Cabot Creamery Co-operative at 100

Celebrating and Building Upon a Century of Cooperative Dairy Farming

Table of Contents

PURE, HONEST FOOD 2

SURVIVAL AND THE COOPERATIVE SPIRIT 13

PRESERVING TRADITION WHILE EMBRACING CHANGE 25

FORGING CONNECTIONS 33

HONORING THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE 59

Note: The intent of this brief is to capture some of the early history of Cabot Creamery and trace its rise as the nation’s premier dairy co-operative. It is by no means all-inclusive. The stories contained herein were chosen to represent some of the lived experiences, contributions and sacrifices of our farmers, employees and others who helped build the co-operative into what it is today. Parts of our illustrious history and the names and stories of some who played a role in our first 100 years may not be fully chronicled. Regardless of inclusion in this document, everyone involved in this journey has contributed mightily to our success. We will do our best to rectify any oversights or omissions.

While the challenges and pressures on our farm families are great, our history shows that just as in prior eras, we can overcome them together. We are confident that our next 100 years will bring about even greater success.
PURE, HONEST FOOD

The birth of Cabot symbolized a nation’s yearning for pure, honest food in a time of great change.

Cover of the set of by-laws adopted by the original ninety-four members of Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company, 1919

By 1919, the United States had become an urban nation. Fifty-four years of economic growth since the end of the Civil War yielded an emerging American middle class that increasingly populated areas immediately surrounding city centers. Rapid industrialization, increased migration and immigration, expanded electric streetcar systems and improved urban infrastructure helped further channel more Americans from rural areas into the growing cities.
Those urban dwellers were pressed for time and hungry for wholesome food. They shopped for ingredients at public markets in cities like Boston and New York.

At the time, the persistent difficulty of transporting fresh, wholesome food to those urban markets prompted companies to alter their products for increased shelf life. The Department of Agriculture identified those alterations in almost all food categories, including dairy.¹

As consumers realized that the foods they ate increasingly contained additives, chemicals and preservatives, they pushed for the passage of the very first national Food and Drug Act in 1906. With that reform came more demand for pure, natural dairy products. But transporting dairy products great distances over hard terrain was still a significant challenge in the early twentieth century.

**Before the establishment of dairy cooperatives, farmers faced profound challenges.**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prior to the establishment of the Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company, individual farmers in New England were at the mercy of the rough and tumble northeastern fluid milk market. Demand was growing, aided by an expanding railroad network, but farmers experienced pronounced hardship transporting their product to market.

They encountered a few major obstacles. The process of separating heavier milk from lighter cream, which occurred on the farm, took a great deal of time, resulting in milk spoilage. The milk that didn’t spoil then had to be hauled from the farm to the railroad depot. This was a daily necessity. Those who lived in excess of one or two miles from the depot spent much of their days driving wagons back and forth. On hot days, milk distributors, who leased space on the trains, declared many of the milk cans “sour,” a major source of consternation for the farmers.²

Before the construction of the original Cabot Creamery in 1893, butter production and distribution were also largely endeavors of the family farm. Those who tried

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² Ibid., 120-121.
to circumvent the distributors had their work cut out for them. Farmer Inez Goodrich recalled that her grandparents used to produce butter in the winter months. Then, when spring arrived, they hauled it to the markets in Boston themselves:

“They used to make butter all winter and put it – we’ve still got some of the butter boxes – and they used to put it in these boxes and set it in the cold, then when spring came they’d load all the boxes on the train and take them to Boston to sell them. They said the first time Gramp and Gram [Read] went to Boston they landed there in the middle of the day and of course everything was just booming and people going everywhere and Gramp says: ‘Abbie, we’ll just set down in the park here, everybody I think is going to dinner and when things settle down we’ll go.’ They set there half the afternoon... Nathaniel Knight [Abbott] [also] used to take butter down to Massachusetts. And we found a letter here a while ago... he was in Lowell, Massachusetts selling the butter. And in this letter it said, ‘I’m in hopes to get home such and such a day if I get the butter all sold.’”

Butter production was an incredibly labor-intensive process. Farmer Fred Blodgett recalled,

“The larger [dairy farms] usually provided a room designed for [butter making] known as the milk room. In some instances, this would be a room finished off in the cellar, as such a room provided a cooler and more even temperature. If the dairy were large enough to warrant, large tin pans each holding the entire contents of one milking were set in wooden frames. When the milk had set for about two days and had become thick and sour it was considered right for skimming. After the cream was removed the thick clabbered milk was then fed to calves or pigs.... If the dairy were small, the sour cream might be churned in a ‘dash’ churn or a small one in which the interior was turned by a crank. A larger one of the same kind might be used for a larger dairy. A more modern kind was a barrel churn which was hung on a pivot at the center and as it was cranked over the agitation came... the dropping of the contents from one end to the other as it revolved.”

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4 Ibid., 19-20.
Faced with such difficulties, some farmers decided to cut corners by feeding their cows distillers’ slops, and diluting their milk, cheese and butter with water and/or lard. As those practices became more widespread, the general public caught on.

Cabot dairy farmers like Blodgett and Goodrich committed themselves to combating those practices. They knew that producing the highest quality products would favorably distinguish them from some of the more unscrupulous or careless producers. So, to ensure quality and foster efficiency, they consolidated dairy production into the Cabot Creamery.

Three key technologies—the Babcock Test, the mechanical cream separator, and the railroad — allowed Cabot Creamery to fairly compensate farmers for their milk, turn their milk into high quality and less perishable dairy products like butter, and distribute them to northeastern cities, which were bursting at the seams with demand.

The Babcock Test, developed by agricultural chemist Stephen M. Babcock in 1890, determined the fat content of milk. It ensured that all milk entering the creamery contained enough fat to be of the highest quality. Big milk distributors often measured milk weight only by volume, so it was possible for those
unscrupulous farmers to water down their milk or remove cream before they sold it. Since town creameries relied on word of mouth about the superiority of their milk, the Babcock Test allowed them to ensure such quality and fetch prices to match. So farmers with the highest quality milk received the highest prices. This incentivized them to continue to produce superior milk.

