

SPRUCE GROVE FARM DAIRY

by Brad Schneller

Spruce Grove Farm was located on lot 13 and part of lot 14, Sniders Road South on the east side of the town of Baden in Wilmot Township. A dairy operated from the farm from 1909 to 1943, first by my grandparents William and Minnie Schneller and then by the my parents Wilfred and Edna Schneller. The dairy was typical of hundreds of others in the province that operated from a farm in the late 1800's and until the time pasteurization of milk became compulsory. With more and more regulations governing off-farm sale of milk, and other reasons such as lack of farm help, many small farm dairies disappeared during and shortly after WW II.

The land on which the farm was located was first settled and trees cleared when Issac Mosser and his wife Catherine were granted a crown deed in 1830. In 1855 the Mossers sold the land consisting then of 143 acres to a James Z. Morley for 900 pounds. A John Hoffman bought the land in 1873 from the Morley estate followed by a sale to a David Y. Shantz in 1884. William Schneller bought the farm from Schantz in 1909 and Wilfred Schneller from him in 1929. Several small adjoining parcels of land were purchased in the 1930's to bring the total of farmland and bush up to 179 acres. Nineteen of these acres were within the then boundary line of the town of Baden.

BADEN DAIRY

The first dairy that operated from the farm was named the Baden Dairy which grandfather Schneller started after moving from Mannheim where he had been born and raised on a mixed dairy farm. (The Schneller family settled in the Mannheim area when they emigrated from Hesson Darmstadt Germany in 1832). Before moving to Baden in 1909 he got some experience selling milk when he went to work for Peter Kastner at Kastnerville in 1889 at the age of 22. Kastnerville was then a hamlet beyond Stratford and before Sebringville on the road to Seaforth. Grandfather bought milk from Kastner and then sold to customers in Stratford. He kept a day ledger of tickets sold to each customer. From the ledger it would appear that all sales were by ticket and that the enterprise lasted only a year.

In 1896 he returned to Mannheim to farm the home farm after he married Peter Kastner's daughter Minnie. Grandfather still had an interest in starting a dairy of his own since in 1897 he built an upright desk fashioned after the one he used at Stratford to record each day's milk sales. But the desk didn't get used for that purpose for a dozen years until he sold the Mannheim farm, bought the farm at Baden in 1909 and started the Baden Dairy that same year.

The Mannheim herd of milking Shorthorns was brought to the Baden farm and milk produced from this herd was bottled and sold to customers in Baden. Grandfather would tell of how he peddled milk in town while in later years we would say we delivered milk. From the start, milk from the Baden Dairy was bottled for sale. Each morning the bottles were put in wooden boxes, the boxes loaded in the back of a horse-drawn buggy and the milk peddled to customers' doorsteps.

As was the custom used at Stratford, grandfather printed and sold milk tickets which were exchanged for either a pint or quart of milk. The cost for a quart of milk in the 1920's was a nickel. There are no records in the family to show that cream was sold separately. At the time it was whole milk, likely with enough cream rising in the neck of each bottle to supply the needs of most families.

But not all villagers bought milk from his dairy. Many continued to 'fetch' milk from a friend's or relative's farm nearby. A lard or honey pail was the container most often used when milk was bought this way. At a nickel a pail, the price was right too.

SPRUCE GROVE FARM

After graduating in 1924 from the two-year course at the Ontario Agricultural College at Guelph, father began to build a herd of pure bred Ayrshires before he took over the farm from his father in 1927. He liked Ayrshires because he was impressed with the College herd and its breeding program. Ayrshires were also considered good foragers and had higher butterfat production than most breeds other than Jerseys.

The butterfat content was important for this was a time when municipal boards of health, such as Kitchener, would publish the names of farmers that shipped milk with low butterfat levels to dairies.

To register cattle as pure bred required the selection and registration of a name, not already used, with National Livestock Records at Ottawa. Four rows of Norway spruce that grew in front of and along the side of the farm house provided the inspiration for father and mother to name the herd, the farm and the dairy, Spruce Grove.

THE HERD

From the 1920's to the 1940's the size of the milking herd of Spruce Grove Ayrshires was fairly typical of many dairy farms increasing from 12-15 cows in the beginning years to 23-25 in later years. A dozen cows was about the number that could be housed using conventional stanchion stalls in the average size barn. It was also the number that a small family could hand-milk twice daily without hired help.

Through a program of selective breeding and balanced feeding, father gradually increased the average milk production of the herd and maintained high butterfat levels. One of the first bulls he purchased was of the Glenn Campbell breeding from the herd of the Ontario Agricultural College, a bull with traits for good conformation as well as high milk production.

Father also liked the stylish look of the Ayrshire. Much of that style could be found in the head of an Ayrshire with an impressive set of well curved horns. When horns of a young heifer didn't develop properly, horn trainers, made up of ropes, pulleys, and weights, would be attached to the horns and the heifer kept in a stanchion in the barn. For a bull, whether raised for veal or breeding, it was different -- the horns were removed.

