

Yorkton Stories

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Putting milk (and Vi-Co) on Yorkton's tables

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Dick DeRyk

In the very earliest years of Yorkton in the 1880s, the pioneer residents in the village and on the farms either had their own cows for milk, or bought it from farmers.

By 1891, a group of residents saw the possibility of establishing a dairy to distribute milk, but that only lasted a couple of years because some of the shareholders did not come up with funds when needed to continue the operation.

In 1895, local businessman James Crerar had another go at setting up a creamery, but he went out of business in 1902.

After that, it is said, as many as 14 farmers made their way into the village to sell their milk, butter and whatever other dairy products they produced on the farm.

By 1913, when Yorkton was a growing boom town, Ideal Creamery opened, producing butter and ice cream. An article in the Yorkton Enterprise in April that year noted it was managed by the former manager of the Saskatchewan Co-op Creamery in Weyburn, who considered Yorkton an idea location because of the good farms in the district and excellent rail connections. The new company bought a building on Front Street, now Livingstone Street, and invested the princely sum of \$2,000 in renovations and equipment. Cream was shipped in by wagon and train from as far as 150 miles away.

Two years later in 1915 Ideal Creamery was sold to Winnipeg-based Crescent Creamery, which built a plant at 25 Laurier Avenue on the land immediately south of what is now TA Foods, and formerly the Western Grocers offices and warehouse. That creamery was sold to Standard Creamery – about which we have not been able to find any information -- in 1954. Then in 1966 Standard Creamery was sold to Sask Co-op Creamery.

The years 1913 to 1920 were boom years for the dairy processing industry in Yorkton. There was Crescent Creamery. In 1917 Saskatchewan Co-op Creameries was formed and operated a poultry processing plant, a chick hatchery and butter production on Myrtle Avenue.

In 1920, Alex and Johanna Blommaert, who farmed just east of Yorkton on the quarter section next to what is now Weinmaster Park subdivision, expanded their dairy farm by establishing White Sands River Dairy. The White Sand River, commonly known as Bull's Creek, ran through their land.

The Blommaerts operated White Sands River Dairy until 1946, and were the last raw milk – that is, unpasteurized -- milk retailer in Yorkton. They sold the business to another dairy that had started about the same year they did, which became City Dairy.

City Dairy also bought York Farm Dairies, operated by two brothers south of Yorkton in the York Lake area, in the late 1930s, as well as Sigardson Dairy and Wilcox Dairy, about which little is known.

City Dairy grew out of milk sales that a farmer by the name of Sydney Herbert Peet operated from his farm, which took up the land from present day Reaman Avenue to the Hopkins Lake ravine, now the ecological preserve west of the Gallagher Centre.

Mr. Peet and his family had a homestead near Endeavour, but sold it to move to Yorkton, where he rented the land from JAM Patrick, a local lawyer who later became Judge Patrick.

Exactly when that was continues to be a bit of conjecture. A history written by his son Cecil states, "I'm not certain of the exact year of the rental of the farm at Yorkton, but it must have been around 1920".

Part of his rental agreement stated that the Peets would supply the Patrick household with milk, so each evening Mr. Patrick came to the farm in his horseless carriage to pick up the milk. After some time, Mr. Patrick suggested that perhaps Mr. Peet could deliver the milk to his home in Yorkton. That led to much discussion between the two, with Mr. Peet proposing in the end that if Mr. Patrick could find enough customers so that he could deliver at least 20-quart sealer jars of milk, he would make the trip and do the deliveries. It took only a day for Mr. Patrick to come up with a list of friends and associates who would buy the milk, and the deal was done. His growth was aided by a Mr. Howell of Fonehill, who sold his business including a custom-designed milk delivery wagon pulled by horses, and his Yorkton customer list, to Mr. Peet in 1922.