Before the invention of the mechanical cream separator, separation of cream from milk required a great deal of time. Consequently, some of the milk would sour while farmers waited for the cream to rise to the top. Centrifugal separators, which spun heavier milk away from lighter cream at thousands of revolutions per minute, sped up the process considerably. When creameries purchased the new separators, it took the burden of separation off of individual farmers and ensured that less milk would spoil in the process.

Increased railroad service then made it easier for creameries to buy bulk space on trains, enabling them to transport more durable dairy products like butter to urban markets while bypassing milk distributors and their onerous requirements.
De Laval Dairy Hand Book, De Laval Cream Separator Company
Cream separator advertisement, Vermont Farm Machine Company
The original Cabot Creamery, built in 1893
Farmers’ obsession with quality eventually became one of the founding principles of the Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company.

Eventually, awareness on the part of farmers, consumers and political reformers resulted in the passage and enforcement of additional state and federal dairy inspection laws. Vermont mandated state inspection of creameries in 1912. To prevent fraudulent milk sales, the state mandated that any milk being sold to creameries and/or cheese producers would contain 3.7 percent butterfat, validated by the Babcock test.

With that reform measure in place, more farmers across the region recognized the creamery’s central role in providing efficient and hygienic distribution methods for dairy products.5

Healthy animals were needed to produce wholesome high-quality dairy products demanded by consumers and, increasingly, by the government.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, another pressing concern for farmers was bovine tuberculosis. As the general public learned more about human tuberculosis and its debilitating characteristics, they increasingly wondered about the health of the animals whose products they consumed.

Armed with a growing understanding of human tuberculosis, public health authorities began to insist that milk supplies come from herds free from the bovine version. Cabot farmers were well ahead of that curve. Twenty-four years before state-mandated testing of herds, farmer and Cabot Creamery’s first president Luke C. Fisher began testing his livestock for TB. Farmer Fred Blodgett related the following story:

“In the winter of 1893-94 the interest in the eradication of tuberculosis in cattle came to its first demonstration in Cabot. Dr. Rich, from the agricultural college at Burlington, came to Cabot and held a meeting and explained the test… Mr. Luke C. Fisher challenged Dr. Rich and invited him to make the test on his superior herd. Accordingly, the Doctor accepted the challenge and with many who were interested, went to Mr. Fisher’s and applied the test. The test showed

there were a considerable amount of cows that responded, some of them his finest. Mr. Fisher was never a man to do things by halves. He ordered one of the reactors to be killed and opened in the presence of those present. Sure enough the animal proved to be badly diseased. He ordered the killing to go on and a large number of his herd were discovered to be diseased.”

Progressive farming, concern with animal welfare and environmental stewardship have run in Cabot’s DNA since the earliest days of the cooperative.

Jenny Donaldson reflected on Fisher’s contributions in an interview with Cabot farmer and historian Barbara Blachly Carpenter,

“I think it’s important to realize what a progressive farmer Luke Fisher was. Certainly using methods way beyond his time. He also was a conservationist and an environmentalist. I remember hearing my father and grandfather talk about the interest Luke would take. He would hear of a new variety of grass or grain or something of that sort, get some of the seed, try it out on his farm, and if he found out that it was well suited for raising in Cabot he’d pass the word along to the farmers.”

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SURVIVAL AND THE COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

Collaborating together allowed rural farming communities to produce products that could be more easily distributed to cities while evading the uncertainties of the fluid milk distribution network that so disadvantaged farmers.

In the early twentieth century, large milk distributors like HP Hood controlled the methods of milk distribution from rural New England to the urban markets of Boston and New York. Farmers increasingly found themselves at the whims of those “middle men,” who often set oppressive prices for milk and made deals with railroad companies without much consideration for the farmers, their costs or their rhythms of life. As early as 1890, many dairy farmers in New England and across the country recognized that unless they could gain greater control of the increasingly complex milk distribution system, their farms might fail and their ways of life might disappear entirely.

Farmer-members of the Northeastern Milk Producers Association, the cooperative that eventually became Agri-Mark, Cabot’s parent company, articulated their rationale for cooperation in the organization’s September 1917 newsletter:

[Cooperation] is more than a move to secure a present help or be a protection against oppression. It is at once destructive and constructive. It has torn down and is removing the debris of an unjust, unreasonable and antiquated system of dealing and handling dairy products – one that inflicted hardship on individual farmers with no compensating benefits to any number of people.

The worthwhile result of the Union of milk producers in one coordinate democratic organization, a facing forward, a focusing of principle as well as power, a foundation laid for building a structure that will endure and successfully eliminate waste and losses that jeopardize the dairy business. The satisfying thing, one that makes men marvel, is that we have proven both the willingness and the ability of farmers to unite harmoniously for definite action that requires something more than mere assent to a program and then, as the saying is, letting ‘George do it.’ In this is the promise of the future.  

In her thesis on the topic of farm activism in Vermont, Penny Elizabeth Hamlet explained:

“The success of marketing cooperatives in Vermont provides a good illustration of the progressive mindset of the Vermont farmer. Eager to produce the quality goods demanded by the consumer, the farmer welcomed the factory methods of the creamery and the technology of the Babcock test, which allowed him both to produce more efficiently and to receive fair compensation for his individual efforts. A businessman at heart, the Vermont farmer stepped into the twentieth century welcoming the changes which allowed him to increase his income while preserving his lifestyle.”

Fred Blodgett explained that before the creamery organized as a cooperative, milk transportation sapped hard-working farmers’ precious daylight hours:

“For many years [before the cooperative was established in 1919], each farmer who patronized the creamery was responsible for the getting of his own milk to the creamery. This usually meant that each patron hitched up his own team and ‘went to the creamery.’ Oft times why there would be a long line of teams lined up to get their turn at being weighed in and receiving in his cans in return, his proportion of milk to take back to the farm.”

Though the task of transportation was grueling, farmers interacted with their peers while they waited in line to sell their milk. They brainstormed ways to make the process easier and more efficient. They shared stories about their routines, their families and their craft. They comforted each other in times of despair and encouraged and congratulated each other at times of triumph.

Slowly but surely, with the help of newly installed rural telephones and regular mail delivery, farmers realized the benefits of cooperation and began to develop a true communal spirit in and around Cabot.

Farmers started sharing equipment, particularly vehicles, to consolidate their collective workload. Blodgett recalled, “gradually… neighbors [began]...”