Like on most farms, many barn chores at Spruce Grove were fairly routine. There were some exceptions. Father always tried to balance the feed rations with the amount of milk a cow produced. As much home grown feeds as possible was used but to balance the ration, especially of heavy producers, bought feed was used. Molasses poured onto a feed-bucket load of beet pulp was common when prices were right. Pulped turnips or mangels were not fed to the cows until after milking was done to avoid customer complaints about feed-tainted milk. In summer, weeds such as penny-cress were hand-pulled and taken to the dump for the same reason

Every effort was made to keep the stalls well bedded and manure away from the platform even to the extent of going to the barn before bedtime to make sure the cows could lie down at night on clean bedding. During the summer a Shell fly sprayer was in constant use to keep the fly population under control.

HYDRO ARRIVES

With Adam Beck, one of the founders of hydro-electric power in Ontario and a native of Baden, the town was fortunate to have hydro power earlier than some others. Because the town's street lights followed the highway to the laneway of Spruce Grove a line was put into the farm in about 1914. The power was used mostly for lighting until the end of WW I. Following the war electric motors started to get used for more jobs on the farm. An early purchase was a motor to turn the grindstone used to sharpen mower sickles. In 1923 father purchased a used Delaval milking machine system. This one piece of electrically operated equipment made milking chores much easier.

Two other pieces of electric equipment also made life easier at Spruce Grove . One was when a jack-all pump powered by an electric motor replaced the windmill to pump water to the farm house, barn and milk house; the other, when mother got an electric stove to replace the kitchen wood stove.

PASTURES AND THE ELECTRIC FENCE

Father was a staunch supporter of the work of E. I. Mcloughry, the longtime agricultural representative for Waterloo County. He would attend his short courses and adopt many new and improved farming practices recommended by Mcloughry and the research and extension workers he brought into the county to speak.

In the late 30's Mcloughry recommended that rotational grazing of pastures would increase production especially with dairy cattle. In this practice livestock were rotated from one confined pasture area to another every few days. With this practice there was better recovery and growth of the forages plants in the ungrazed sections.

The main problem with rotational grazing for most farmers was fencing. Dividing fields with conventional fences was too expensive and permanent.

Father read and heard about a new invention in the United States where a charger that sent an electric shock through a single strand of barbed wire mounted on insulated posts would keep cattle confined. To him this was the answer if he was ever going to use rotational grazing. He talked to Stuart Kuhn to get his ideas on how to built a charger since they were not yet sold in Canada. Kuhn had the hardware store on Foundry Street next to the railway tracks. He bought some parts from Kuhn and, using a coil from a Model T Ford built a unit that did work. However, the frequency and amount of charge needed to be improved.

Both father and Kuhn thought that farmers would buy electric fencers if they were available in Canada. Kuhn thought the mechanics of a charger were simple enough that he could make one if he could see one. So the two men drove to Michigan where they bought a unit and made sketches of the construction. They then took it apart and stashed the parts throughout the car and smuggled them back to Baden

A business partnership between the two men resulted and the Baden Electric Fence Company was formed in 1939. Assembly of fencers was done in the back of Kuhn's store. Housing for the first units was in a metal box large enough to hold a wet cell battery. This size proved impractical. The size was reduced to hold four dry cell batteries (6 volts) in a weather-proof metal housing a little larger than twice the room needed for the dry cells.

Once a market was established for Baden Electric fencers, the back of the store became too small and assembly of units moved to a larger building. It was a new building located a short distance away on Sniders Road beside the old Opera House. A pamphlet to promote sales

featured the head of a Collie dog and called the electric fence "the modern watch-dog. In the pamphlet it said " with the growing scarcity of labor and the increasing difficulty in securing ordinary fencing materials, the logical course for a farmer is to install a Baden Electric Fence. It saves much valuable time in erecting and eliminates costly delays".

The partnership lasted seven years until father sold his interest to Kuhn.

But the venture that had a small beginning gave father all the fencers he ever needed and for Baden an industry that lasted for many years.

THE MILK HOUSE

Grandfather built the first milk house on the end of the drive shed, which was a short distance from the barn and on the roadway to the house. With an increase in herd size and more milk to bottle father built a large room within the drive shed. Walls and ceiling were well insulated, the floor cemented and sloped for good drainage and new milk handling equipment added over time. The milk house is remembered as a fairly comfortable place in which to work. It wasn't that way in earlier years.

In the 1930's mother, besides helping milk in the barn, had to heat water in a tea kettle on the wood stove in the kitchen and carry the kettle to the milk house where the hot water was used to wash bottles, pails and strainer. Often several trips were made to supply enough hot water. After hydro went in a submersible pail heater was used and some years later, an electric hot water tank was installed. A new electrically operated brush bottle washer also made the daily chore of bottle cleaning much easier.