Thus started the upward trend of the Peet family dairy processing business as described by Cecil:

"Instead of only having a hired man in spring and fall we hired a man the year round. A milk house was built in connection with the well-house on the top of an incline. A windmill was purchased from the town, taken apart piece by piece, and re-assembled above the pump next to the well-house.

"This was a real step forward as it took away the tedious chore of hand pumping water for our growing herd of cattle. Also, a collie dog was procured and trained to bring the cows home whenever required. One major improvement that we made was in the cementing of the cow barn, and further addition of an upright silo for the storing of cut sunflowers and corn. This was in the neighborhood of about 60 feet high and was a first in the area.

"As time went on and shortages of milk loomed we approached some other farmers and had them bring their milk to our farm for bottling and delivery.

"Mr. Harry Wilkinson was one of the larger suppliers at that time and it became apparent that we had to make some changes, as the milk end was using up most of our working time while leaving

the farm short handed. It was at this time after my father had made a trip to Ontario, that he had the idea of building a pasteurizing plant in Yorkton.

“The plant was constructed of wood. It was about the size of a double garage. The floor was cemented and a small basement for an upright boiler to make steam and for heating was built. An ice well was constructed next to this for a place to keep the milk cool after bottling and before delivering.

“The dairy kept my father and whole family busy in every way. He would be up early each morning and with my brother and myself we covered the town with milk before breakfast and then went to school.”

That was the start of City Dairy, which operated in Yorkton until 1969, at which time Cecil, who had bought the company from his father in 1953, sold to Saskatchewan Co-op Creamery. Cecil moved to Regina to manage the Co-ops plant there for 13 years, before moving back to Yorkton when he retired.

There were other smaller local dairy operations in the early part of the 1900s, most of them consisting of dairy farmers selling milk in town, each with their own list of clients. When the business was sold to a larger creamery, the customer list went with it.

Saskatchewan Co-op Creameries, formed in 1917, operated on Myrtle Avenue between the rail tracks and Smith Street. It had plants across Saskatchewan, but went into receivership in 1932 when the depression hit. But it didn't shut down; it continued to operate with financial and operational support from the provincial government.

In 1939 Saskatchewan Co-operative Creamery Association Limited was established and took over operations from the government. About the same time, it started to process fluid milk in a plant on the corner of Myrtle Avenue and Smith Street, now the location of a plumbing shop.

By the war years starting in 1940, City Dairy and Sask Co-op Creamery were the two largest players in the dairy business here. The two competitors also worked together during the war years to supply milk to the commonwealth pilot training school at what is now the Yorkton airport, as well as other air force training stations in the area.

City Dairy stopped Sunday milk delivery to homes in the early 1940s, due to lack of workers, with many men having gone off to war. The Co-op soon followed, making Yorkton only the second city in Canada, after Ottawa, to not have Sunday delivery of milk.

That was a huge change for the milk industry; daily home delivery had been important because refrigeration of food was not available in most homes – at best food was kept in a cool basement, although some may have had ice boxes which were becoming more common. Those were wooden cabinets where food was kept cold with the help of large blocks of ice which were delivered to the home on a regular basis.

After the second world war, big changes took place. In 1948 City Dairy built a new plant on Laurier Avenue just south of the tracks and the Independent Street intersection, next to the original small pasteurizing facility, and five years later Cecil Peet bought the business from his father.

In 1960 glass milk bottles were replaced by cartons, at about the same time as the horse-drawn milk wagons disappeared from city streets, replaced by trucks and vans. By the end of the 60s, home milk delivery was a thing of the past. Corner stores, of which there were many in Yorkton, and grocery stores is where people went for milk.

In 1969 City Dairy was sold to Sask Co-op Creamery. In the early 1970s fire destroyed the poultry plant and hatchery on Myrtle Avenue, but the milk production plant survived. As did Scott Fruit, a wholesaler that occupied the building that is now Denson Food Equipment.