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exchanging and combining their trips to the creamery… employing someone with a truck to come to their door, picking up their milk and returning their cans empty and sterilized and ready for service again.”

In 1919, determined to preserve their farms, their traditions and their craft, ninety-four Cabot farmers purchased the town creamery, its spring rights, remaining ice, sawdust and fuel for $3700 from its owner of eight years, Fred A. Messer, a dairyman from Waitsfield, VT.

*Historic photo (circa 1915) of a butter wrapper from Mad River Farms, owned by Fred A. Messer, distant great uncle of Fred R. Messer. Fred A. Messer owned the Cabot Creamery Company from 1911 - 1919. (Courtesy of Fred R. Messer)*

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11 Ibid.
Unlike an earlier attempt at cooperative organization that sold stock to each farmer, these farmers envisioned themselves as “members.” Each member agreed to “furnish their entire dairy products for a period of two years, provided at least 800 cows could be subscribed and that members would support the enterprise ‘morally as well as financially.’”\(^{(12)}\)

The founding members collectively owned 863 cows, just enough to meet the 800-cow threshold. Some owned as little as one cow, some as many as thirty. Angus Smith and H.L. Nelson were the exception—they each owned more than thirty cows.

The new cooperative began on April 1, 1919. The farmers who made up the first board of directors were: W.J. Perry, O.L. Dow, Angus Smith, E.C. Gould, R.M. Hoyt, F.G. Lamberton, and Burt Smith. Tom Orne became the first manager and held the position for almost twenty years.\(^{(13)}\)

**Under Tom Orne’s management, the 1920s became a decade of robust growth for the young cooperative.**

Cabot farmers banded together to produce butter and sweet cream that exceeded the market’s expectations for quality. Throughout the 1920s, they often invited representatives from the Vermont Department of Agriculture to the creamery to showcase their commitment to cleanliness and sanitation. They also voted to adhere firmly to the state’s strict safety guidelines.

Bovine tuberculosis remained a persistent problem well into the decade. Honoring the cooperative’s historical commitment to healthy cows, Cabot’s board of directors would not accept milk or cream from any member’s herd that had not been tested and cleared for TB or Brucellosis.\(^{(14)}\)

By 1925, the cooperative sold more butter than its farmers could produce — most of it into the Boston market. Remarkably, demand became so great that Cabot’s

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board of directors voted in 1928 to purchase an entire railroad car of butter from Land O’Lakes to fulfill orders.

*Cabot Creamery market stall, 1930s or early 1940s*

By the late 1920s, an expanding middle class had more disposable income than ever. Cabot farmers were able to sell more of their products into urban markets. In 1929 the creamery established its first cheese room and hired Fay Warner, a cheese-maker from Wisconsin, a prescient decision that charted Cabot’s future as a world-class cheese producer.\(^{15}\)

But storm clouds churned on the horizon. The arrival of the nineteen thirties meant the beginning of the Great Depression and the first major threat to the creamery’s survival. When the stock market crashed, milk prices plummeted, and many panicked consumers went without butter and cheese, luxuries they could no longer afford. Even though farmer members fared better than their non-affiliated peers, the Depression was still a punch in Cabot’s gut. In 1930,

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Cabot’s board of directors determined that the creamery would have to assume $2500 in debt to pay its bills. They recommended cutting salaries across the board. Tom Orne’s salary was cut from $50 per week to $36 “until milk shall advance to six cents per quart.”

Wesson Bolton, a veterinarian in Cabot and son of Raymond Bolton, one of the cooperative’s founding members, recalled what life was like in Cabot during those challenging years,

“Things that stand out in my memory would be always wonder[ing] about the number of peddlers that came around. These were fellows that… found a new way to make a skimpy living and they obviously, most of them enjoyed it. We had a hulled corn person, every summer he’d come through… the occasional person that would sharpen shears and knives. These people trying any way they could to make a buck…

You’d hear of people that lost their farms. The thing I’ll never forget – like everyone else, we took our own milk to the Creamery – every other day, usually. We had the patron number three and I think patron number one was Will Walker and I think Wendell Goodrich was patron number two. These numbers [were] on all the milk cans. You get to the Creamery and they empty your milk. They run the empty cans through the steamer to clean them out and sterilize them. Those numbers I’ll never forget. They were the men that had a lot of foresight in the Creamery. I’m sure that saved a lot of trouble, probably saved more farms that would have gone down. They created their own market.”

Though the depression tested Cabot farmers, many were able to weather the tough times because they were used to doing what it took to survive. Cabot’s Chrystal Foster Fox recalled,

“What allowed many Vermonters to survive were the skills and tradition of self-reliance, combined with cooperation, bartering and sharing with their neighbors. They were actually subsistence farmers, accustomed to a low standard of living and adept at making do with what they had.

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16 Ibid., 22.
17 Transcribed interview of Wesson Bolton, Cabot Oral History Committee, Cabot, Vermont, Transcriptions of Spoken Memories, 97.
Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote, ‘Subsistence farming habits were ingrained in most Vermonters with a hill country background.’ George Aiken observed, ‘The fact remains that here we are, most of us healthy and well nourished, comfortably warm and self-supporting – ‘statistically bankrupt,’ but actually solvent.’”

Young farmers striking out during the 1930s grew up and lived with the fear of another depression hanging over their heads. More established farmers felt great uncertainty about the future of their farms.

Brothers Fred, Percy and Royce Pitkin took it upon themselves to see their parents, both Cabot farmers, through the Depression. After much deliberation, they agreed to pool their resources and bail out the family farm. The strength of the Pitkin family and their dedication to the craft of dairy farming brought them through the dismal time. On February 4, 1932, Royce wrote to his brother:

Dear Fred,

If I hadn’t been reading a good bit about hard times and depressions of other days, I would be inclined to think that these are particularly hard times. A little perspective is, however, quite helpful in looking at the situations in which we find ourselves.

It has seemed to me ever since we quit operating the farm (with its big yield of profit) that it was inevitable that Father would find it difficult to make ends meet within a few years but the sudden drop in the price of milk and the unexpected lack of demand for wood products has served to hasten the coming of that day. There is mighty little profit under the best management when milk sells for as little as it has for nearly a year now.