In the early years milk bottles were filled using a Mclary hand bottler - a funnel-shaped container that held several gallons of milk. When placed on a bottle and a spring valve pressed down, milk flowed into the bottle from the reservoir until full. The bottles were then capped and, while in the milk case, washed again on the outside to remove any spilled milk.

Then the hand bottler was replaced with a small electrically operated bottle filler where bottles placed on a rotating tray got filled and capped before they were removed by hand and placed in milk cases.

Before a refrigerator was installed, ice cut in winter from the Baden Dam was used to keep milk cool. The ice was stored behind the milk house in the same building. Sawdust from the Baden sawmill kept the ice from thawing well into the late Spring and often, early Summer.

With the lack of cool storage both on the farm and in homes complaints about sour milk increased during the summer hot spells.

About 1938 a walk-in refrigerator, previously used in a butcher shop, was installed in one corner of the milk house. This greatly improved the length of time milk could be kept from going sour.

PASTEURIZATION

With passage of The Dairy Products Act in 1938, The Public Health Act was amended to require the pasteurization of all fluid milk sold for human consumption. The legislation became effective September 1938. To comply with the legislation, arrangements were made with Maple Lane Dairy in Kitchener to pick up cans of milk from the farm, pasteurize and bottle at their plant, and return the milk in cases the next day.

Even with well documented health benefits to pasteurization, not everyone liked the idea. Small dairies, like Spruce Grove, did not pasteurize earlier because they were too small to utilize or justify the cost of equipment or to have the milk pasteurized elsewhere. Not only did customers resist the added cost, some complained milk heated to sterilize it killed off the good as well as the bad bacteria.

The Baden Post Office was a popular place for townspeople to gather each morning to chat while Mrs. Schumm sorted mail from the morning train. It was here that one customer strongly voiced her disapproval of pasteurized milk before regular delivery of it began. She complained that pasteurized milk tasted awful, that it tasted caramelized and that much of the goodness of milk had been taken out by the heat treatment. She continued her harangue especially after delivery of pasteurized milk began. Her complaints stopped abruptly the day father told the Post Office gathering that for two weeks unpasteurized milk had been delivered to her doorstep.

THE MILK ROUT

Milk was delivered to about 100 places in Baden each week-day morning and twice on Saturday. The Saturday night delivery stopped in the early 40's.

In 1931-32 father built a milk delivery wagon using an old auto chassis to replace the open wagon used originally by grandfather. About 1938, he bought a pick-up truck to replace the horse-drawn wagon. After buying the truck, I helped more to deliver the milk. Each morning I worked on the route before rushing off to public school. For this I got 10 cents a day -- 25 on Saturday-- which was saved to buy War Saving Certificates. I also got the chance to drive the truck between stops.

The price of a quart of milk was 9 cents. Most people bought a week or more supply of tickets. These they left in the empty bottles in exchange for fresh milk. A leather pouch with two compartments -- one for money and the other for the milk tickets -- was worn at the waist held by a shoulder strap.

Delivering milk in winter always seemed to test one's endurance. The snow seemed deeper in those years and you remember climbing over high drifts and uncleared walks to get to the back porch to where most customers wanted their milk delivered. Like mail, people expected milk to be delivered no matter what the weather was like. Side streets were often the last to be plowed and sometimes plowed only one vehicle in width. Full sets of chains on the rear wheels gave good traction in heavy snow conditions. But putting on and taking off the chains wasn't easy. Father kept sets of double-row strap-on chains in the cab that could be put on fairly quickly. Even with these you remember the all too frequent times the truck got stuck when there was a blizzard and you shoveled and used wood ashes, sand or burlap to free the truck.

In winter father often strapped on a pair of leather leg covers to protect his ankles and legs. In icy weather we strapped a metal plate to the bottom of our shoes. The sharp corners of the plate were bent down to provide a better foothold on ice. On days when the temperature was well below freezing thick wool blankets covered the milk to help prevent freezing before it got delivered. On bitter cold mornings, even blankets didn't stop milk from freezing before the end of the route. To some, the sight of bottle of frozen milk with cap pushed high out of the neck was picturesque. To father, freezing milk meant trouble. Each winter more than just a few bottles cracked or broke from milk left too long outside on the back porch. When this occurred one could expect a squabble over who was responsible.

After pasteurization began, father bought other dairy products such as whipping and cereal cream, buttermilk, and chocolate milk for resale in town. Chocolate milk sales were high in workplaces such as Livingston Oil Mill, Shirk and Snider Flour Mill, and the garages. Buttermilk

sales seemed high on weekends and holidays, usually to homes of people known to frequent the local hotels.

Today the old farm house is still a residence and many of the Norway Spruce still stand on the lawn in front. But the milk house, the barn and field first used to try the new electric fence and rotational grazing have been replaced with neat homes along a roadway named Schneller Drive.

Waterloo Historical Society
Volume 81 - 1993
© Copyright Brad Schneller