

Mutual Creamery History

By Boyd Hakes (1917-1990), Aitkin Minnesota, circa 1980

(Transcribed by daughter, Jennie Hakes, from Boyd's notes. There were two drafts.)

First draft

I first came to Aitkin as a high school freshman in summer of 1932. My brothers Hugh¹ and Ken had bought the creamery from George Peterson and Con Ecklund and called it "Ideal Creamery." That summer and the next I worked there with Pernel Peterson, Dick Flood, Babe and Tax Kast, and Helen Wenzel, among others.

In 1934, because of the depression (after stock and land busts), the Ideal Creamery was taken over by Mutual Wholesale (C. Thomas Stores). Hugh continued running the Aitkin Creamery, except for two years by Axel Paulson. The depression, and price ceiling violations, resulted in the creamery being taken over by the National Tea Co.² when Mutual Wholesale went bankrupt in '44.

In 1937, under Hugh's direction, the Mutual Creamery moved to the Hodgedon MacDonald building, which once housed a saloon, general merchandise store, bank, and open house. It was bought from Larson Bros (general merchandise hardware store). Bill Murphy and Cliff Schroeder put a cement floor in the back part and basement, a first floor for Creamery and the Locker plant - a complete overhaul and refurbishing.

It then contracted under "Trading Post:" *can't read this word* (Gileyette?), clothing (Ken Bouma³), Locker Plant (Ray Corbett & Matson), Feed (Ely Wodel?) and Creamery (Hugh Hakes). Babe Kast⁴ ran the day-to-day operation prior to my coming in fall of 1940.

In the late '30s the gallon jug was introduced at retail point of sale, and at one time, 10% in scrip was given to be spent in the Trading Post building. Ohren moved the Furniture Store to the Opera house when the Casey building was destroyed by fire. Later it moved across the street by Ken Sall, and later the Legion Club took their places.

Second draft

Al Zoerb⁵ is the first butter maker heard of in my memory (early '30s). At about that time, the Hakes brothers, Hugh and Ken, bought out the George Peterson and Con Ecklund Creamery at Minnesota and 5th Street North. Their Ideal Creamery went into ice cream during the depression and they nearly lost their shirts.

In 1937 they sold to Mutual Wholesale (C. Thomas Stores, a Minnesota 40 chain) and Hugh remained manager. After an interval when Alex Paulsen ran it, Hugh again took charge.

¹ Hugh Hakes, 1908 - 1985

² The National Tea Store was a large grocery chain

³ Kenneth Buoma, 1906 - 1963

⁴ Arthur Myron "Babe" Kast, 1908 - 2001

⁵ Alfred Zoerb, 1886 - 1968

In 1937 the creamery was moved to the Hodgedon McDonald building, replacing Larson Hardware. The entire building was remodeled by Murphy-Schroeder contractors. The creamery, bottling plant and locker plant (Ray Corbett) were in the back; the feed store was in the middle (Ely Wodel?). There also was a grocery store (George) and clothing store (Kenny Bouma). It all was called the "Aitkin Trading Post." At one time, 10% scrip was given with the cream checks to spend in building.

Boyd Hakes came from Foremost Dairy in Florida, to run the creamery operation in the fall of '40. When Hugh went to California, Boyd became the President of the Mutual Creamery. Later during the war, Mutual wholesale was obtained by the National Tea Company of Minneapolis, to secure a butter source for their stores. This was done through bankruptcy of the Mutual organization stores as a result of wage price violations (it was impossible to compute because of help turnover). Mutual's president Bailey fought and lost it in court and went bankrupt.

Boyd ran the creamery for National Tea. When the war was over, the butter shortage was over (1/3 had been set aside for US troops).

In January 1948, National Tea sold the creamery to Boyd, who continued supplying National Brand butter. The creamery printed (packaged?) butter for 3 other (*can't read this word*) creameries: Backus, McGregor, Aldrich (?), and cream stations: McGillis, Nibby, Isle Souter (?), and the Farm Services Board.

Due to a change over from cream marketing to whole milk caused by government milk subsidies, Mutual Creamery's volume ran down. It was sold to the Co-op Creamery in 1967. Boyd Hakes became the manager until his retirement in 1979.

A year later Co-op Creamery expanded their operations to Land O' Lakes, which favored bulk tank tanker pick up. Boyd sold the building to Vern Butler⁶ and stayed at the Co-op because of 1967 elementary and Home education - cafeteria and farm shop addition.

Volume reached 1,000,000 pounds at the Co-op, 600,000 pounds at the Mutual Creamery.

Thoughts on the demise of the small farm

This is in rumination of this early farmer retailing here.

It seems that a great number of farmers came here of economic necessity, due to hard times. After the stock crash came bank foreclosures and a huge loss in farm prices (dairy farmers were 25% of past). A great number of farmers were foreclosed on by banks and insurance companies in the Minnesota and Iowa plains. It was the demise of the land boom of that time. These farmers came to Aitkin County because of the great quantity of cheap land available through purchase, or their relatives' ownerships.

Between world wars, a system of self-contained working of the farm arose, and large families were able to live off the land. There were nearby meadows for summer pasture and haying, and even some grazing in the woods. Much land was cleared - logged for sawmills and for building houses and barns. There was a balance of self-sustained farming built around the 5 - 15 cows a farm typically had. In winter they mainly were

⁶ Vern Butler, 1915 - 2005

(can't read this word) and only fed meadow hay. In the spring and summer, when foddered (?), the cream volume doubled, which explained the 1 to 2 million pounds of butter manufactured in Aitkin Country in the early '40s.

This economy, favored by kids helping with chores during vacations (haying, threshing, milking cows) revolved upon the cream. Creameries accepted the cream which good quality was assured by utilizing 48% water for cooling. This was marketed two times a week at Hill City (Beautrauer?), McGregor (Geo Gorham), Palisade (Martin Floyd) and Aitkin (Aitkin Co-op – Peterson and Hakes Mutual Creamery).

The cream check paid for groceries and gas. The separated skim fed pigs, young stock, and chickens. This, plus large gardens, wild blueberries, cranberries, and wild rice, and the abundance of grouse, deer, and fish made the farms self-sustaining.

Because of government subsidy of milk powder, started in World War II, this era was practically over by 1970 when all above creameries had closed (the Co-op Creamery being the last, in 1971). The change-over to whole milk, bulk form pick up, and government regulations made dairy farming a \$200,000 investment. With 100 cows, approved septic tank and water regulations, loafing barns, pollution of pastures to lakes, made Grade "A" the only market left.

Self-sufficiency living on self-contained small farms (relatives' and wives' labors were replaced by machinery) made small farms "gone with the wind." In driving through the countryside, you cannot help but notice the empty barns and siloes that once made homes for farm families. I knew of 300 cream producers and the Co-op Creamery had 700. These farms have been replaced by service industries, lake cabins, and tourism.

Dairy products, that made us a strong physical nation of muscles in the past, are now bad for the present of farmers making a living. The result is more heart attacks and obesity.