About the only permanent solution for the problem so far as I can see if for the five sons to join in the purchase of the farm by taking over the land bank mortgage plus whatever more seems to be fair, but paying over the latter amount only as it becomes necessary for Father to meet certain of his old debts. We could then give

18 Chrystal Foster Fox, My Memories of Frankie & Ginny (Foster Farm Publishing, 2015), 17-18.
19 “O.C. Pitkin’s Sons,” in possession of Caleb Pitkin, personal records of the Pitkin family, 9.
him and mother a life lease of the place for $1 a year so that they would be assured of some degree of security.  

The Pitkins spirit of perseverance and cooperation also characterized other Cabot families, the town and the cooperative.

To some in Cabot, the creamery’s survival was an open question at the depth of the Depression. As they had in the past, farmers did what they needed to keep it afloat. Farmer Donovan Houston recalled that five members of the cooperative’s board of directors wagered their homes and farms on the creamery’s survival,

“[During the Depression], the creamery was in bad [financial] shape. We weren’t going to get any milk checks. They had five of us… Howard Carpenter, Will Walker, Ralph White, and Wendell Goodrich and myself sign a note [at the bank pledging our farms] so they could get the checks out. I was one of them, but I thought probably I’d lose my shirt.”

Cabot resident Dwight Clark explained that some Cabot farmers suggested closing the creamery. Tom Orne wouldn’t hear of it.

“[He] said, ‘We ain’t closing this creamery… ‘I got to have a job here.’ And he said, ‘I’m going to Boston and I’m going to Providence, Rhode Island and I’m going to make a cheese that everybody will buy.’ [Orne] went to Boston, he went to Providence, Rhode Island and he got a market for the stuff. And he begun to get people in there to work in the creamery and he put out the best butter you could buy. Everybody wanted Cabot butter and it got where they wanted Cabot cheese. Everybody wanted it. Even here they wanted Cabot cheese.’”

Of Orne’s leadership, H. Brooke Paige recounted,

“The cooperative under Tom Orne’s judicious management and the board’s careful direction, weathered the financial storm and by 1938 began to build anew. That year Cabot purchased Riverside Dairies of St. Johnsbury and with it

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20 Royce Pitkin to Fred Pitkin, February 4, 1932, in possession of Caleb Pitkin, personal records of the Pitkin family.
22 Ibid.
acquired their respected ‘Rosedale Brand.’ Cabot soon would use this well-known brand for their butter, cheddar cheese and cottage cheese with great success.”

In 1938, Cabot Farmers Co-operative Creamery Company purchased Riverside Dairies of St. Johnsbury, and with it, the well-known “Rosedale” brand.

23 Ibid.
An all star collection - our famous cottage cheese, butter, yogurt, sour cream and dips, although not available through mail order, can be purchased in most fine stores in New England.

The Cheddar aging cooler - where Cabot Cheddar ages for 6 months to 1½ years under quality controlled supervision.

Fine aged Cabot Cheddar - cheese with a smooth, rich quality and incomparable flavor. Available in many different sizes to suit your needs.
By pooling resources and turning farmers’ milk into value-added dairy products, the cooperative was able to help farmers emerge from the Depression.

World War II brought a whole new set of challenges, but also reinforced the value of working together in a spirit of cooperation. During this period, the cooperative model became an even more enshrined institution in Cabot and across New England.

Farmer Walter Bothfeld recalled that World War II had a positive impact on the price of milk in Cabot, “[The war brought up the price of milk]. You always had good times in war. Not that we wanted [war], but the prices were better.” However, the war’s positive economic impact was bittersweet. “Wistfully, [Bothfeld] recalled how many young men didn’t come back, “You see, this Neil Knapp… had a son. He was lost.” Farmer and historian Barbara Carpenter dug deeper on the subject. She prodded Bothfeld, “Well there was an Oliver Spencer…” Bothfeld replied, “Yeah, and a Maynard boy.” He was referring to Ernest Maynard, an airman killed in Europe.

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24 Transcribed interview of Walter and Roberta Bothfeld, Cabot Oral History Committee, Cabot, Vermont, Transcriptions of Spoken Memories, 118-119.
PRESERVING TRADITION WHILE EMBRACING CHANGE

The 1950s ushered in a period of great change, but young, energetic farmers helped Cabot’s cooperative traditions endure.
Barbara Blachly Carpenter’s story embodies the Cabot spirit. In the late 1940s, she purchased a little farm in Cabot for $100 from a family friend. At the time, she hadn’t yet graduated from high school. The farmhouse was in a state of profound disrepair. Journalist Jay Steven Wallach described it as “scarcely more than a cellar hold with walls... an eight-acre wasteland of wild raspberry canes, hellebore and rocks. The back roads to its steep driveway had long since been left to the trolls.”

Barbara spent her first five non-winter months there fixing up the property. “There were abandoned farms everywhere around here,” she reflected, “the last gasps of the Depression. Cabot itself was down to probably 500 people.”

It was 1953. Cabot’s population had certainly been hollowed out by the Depression, but World War II and westward migration resulted in the town losing more and more people and farmers every year. The price of milk had dropped again and the town and creamery experienced yet another wave of

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26 Ibid.
economic distress. Barbara represented a new generation of entrepreneurial farmer members who, by the sweat of their brows, carried on Cabot’s cooperative spirit and ensured the creamery’s future.

Barbara was not born in Vermont, but in New Jersey. She graduated from Oberlin College as her two great-grandmothers had before her, members of the school’s first group of female graduates.

She recalled that when she first came to Cabot, she was astounded by the smell of the Winooski River, “The smell in the upper village was pretty bad, but when you left to go to Lower Cabot you’d roll up the car windows until you’d start up Southwest Hill. The rocks and bottom in the river by Perkins Bridge were thickly coated with gray slime and long strands of slime trailed downstream.”

The smell was caused by creameries dumping their excess whey in the river. Such dumping had been standard practice for years, a problem that Cabot eventually solved by opening up new markets for whey, contributing to the sustainable nature of its processing.

Barbara and local carpenter Ed Duke renovated the old farmhouse. During the renovation, she sometimes slept in a hammock. In those early years, Cabot’s hearty communal spirit helped her survive. Barbara reflected on the relationships she developed with others in Cabot, “I got acquainted with my neighbors, wonderful folks. They were so kind to me. They even… I came home one night in the fall and I hadn’t covered up my hammock properly. And the hammock was full of water and my sleeping bag and the Lowrys had me over there to stay overnight to dry out.”