In 1972, Sask Co-op Creameries and Dairy Pool, located in Saskatoon, merged to form Dairy Producers Co-op. The next year the newly formed company built a large 90,000 square foot plant on York Road. Gordon Shiplett was the first manager, later succeeded by Stan Stevenson.

Amalgamation in the milk business continued. In 1992 Agrifoods was formed when one British Columbia and two Alberta dairy co-operatives joined forces and produced milk products under the name Dairyworld. Saskatchewan's Dairy Producers Co-op declined to join, but Manitoba's dairy co-op joined the next year.

Things were also changing on York Road. Yogurt production stopped in 1992. Butter production stopped in 1994, and the next year was the end of milk and creamette production. In 1995, the only thing still produced at the York Road plant was milk powder.

In 1996 Dairy Producers Co-op was absorbed into the Agrifoods/Dairyworld operation, which was then bought by Saputo in 2001. In January/February of 2003, the York Road operation, state of the art 30 years earlier, closed for good.

It represented a huge change locally and provincially. In Saskatchewan in 1938 there were 42 creameries including ones in Yorkton, Preeceville, Norquay, Melville, Langenburg, Esterhazy, Broadview and Moosomin. In addition there were poultry killing plants, and dozens of egg grading stations in Saltcoats, Bredenbury, McNutt, Calder, Wroxton, Waldron, Marchwell, Stockholm, Jedburgh, Parkerview, Ituna, Goodeve, Sheho and Tuffnell.

By 1971, Sask Co-op Creamery had reduced its operation to 22 creameries, of which 13 processed fluid milk.

The only milk processing plant now operating in Saskatchewan is Saputo in Saskatoon, producing Dairyland products.

As for that plant on York Road, surrounded by a chain link fence, there is no indication what, if anything, takes place inside. It is owned by a numbered company not located in Yorkton. Public information indicates that it had been owned since 2017 by Tweed Grasslands, operated by Canopy Growth, to grow cannabis, which became legal in Canada in October of 2018. In April of 2020 Canopy Growth announced it was closing the Yorkton facility. The site, 90,000 square feet in

size, came to Canopy Growth as part of the Ontario company's takeover of medical marijuana firm rTrees Producers Ltd. in 2017. At the time, Canopy Growth said it planned to expand the plant on the 11-acre Yorkton property to over 300,000 square feet and ultimately create between 40 and 50 new permanent jobs. That did not happen.

The building appears to sit idle today. The city of Yorkton won't say if the property taxes are up to date, but indications are the city is not concerned about the taxes at this time.

This podcast started as a story about the two main dairies that longer-time residents of Yorkton would be familiar with – Dairy Producers and its predecessor Saskatchewan Co-op Creamery, and City Dairy. But the more we dug into those histories, the more we learned about who was putting the milk on the tables of Yorkton over the past 130 years.

We owe our thanks to a number of sources and people who helped us put together this story.

Jack Light, who ended his 44-year career in the dairy industry in Yorkton in 1999, spent years of his retirement compiling a book titled Saskatchewan's Creameries: A History. He started in 2003 by writing letters to 82 communities, local museums and individuals to ask for information about local dairies. He published it in 2009, providing information and photos from across the province, with special emphasis on the Yorkton area.

Jack had started working for Sask Co-op Creamery in Melfort in 1955, then worked in Lloydminster and Moosomin before coming to Yorkton in 1974 as assistant manager. He died in 2021. His wife Alice and son Lance, who was one of the last to work at the plant on York Road before it closed, still live in Yorkton.

The grandson of White Sands River Dairy's owners Alex and Johanna Blommaert, Dave Blommaert, was helpful in rounding out their story. In the process I discovered that Johanna was Dutch, and was born in the same small town, Ede, where I was born 58 years later. Small world indeed.

And the Peet family here and in Preeceville provided documents including speeches and the writings of Cecil Peet, as well as photos and artifacts which can be seen on our website, yorktonstories.ca, on the page dedicated to this podcast.

