached for their support, and it was freely given by most, including Blankenberg. A grand parade was planned and exceeded all expectations in its execution. Floats were entered from at least 137 area businesses, and included one from the Blue Ribbon Dairy.

Eventually, a Divco "stand and drive" single-pedal delivery truck was put into service. Apparently that particular truck took some getting used to. Blankenberg recalls that a schoolteacher had been hired to deliver milk part time. One day somewhere along Main Street, he locked

the brakes and launched the load of bottles and milk out of the van and onto the street. Early in the 1950's the Divco was replaced.

One of Blue Ribbon Dairy's better-known customers was Garlock, Inc. Garlock's vending machines were filled once every day with fresh milk packaged in specially made one-third quart bottles that were supplied by Thatcher's of Palmyra. The machines were also serviced and cleaned every Saturday. During wartime, when Garlock was especially busy, the machines were filled twice each day. One special memory that Blankenberg shared about "the Garlock days" was of then-president of the firm, George Abbott's fondness for cream. "He liked cream so thick he had to spoon it out of the bottle," said Gerry. Another was that their dog, Jiggs, used to ride in the delivery truck, and was given his own Garlock identification badge.

The dairy business was good to Blankenberg, but like most businesses, they had to make more and more changes, some nuisance-type and others expensive, to keep up with health regulations and to remain competitive.

One change was the purchase of a heat seal machine that replaced the previous cellophane sealer. The purpose of this machine was to cover the top of the bottle with a paperboard cap, which was supposed to be better than the colorful cellophane. Blue Ribbon had the first such machine in the area.

The desire to make a profit, to get ahead or just to keep up, required expansion and innovation. In 1960, Blankenberg joined in partnership with Dave Cannan from Victor, Berle Case of Canandaigua and George Record of Manchester. The partners built the Dairy Center of the Finger Lakes plant in Manchester, where they processed not only their own milk, but also milk for eight other dealers. Included among them were Rich's Dairy in Marion, Eaton Dairy from Williamson, Crane's Dairy in Newark, and Green Dairy in Wolcott, to name a few.

When asked about problems he encountered, Gerry said that one was the fluctuation in the milk supply from the farmers. The naturally heavy spring calving and early-growth grass cycles resulted in a surplus of milk for a couple of months in the spring that had to be remarketed. Separating the cream from the milk and providing skim milk to area pig farmers while making ice cream from much of the cream alleviated some of this problem. Ice cream proved to be a successful venture, and Blue Ribbon made and sold as many as 32 flavors, including his personal favorite, Dutch Apple. Later on, the surplus cream was sold to Sorrento Cheese in Rochester.

Another problem he had to deal with was "the dull life" that was inherent to the business. It was a 7-52 (7 days a week, 52 weeks a year) job that began at 2:30 a.m. each morning and didn't end until after dark every evening.

He said that it wasn't exactly what he had in mind when he had been studying mechanical engineering at Clarkson

University, but he tried to make the best of it. He lightened the chores sometimes by teasing the girls who worked in the dairy. He had given each one a nickname such as Mable or Gertrude, and still remembers who had which name.

Finally, the straw that broke the camel's back was the increasing pressure and cost of competition. In 1980, the partners decided to sell the Manchester-based business to Upstate Farms when they could no longer process and deliver milk at a suitable profit.

Thanks to friends Gerald and Nancy Blankenberg, Earl Lupold, Frances DeWeaver and Jim DeBrine for their help.