Barbara met her husband, Charles Carpenter, while sugaring at his farm. They combined their properties, committing themselves to each other and a lifetime of dairy farming. Along the way, they raised and nurtured two girls, Mary and Susan, and a barn of twelve milking cows. They brought their milk to the creamery each day in cans.

Charles died in 1981. A few days after his funeral, a cattle dealer called Barbara and asked if he could buy the cows. She told him no. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing what she and Charles had built together. The following year, Mary and Susan moved back to Cabot and helped their mother keep the farm
Barbara reflected, “The most fun thing about my career [was] bringing the farm back into production… I’ll never get tired of farming. It excites me.”

In the 1950s, strong management helped the cooperative through trying times.

In April 1952, a young University of Vermont graduate named Bob Davis visited the creamery and asked to meet with Cabot officials. Davis hailed from Morrisville, where he had accumulated significant dairying experience at United Farmers and Whiting Dairy. Shortly after the meeting, Cabot’s board of directors hired him as its newest plant manager. As it turned out, he would need to exercise all of his experience to guide the cooperative through some very formidable challenges.

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At the time, the creamery was not taking in enough milk to keep up with production. During the 1940s, the cooperative built a large addition to the original Cabot plant, along with a new coal-fired boiler. Herndon Foster recalled, “The biggest change under [prior manager] Joe Trombley was that he put on a whole new end to the creamery, great big building. And he put a ten foot [high] cellar all the way around! Old Harry Pike used to be down there at three o’clock in the morning and fire that up and have steam up so that when the farmers came it would be ready.”

Davis recalled in a 1989 interview that when he first arrived in Cabot, the creamery needed mechanical and technological updates. Employees were still making some products by hand:

“We had seventy-seven producers who lived and [delivered] milk here in Cabot, with the majority of them living right in close proximity to the plant. The average producer then was only making about 200 pounds a day… Back in ’52, there were a lot of farms that were still doing everything by hand and with horses. When I came in, the butter room had a 250-pound churn and each batch of cream would make 250 pounds of butter, and it was nothing to run five or six batches [a] day. All that butter was what we called then ‘hand printed.’ And which involved a little wooden mold and the butter maker would throw the butter out on the butter table and he’d take that little mold and slap it down and scrape off the excess and put in on a… board with a piece of parchment on it and when that came out of the mold it had the imprint of sixteen roses on the top. As for cheddar production, [it was] strictly a hand operation… we had six vats up there that held 8,000 pounds of milk. So basically, the production of the cheddar is the same today as it was then, except we’ve installed a lot of automated equipment. We did have agitators on the old vats that were suspended from the ceiling. You used to have to keep jacking up your vats if they settled…”

Quality control preoccupied the first months of Davis’s tenure. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined that Cabot had shipped cheese into the Boston market that it had labeled cheddar, but which contained too much moisture content. By labeling it cheddar, the cooperative had violated the law, which resulted in the FDA issuing Cabot a restraining order and a hefty fine. Davis recalled,

“One of the first things I did was go to the Federal court down in Brattleboro and try to convince the judge to reduce the order and the fine that was going to be assessed against Cabot. The cheese in question had been mislabeled… The judge was willing to reduce the order in part because the Directors of the creamery had taken dramatic actions…”

He knew that he had to improve plant operations to prevent such a thing from occurring again.

29 Transcribed interview of Bob Davis, Cabot Oral History Committee, Cabot, Vermont, Transcriptions of Spoken Memories, 187.
“The first thing I did was to hire Lee White who I had worked with at Whiting Dairy. We set up a laboratory and [tested] each vat of milk going into the cheddar – check the moisture content and everything in all the cheddar manufactured so that we knew what we were doing… and we ran test on the cream and the cottage cheese as well – everything all the way through the plant.”

Davis also made plans to ensure that more milk flowed into the creamery so that more product could be made and sold. He recalled, “We had the facilities to handle more milk. So it was to our benefit to get the additional supply to make our operation more efficient.” With Davis at the helm, the cooperative purchased other creameries and their milk-sheds, including New England Milk Producers, Whiting Dairy, the Bradford Cooperative, Mt. Mansfield Creamery, Washington Creamery and United Farmers.

As a result of Bob Davis’s proactive leadership, Cabot was able to emerge from the 1950s with essential technological improvements and more efficient procedures. This set the stage for decades of cooperative growth and prosperity.

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31 Ibid.
FORGING CONNECTIONS

Between 1953 and 1980, Cabot became the largest butter and cheese manufacturer in New England, handling 130 million pounds of milk per year from 350 farmers across Vermont. Annual sales by 1977 totaled $17,000,000. The cooperative continued to ride the “crest of [the 50 year] cheese boom.” In 1927, Americans ate 4.7 pounds of cheese a year. 50 years later, they ate over triple that amount. According to Bob Davis,

“A lot of factors have gone into the growth of cheese. Fifteen years ago there was a surplus of cheese and the government bought it and gave it to schools for hot lunch programs. Meat prices skyrocketed, and people began looking for a good substitute – cheddar cheese. Cheese is a conversation piece. I go to doings and I’m a cheese man and everyone wants to talk with me about cheese.”

Cabot products were being sold in 1,000 retail stores, ranging from small independent groceries to large chain outlets.32

Throughout New England and, increasingly, across the country, Cabot had become synonymous with Vermont quality cheddar. Its organization, products, branding and people reflected the values of the family farm: hard work, commitment to superior quality, healthy lifestyles and strength of community. Big city newspapers began to take notice.

50th anniversary commemoration of Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company, 1969

Front row, from left: Maidene (Mrs. Ray) Bolton, Abbie (Mrs. Tom) Orne, Leon Haines, Herbert Tebbetts, Wendell Goodrich and John Welch. Back row, from left: Max Gray, Bob Davis, Charles Carpenter, Lloyd Patterson, Everett Walbridge and Edwin Smith
The community comes together in 1969 to celebrate 50 years of Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company

A New York Times travel reporter reflected in 1961,

“The visitor to a Vermont country store often is treated to a piece of old-fashioned Montpelier cracker, topped by a generous portion of tangy Vermont cheese. Sometimes the visitor concludes that the store is entirely responsible for the superior taste. To be sure, the storekeeper may be an expert in the care and handling of good cheese, but the real credit belongs to the Vermont cheese factory that created the mouth-watering product.

