

**Cabot Creamery Co-operative**  
**100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Historical Web Content**

Derived from parent document titled *“Cabot Creamery Co-operative at 100: Celebrating and Building Upon a Century of Cooperative Dairy Farming”*

## PURE, HONEST FOOD

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

By the turn of the 20th century, the United States had become an urban nation. Decades of economic growth since the Civil War yielded an emerging American middle class that populated rapidly expanding 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.

As people moved further away from their sources of food, they became more anxious about what they consumed. In 1904, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* exposed horrific conditions in meatpacking plants that led to food contamination, disease and death. Consumers demanded reform. They also demanded pure, natural dairy products from wholesome sources they could trust. But could farmers deliver what they demanded?

Transporting fluid milk great distances over hard terrain was no easy feat in the early twentieth century. Because milk was highly perishable, the trip from farm to train became a daily necessity. Those farmers who lived beyond one or two miles from the depot spent much of their days driving wagons back and forth. Hot days were the worst. Farmers from the furthest reaches might make the trip all the way in, only to have gruff milk distributors tell them that their milk had spoiled.

Some farmers, desperate to sell milk on terms separate from the distributors', produced more durable dairy products like butter and transported it to market themselves. Farmer Inez Goodrich recalled that her grandparents used to produce butter in the winter. Then, when spring arrived, they hauled it to Boston: "[Gram and Gramp] used to make butter all winter and 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."

It was clear that if their farms were to survive, Cabot farmers would have to find a way to more easily sell their own products, on their own terms. So, they established Cabot Creamery, which allowed them to efficiently process their milk into more durable and shippable dairy products, initially butter and, eventually, cheese and much more.

## THE COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

***The cooperative model allowed rural communities to produce and distribute their dairy products, on their own terms.***

By 1919, many New England dairy farmers recognized that unless they could somehow gain more control of the increasingly complex milk distribution system, their farms might fold and their ways of life might disappear. Only by banding together could they create an efficient system of production and distribution to compete with the big distributors.

New advances in technology and communications, including recently installed rural telephones and regular mail delivery, allowed farmers to better share ideas, strategies and advice. Slowly but surely, a new communal spirit took root in and around Cabot.

Farmers interacted with their peers while they waited in line to sell their milk. They brainstormed ways to make dairying 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.

They also began to share equipment and resources. One farmer recalled, “gradually... neighbors [began] exchanging and combining their trips to the creamery... employing [trucks] to come to their door[s], [pick] up their milk and [return] their cans empty, sterilized and ready for service again.”

In 1919, determined to preserve their ways of life, ninety-four Cabot farmers purchased the town’s existing creamery for \$3700. They envisioned themselves as “members.” Founding members owned 863 cows between them. Some owned as little as one, some as many as thirty.

The 1920s produced an expanding middle class that had more disposable income than ever. Cabot farmers were able to sell more of their products into urban markets. The creamery began producing cheese in 1930, established a new cheese room and hired a specialized cheese-maker. As a result, the decade saw robust growth in the town of Cabot and across the dairying northeast.

But storm clouds hung 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

anxious consumers went without butter and cheese, luxuries they could no longer afford.

Even though Cabot's members fared better than non-affiliated farmers, the Depression was a punch in Cabot's gut. Cabot's board of directors determined that in order to stay in business, the creamery would have to take on debt and cut the pay of its staff substantially. Five board members even mortgaged their farms to keep the cooperative afloat. By doing so, they ensured that even at the Depression's absolute depth, farmers would have a place to sell their milk.

Though the depression tested Cabot farmers mightily, their cooperative spirit allowed many of them to weather the terrible time. Cabot's Chrystal Foster Fox reflected, "What allowed many Vermonters to survive were the skills and tradition of self-reliance, combined with cooperation, bartering and sharing with their neighbors."

## PRESERVING TRADITION WHILE EMBRACING CHANGE

***World War II ushered in a challenging time, but young, energetic farmers and creamery leaders helped Cabot's cooperative traditions endure.***

It was 1950. Cabot's population had been hollowed out first by the Depression, then by World War II and westward migration. The town lost more people and farms each year. Further complicating matters, the price of milk continued to drop. The future of family farms and the cooperative that sustained them was uncertain. It would be up to a new generation of entrepreneurial farmers and creamery leaders to, by the sweat of their brows, carry on Cabot's cooperative spirit and ensure the town's future.

When young farmer Barbara Blachly first arrived in Cabot from New Jersey, she recalled, "*There were abandoned farms everywhere around here... the last gasps of the Depression. Cabot was down to probably 500 people.*"

That didn't deter Barbara. She, together with her husband Charles Carpenter, combined properties, took the risk of their lives and established a brand new dairy farm. There, they raised two daughters, Mary and Susan, and a barn of twelve milking cows. For over four decades, the family brought their milk to the creamery in cans. Without intrepid farmers like the Carpenters and many others, Cabot would not have been able to endure.

At the same time, new strong cooperative leadership helped Cabot's farmers through the uncertain period.

In April 1953, a young University of Vermont graduate named Bob Davis took the co-op's helm. When he arrived in Cabot, the creamery was in need of major mechanical and technological updates. Employees were still making some products by hand, and the creamery wasn't taking in nearly enough milk.

Under Davis's leadership, the cooperative streamlined plant operations, initiated new quality control procedures and made sure enough milk entered the creamery to produce a sustainable amount of butter and cheese. To do so, Cabot's members took the major risk of purchasing other troubled creameries and their milksheds.

The foresight, hard work and dedication of the Carpenters, Davis and so many other Cabot devotees helped the cooperative and the town weather mid-20<sup>th</sup> century economic storms, setting the stage for decades of growth and prosperity.

## FORGING CONNECTIONS

In the second half of the twentieth century, Cabot became the largest butter and cheese manufacturer in New England. By 1977, it handled 130 million pounds of milk per year from 350 farmers across Vermont. Its products were sold in 1,000 retail stores, ranging from small independent groceries to large chain stores. Annual sales that year totaled \$17,000,000. The cooperative helped drive New England's dairy industry to what Bob Davis referred to as the "*crest of [a 50 year] cheese boom.*"

Throughout New England and, increasingly, across the country, Cabot became synonymous with 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 from cooperation.

In the decades since, Cabot has continued to grow and thrive. By the mid-nineties, after merging with the stalwart southern New England dairy cooperative Agri-Mark, the new partnership generated \$90 million in sales. In 1995, Cabot's aged cheddar won a top award at the American Cheese Society meeting. 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 dairy products can be found in stores nationwide, including Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and other major grocers.

Cabot's ongoing commitment to environmental and community sustainability sets the stage for the next 100 years of cooperative dairy production. By producing pure and honest food, preserving its cooperative tradition, and forging meaningful connections between farmers and customers, Cabot remains committed to sustaining and enriching over 850 family farms throughout New England and upstate New York. Those farms, in turn, support each other, enriching and nourishing their communities, the country and the world.