On our website you will also find a document with the timelines of dairy production in Yorkton starting in 1891. It is as accurate as we can determine from all the information we have found.

We had a chance to speak with three long retired employees of the Dairy Producers operation in Yorkton.

Joe Swejda started with Sask Co-op Creamery as a butter maker in Esterhazy in 1955, then worked in Foam Lake packing poultry and making butter, followed by stints in Wadena and Swift Current before coming to Yorkton in 1973 as the production manager. That meant he spent his time on the road in western Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan finding and convincing dairy farmers to ship their milk to Yorkton. To clarify some of the terminology you will hear, Joe talks about industrial

milk, which is turned into milk powder. Fluid milk is what goes into cartons for retail. Joe retired in 1998.

You were a butter maker when you started in this business.

Joe Swejda

Yes, I was, yeah.

Dick DeRyk

What's involved in making butter in 1955? Was it all mechanized?

Joe Swejda

Well, the cream would come in, it would be graded, of course. Three grades. Table, special, and number one.

Dick DeRyk

The table would be the stuff we use for whipping cream.

Joe Swejda

No, they all went in the same tank. Actually it was different acidity. Table was low in acid. And then number one is pretty sour. And then the lowest grade was sent to Yorkton to an eviscerating plant to run it through the eviscerator to make it quality enough to turn it into churning cream.

Dick DeRyk

How did they do that?

Joe Swejda

Well, the big eviscerating thing is kinda run on steam. We had to add a soda base to sweeten it up.

Dick DeRyk

I'm assuming that there was different prices for the different...

Joe Swejda

Oh yes, oh yes.

Dick DeRyk

But in the end it all ended up together anyway.

Joe Swejda

It ended all up together.

Dick DeRyk

And then the butter, you have machines for that, I'm assuming, in 55.

Joe Swejda

In 55, we had a barrel churn. You had to cool the cream down to a low, low temperature, then the churn would go round and round, of course. I would run my test first. I would add salt to it, and

then I'd put the churn on and you'd go round and round and round and round until it had a nice texture of butter. Then you had 56-pound boxes, they were wooden at that time. I'd have to fill those boxes up and had a big pounder. Usually I had a helper too that would help me. We pounded this fat into this box, it got nice and square, of course. Nailed the lid on top and into the freezer, and then we ship it over to the freezer.

Dick DeRyk

So it was sold in a fifty-six-pound box. In the crate.

Joe Swejda

Yeah. Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

You didn't make it into neat little one pound packages like we see on the shelf today.

Joe Swejda

Yeah, some of it got done. It would go into a kind of a holder with the wire, and then you press the lever and then the wire would cut the pound this way, and then it would cut the pound that way.

Dick DeRyk

Oh yeah yeah.

Joe Swejda

And of course some of the lady helpers, they would package it into one pound. You have to put on a scale first, make sure it's one pound, and then they put the wrapper on it.

Dick DeRyk

And was that done even in Esterhazy at the time?

Joe Swejda

Oh yeah. Oh yeah, oh yes.

Dick DeRyk

Yeah. Plant in Yorkton on York Road. Did it produce butter as well?

Joe Swejda

Oh yeah. Big time at that time. Glen Meekma, he was one of the butter makers. Frank Vidomsky?
Oh yeah. I remember those old timers.

Dick DeRyk

Was there competition at the time between butter and margarine, or would that have come later?

Joe Swejda

No, it wasn't. Well, later on there was competition.

Dick DeRyk

But when you started in it, butter was the thing.

Joe Swejda

Oh yeah, yeah.

Dick DeRyk

Joe, when you came to Yorkton in 1973, you were the production manager. You were going all over the place to find producers.

Joe Swejda

Yes, yes, I was, yes.

Dick DeRyk

What kind of territory did that cover?

Joe Swejda

It covered everything from Roblin to Elkhorn, Manitoba, down to the Moosomin area, then back to number six highway, across number six highway to Govan, and from Goven, Melfort, Tisdale, and the local area.