Far to the north, between St. Johnsbury and Barre, in the small town of Cabot, is the largest of the state’s old-time cheese companies. The company has been operating in the same location for [many] years and is known generally as the Cabot Cheese Company, although its official name is The Cabot Farmers’ Cooperative [sic] Creamery, Inc.
The Cabot firm makes a true raw-milk-cheddar-type Vermont cheese of outstanding quality, in all sizes from the three- and five-pound wheels to the larger wheels and squares. The staff of sixty-three handles 5,000 vat loads of milk a year. In spite of the big production, the distinct Vermont flavor is retained through the careful handling and individual attention which each cheese gets.

The appeal of Vermont cheese lies in its high standard of quality and its superb flavor. Even among the several manufacturers there is a genuine respect for each other’s product and a striving for uniformity of quality. Many cheese lovers regard the Vermont variety as the best this country produces.33

By 1960, quality food products made with care from pure, wholesome ingredients were increasingly distinguished from mass-produced and mass-distributed processed foods entering the market at a record clip. At the same time consumers, ever more conscious of where their food came from, were also awakening to the dangers of the use of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals. Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, published in 1962, detailed how the pesticide DDT infiltrated the food chain, causing cancer and genetic abnormalities.

Carson’s controversial book raised public awareness about such environmental dangers, ultimately resulting in a federal ban on DDT. After a century of rapid urbanization and industrialization, consumers craved a return to more natural, harmonious and sustainable ways of life. Many of them continued to look to Cabot and other similar producers — and to the concept of cooperative farming — as alternatives to large-scale industrial food.

Paradoxically, the construction of new highways, which allowed the industrializing food chain to flourish, also brought urban consumers closer to remote farming regions like Cabot. There was a certain mystique about escaping the big city for more elemental experiences. In 1966, another New York Times reporter reflected,

“Although it may be lamentable for Vermont’s industrial ambitions that its people are outnumbered by its cows, the state is a haven for those like ourselves –

people who respect wilderness and solitude and who enjoy first-rate exploring. I am talking specifically about northeastern Vermont. Not so many summers ago, this part of New England was remote, open only to summer travelers with a month or two to spend… Today, thanks to the thruways and roads such as Interstate 89 from Burlington to Montpelier, or Interstate 95 from Boston to Plymouth, N.H., the entire area is far more accessible for the short-term visitor.

New geological maps were our key to tracking a wilderness that has probably seen no more than a dozen men in the last 100 years. Guided by the maps, we dared dirt lanes only inches wider than our car, found ponds so remote that bathing suits were clearly optional and traced mountain brooks well stocked with trout.

When we had nothing else to do during our holiday, we got into the car and drove somewhere. We never tired of the natural beauty of the farmhouses, many of them now taken over and restored by appreciative summer owners and others still needing hammer and paint to restore them to their full beauty.

Whenever we stopped, we were struck by the silence. We rarely heard noises other than the ones we made ourselves. During our entire visit, we never heard a motorcycle, a horn or a radio. Most amazingly, there were no airplanes. We exclaimed to each other how long it had been since we had lain on our backs in the grass studying the clouds and had not seen a single jet stream.

We had a favorite spot to end the day. It was the cemetery below Peacham, a half-acre plot set in the middle of a broad valley of pastures. A well-mended fence kept out the cows, which, when they saw us coming, ambled up to have their noses rubbed.”

Mrs. E. McGovern of Midland, New Jersey was one of those who made the trip summer after summer. She wrote the cooperative in 1972,

As a teenager, vacationing at my parents’ summer house at North Hero, Vermont, I first discovered Vermont cheddar. Through the last forty plus years, it has become the one food for which I have an insatiable taste.

In my opinion, it is the finest cheese in the world and having lived abroad and eaten the many world-famed varieties my opinion has never wavered.

In late August, I drove many miles out of my way to shop in Vermont local markets for my great favorite. I found yours to be the best. Foolishly, I purchased only 12 pounds and gave away much of it.
It is very difficult to find in Ridgewood, NJ stores. Sometimes, [I can find] small bars; our cheese store rarely offers it.\(^{35}\)

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Mrs. McGovern then asked Cabot’s management if they could send her some cheese by mail. She enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope “with hopes and high anticipation of a possible affirmative reply.” She then signed the letter, “Hopefully, (Mrs. E. McGovern).”

Bob Davis read the articles and listened to written requests from Cabot customers. He and others at the cooperative recognized that satisfying the demands of the urban market would mean meeting customers where they shopped. Distributing increasing varieties of value-added products created even more demand for members’ milk and a stable supply line ensured that members would always be able to sell it. Just as during the Depression, the cooperative sheltered family farms from the brunt of economic downturns. To be sure, farmers experienced pronounced distress during those downturns but in many cases, the cooperative represented the only viable outlet for their milk.

Fred Webster, professor of resource economics at University of Vermont, elaborated on the stability provided by milk cooperatives in the August 21, 1977 issue of The Vermonter:

> “What co-ops have tended to do is give stability to the market. Rather than farmers trying to dump milk on the market during spring flush and trying to sell as best they can, the co-ops have provided alternative markets for the products. As a result, there isn’t dumping one season and shortage the next. This balancing is a service to the farmer and consumer. The farmer has a steady market and doesn’t have to throw up his hands in the spring and the consumer gets a low-cost supply year-round.”

Vermont’s Director of Agricultural Development Gil Parker remarked in that same year,

> “[Cabot has] picked up the pieces after a lot of handlers have gone under. They’ve rescued a lot of dairymen who would have had not place to sell to. Your proprietary dealers (the privately-owned bottling companies) want big high-quality producers right on the main road. Someone has to look after the small farmers and we’ve nothing but admiration for the job they’ve done. They’ve got

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the true co-op attitude. Even if it’s inefficient to pick up a farmer they’ll pick him up and share the inefficiency.”

Regular processing and distribution of millions of pounds of milk in different forms required forging new connections.

Unlike the early part of the 20th century when Cabot representatives set up booths at central markets like Boston’s Faneuil Hall, by 1970 the marketplace had become decentralized. In 1972, Cabot initiated mail order sales of gourmet gift cheeses. The Christian Science Monitor reported that year,

“Here in Cabot the creamery, capitalizing on [the cheese] trend, has taken to making ‘gem’ cheeses – a three-pound miniature replica of the big 50-80 pound cheddars it turns out… A manufacturer of high-class women’s apparel whose lines are sold almost exclusively in New York City ordered 200 of these cheeses as gifts for its ‘special customers’ last Christmas. Everyone was delighted.”

Indeed, as Mrs. McGovern had requested, Cabot pursued mail orders in earnest through the next two decades, establishing a catalog in 1981. By the mid-1980s, it became a four-color catalog. Cabot’s Director of Marketing Charles Reynolds explained that in addition to the creamery’s products, the catalog also featured products made by other Vermont producers, including apples, honey, preserves and chocolate. Roberta MacDonald, who would eventually become Cabot’s Senior Vice President of Marketing, explained that by cooperating with each other, Vermont’s producers could “do things… that other states can’t.”

37 Ibid.
### PURE VERNON GRAND A MAPLE SYRUP

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### GIFTS FOR FUN!!

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<td>Cabot Tote Bag with a handy pocket...</td>
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Page from an early Cabot mail order catalog
MAIL ORDER SHOPPING QUESTIONNAIRE

Please return the completed questionnaire with a copy of your catalog to:

Patricia Wagen Wathen
P.O. Box 19069
5027 S.W. Texas Court
Portland, Oregon 97229

Company Name: Cabot Farmers' Co-operative Creamery Co., Inc.
Catalog Name: Cabot Vermont Cheddar Cheese Mail Order Catalog
Address: Main Street
City: Cabot
State: VT
Zip: 05447
Mail order telephone: (802) 251-2231 (Mail Order Customer Service)

1. What general product category is your company identified with?

2. How many types of cheese does your company make?

3. What is the address of your company?

4. What is the telephone number for your company?

5. What is the price of your main product?

6. What is the price of your secondary product?

7. What is the price of your tertiary product?

8. What is the price of your quaternary product?

9. What is the price of your quinary product?

10. What is the price of your senary product?

11. What is the price of your septenary product?

12. What is the price of your octonary product?

13. What is the price of your novenary product?
SATISFACTION GUARANTEED. BEST OF THE MAIL ORDER FOODS
Linda West Eckhardt, 108 Bush Street, Ashland, Ore. 97520

While I was researching my newest cookbook, The New West Coast Cuisine, Tarcher - St. Martin's Press, August '85, I discovered the growing mail order kitchen industry. Good home cooking and you don’t have to do it. I determined that the mail order kitchen cooks and handcrafters deserved a book of their own, and now I am in the process of selecting products, cooks and kitchens to feature in the new book. The criteria for inclusion in this book are that a food product must taste good, should not contain chemicals, dyes, or artificial preservatives. All products chosen should look good and be nicely packaged. Kitchen ware must be handmade. All products must be available by mail order (either from the manufacturer or through some reliable retailer), so that cooks and diners far removed from the locales where the product was grown, gathered or produced, can have access to it almost as readily as if it were for sale around the corner. I want this new book to open up a bountiful pantry of small batch food items and handcrafted kitchen ware to people all across America, a veritable treasure trove that features the best farm and kitchen products available. Of course, there is no charge to companies listed, and all choices are at my sole discretion. No advertising fees are solicited or accepted. I would like to consider you for inclusion in this book. If you are interested will you kindly answer these questions and return them along with a sample of your product, press and other information to help me best present your products.

Name of Company: CABOT CREAMERY

Name of person for me to contact: CA 186

Phone: 802-464-2223

Mail order cost

Kitchen items:

Do you sell retail by mail order now? Yes

If not, can you give me the name and address of a retail carrying your goods:

Do you accept Mastercharge/Visa? Yes

Catalog Cost

Do you have special requirements? No

Minimum orders? Yes

What can you tell me about your product? (please attach)

Can you send me copies of press coverage about you/your company? Very helpful if you can attach tear sheets.

How did you get in this business? How long have you been in?

Do you have a b/w photo that could be used to illustrate?

Do you have a retail outlet that people can visit? Where?

Yes - Cabot UT open year-round along I-70, tour of manufacturing plant
As it turned out, such innovative marketing of Cabot’s products proved essential as the 1980s progressed. That decade saw the collapse of other dairy cooperatives and the sale of many family farms across New England. Nationally, the number of small dairy farms had dropped every year since the depth of the Depression. Until the 1980s, many were able to sell their property for a reasonable profit. But by 1986, many farmers left their properties in debt.\(^{40}\)

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As it had during the Depression, Cabot’s historical commitment to producing value-added products and its role in successfully branding “Vermont Cheddar” helped stanch the bleeding.

During the fifteen years since 1971, Cabot’s cottage cheese production tripled, butter production increased 500 percent and sour cream production quadrupled. Yogurt production increased 1500 percent.41 The cooperative adapted swiftly to its customers’ changing tastes and demands.

While other cooperatives shut down during the 1980s, Cabot posted the largest profit in its history in 1986, instituted new state-of-the-art bacteriological testing for its finished dairy products, upgraded its equipment cleaning facilities and geared up for expansion. Under the leadership of Bill Davis, who succeeded his father in the managerial role, the cooperative, 500 members strong, broke ground on a brand new state-of-the-art 70,000 square foot warehouse and cutting/packaging plant that consolidated most dairy product manufacturing in one central location. The plant helped Cabot increase sales from $19 million in 1985 to $44 million by 1990.

Photos of cheese-makers at Cabot’s new plant, completed in 1987
Cabot celebrated its accomplishments in July 1989 by hosting the town’s first-ever dairy festival. The festival brought people from across Vermont and the Northeast to Cabot, where they were able to tour the new expanded plant, sample Cabot’s products and interact with the dairying community. Farmer
members and their families were also on hand to acquaint visitors with their crafts and routines, and with the concept of cooperative farming.
1989 CABOT DAIRY FESTIVAL

ENTERTAINMENT

*** DIXIE ZICELY & THE RENEGADES
-- DIRECT TO WAREHOUSE

*** TOM RAYBURN, JUGGLER & ENTERTAINER
-- DIRECT TO WAREHOUSE
-- SHOWS AT 1 PM & 2:45 PM (APPROX.)

*** GEORGE WOOGARD, JR., PRODUCER & SINGER
-- WILL ARRIVE AFTER 1 PM
-- DIRECT TO WAREHOUSE

*** TOM PARKER, WANDERING JUGGLER & CABOT EMPLOYEE
-- DIRECT TO MENGLE & PERFORM ANYWHERE

*** BUBBLEMAKERS
-- CLAIRE LAMPREAUX AND ASSISTANTS WILL BE
MAKING BUBBLES IN THE RETAIL STORE PARKING LOT

Quality Vermont Dairy Products

1989 Cabot Dairy Festival press release
In the mid-1980s, Vermont artist Carol MacDonald painted this portrait of Cabot Creamery surrounded by family farms that owned the cooperative and supplied its milk.

Kids delighted in Cheddar Moon Walk rides, face painting, palm reading, carnival games, jugglers and a clown performance. Country music played as kids and their accompanying calves competed in the “totally capricious and arbitrary” Ms. Cabot contest and parade for the honors of Best Heifer, Most “Amoosing” and Best Personality. Kids and their bovine companions dressed up in costumes, some made out of actual Cabot product packaging and paraded in front of a panel of judges. Instructions for the contest read, “Be imaginative, be brave, be funny.”

Cabot opened the event up to other Vermont producers, including other dairy makers, to exhibit their products, making it a celebration of the state’s agricultural bounty. The majority of events at the festival were free, but the cooperative donated the proceeds it did collect to the Cabot Young Farmers’ Education Program.42

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The festival connected Cabot farmers to their customers. It also familiarized new customers with the Cabot cooperative spirit. On July 29, 1989, a mood of celebration echoed across the rolling hills of northeastern Vermont. The celebration would be short-lived.

The cooperative’s dizzying ascent to the top of New England’s cheese market masked a devastating reality. The new plant’s construction and subsequent maintenance were expensive, and construction had run over budget. Additionally, its opening coincided with a period of unstable milk prices. By June of 1991, milk prices had fallen thirty percent, resulting in a major oversupply. By September 1992, prices had fallen to 1970 levels. Cabot’s losses in 1991 were between $1.5 and $2 million. To honor its commitment to farmer members, the cooperative continued to share profits with its farmers, which made it difficult to reinvest the proceeds back into the creamery, as the cooperative had been able to do until then.43 By the end of the year, it was rumored that the cooperative might have to stop the payment of those premiums. By 1992, the creamery was on the verge of bankruptcy, and rumors swirled that the cooperative would be sold and potentially liquidated.

In 1992, Cabot Farmers’ Co-operative Creamery Company merged with Agri-Mark Inc., the stalwart southern New England dairy cooperative that originated as the New England Milk Producers’ Association (NEMPA). Though many in Cabot fiercely resisted it, the merger allowed for cooperative dairy farming to continue to thrive in New England. Against formidable odds, the cooperative model withstood the test of time.

In the decades since, the Cabot brand has thrived. By the mid-nineties, the newly merged cooperative generated $90 million in sales. Cabot’s aged cheddar won a top award at the 1995 American Cheese Society meeting, along with three other Vermont producers. That year, Dairy Foods Magazine recognized Cabot as one of the “movers and shakers in the industry,” competing strongly with the largest dairy companies in the United States. Today, a wide array of Cabot products can

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be found in stores like Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods and other major grocers nationwide.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{44} Kathleen Hentcy, “Cabot churns its way to the top,” \textit{Vermont Business Magazine} 24, Vol. 6, (Jun 01, 1996), 25.
HONORING THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Through it all, Cabot and Agri-Mark maintain their commitment to pure food, animal welfare, community service and the cooperative spirit.

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, Cabot Creamery Co-operative continued to expand well beyond Vermont, through Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and upstate New York. That growth enabled Cabot to produce more high-quality milk and more diversified dairy products. The growth of cooperative ownership to include farmer-owners throughout New England and upstate New York brought Cabot more agricultural knowledge, expertise, and leadership then ever before. This enabled the cooperative to greatly expand its distribution along the east coast and ultimately, nationwide.

At the same time, Cabot’s ongoing commitment to environmental and community sustainability set the stage for another century of cooperative dairy production. By producing pure and wholesome food, preserving time-honored traditions, and forging deeper connections between producers and consumers, Cabot Creamery Co-operative continues to serve as a model for progressive food production.

At its 100th anniversary, Cabot remains committed to its central purpose: sustaining and enriching family farms. Those farms, in turn, support each other and contribute to the well-being of their communities.

Third generation dairy farmer Amanda Freund reflects on what Cabot Creamery Co-operative means to her, her family and her way of life as she tends the land settled by her grandparents:

[My grandfather] was raised in the Bronx. After serving in World War II… that city boy married [a northwest Connecticut] farmer’s daughter. They bought a few cows and began their life together as dairy farmers… Belonging to a cooperative gave Eugene and Esther [Freund] the ability to focus on raising cows, crops and kids while the cooperative handled the logistics of transporting and marketing the milk. It was a model and relationship that Eugene was committed to for all his days as a dairy farmer.
Seven decades later, that cooperative is still responsible for handling our milk. The confidence we have in our cooperative has allowed us to take new risks; from developing a value-added product from our cows’ manure, which we sell across the country, to being the first farm in the state to install robotic milkers. These innovations have inspired the third generation, my generation, to return to the farm. We take great pride in caring for the cows, harvesting from the fields that grandpa himself had worked and continuing his legacy of being active with our cooperative, Cabot Creamery.

Over the seven decades, our co-op has evolved to meet the shifting expectations of consumers and that includes the involvement of the farmer members. The root of many of our farm chores remain the same as 70 years ago, but one significant way my job as a dairy farmer differs from my grandpa’s is the importance of connecting with those who chose to purchase our Cabot products. From university classrooms to NYC grocery stores, Instagram hashtags and direct marketing conferences, our farm and cooperative’s success depends on sharing our farm story.

Today, we continue to carry out the legacy of Eugene and Esther Freund. Our community, our neighbors and Cabot customers are all part of that journey.