Dick DeRyk

Your job was to convince them to ship their milk to Yorkton?

Joe Swejda

It was to go into production, number one, and of course to ship the milk to Yorkton, yeah.

Dick DeRyk

How many dairy farmers, how many people who farmed with cow herds would have been at that time when you first started in the 70s?

Joe Swejda

Well, I don't know about the cream shippers, but there was about 64 shippers that eventually shipped industrial milk, and another 30 shipped fluid, which would be close to a 100. And of course, at that time we had about 98 employees in Yorkton here, too.

Dick DeRyk

Ninety-eight, close to 100. So the plant here was a busy plant.

Joe Swejda

It was one of the major plants in the province. There were only two milk dryers in Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon and Yorkton.

Dick DeRyk

For the farmers, the dairy herd, was that profitable?

Joe Swejda

Yes, at that time it really was. Especially when industrial milk came in. They were probably doubling their money on it by shipping milk. All they did was the milking and ship the milk in.

Dick DeRyk

They didn't do any processing on the farm at all? I mean they used to way back when.

Joe Swejda

They used to, yeah, yeah. They had bulk tanks, which I helped sell. Smaller tanks and bigger tanks. Some of the producers were quite large, like Nelson Ford, just not far from town here.

Dick DeRyk

Yeah, yeah.

Joe Swejda

They were a large producer and many others.

Dick DeRyk

By the time you retired in the late 1990s, had the number of producers gone down? It used to be that every farm had some cows.

Joe Swejda

What was really happening is some of our producers were selling out, and most of them were ready to transfer to the Saskatoon plant. They also had a dryer there. Same type of operation.

Dick DeRyk

From 55 until you retired, you must have seen some major changes in the way milk was handled and produced.

Joe Swejda

Oh, tremendous changes. Tremendous changes, yeah. From the small scale to large scale, yes.

Dick DeRyk

And from a lot of small producers to fewer larger producers. You mentioned a 100 or so in your territory. That would have probably been less by the time you retired as well? Fewer producers shipping milk?

Joe Swejda

It got so bad that even Regina shut down, you know. It was a slide downhill. Some of the diehards like Fords and Lowenbergers at Langenburg and so forth, Mitskis kind of hung on, but lots didn't.

Dick DeRyk

Ed Spilak started working at the chick hatchery on Myrtle Avenue, then at the York Road Plant until it closed in 2003.

Ed Spilak

I started in 1956 in September. I was working at the poultry plant, that's when I started here. They were killing chickens and turkeys and packing them, and they ship them away. Then I went to the hatchery. I worked at the hatchery from March till June. I started at 12 midnight and I worked till eight in the morning. Seven days a week.

Dick DeRyk

Was that normal at the time?

Ed Spilak

I don't think so, but this was a hatchery and somebody had to be there at night.

Dick DeRyk

They were hatching chicks. And what happened to the chicks that they hatched?

Ed Spilak

People came and bought them and they sold the chicks. Yeah, anybody came along and bought them and bought them. In the hatchery, I went into the creamery. Yeah. And in the creamery I started washing cream cans.

Dick DeRyk

Somebody had to do it I guess.

Ed Spilak

Somebody had to, there was a machine, that was the best job I had. And then from there I went into the shipping department. Then I went over to the new plant in 73. I worked in the shipping there for a while, and then I start trucking, hauling milk to Canora and Rhein, all these little towns. And then the plant closed down, and I get laid off for a while, and then I got called back to work, and I was picking milk up at the farmers, driving it into Yorkton here, and they were making milk powder out of it. They made milk powder for a couple of years anyway, after that.

Dick DeRyk

And then they shut it down. They joined Dairyworld in 1996 and Dairyworld, which was the Alberta and British Columbia co-op, the promise was made that none of the plants would shut down. But they did.

Ed Spilak

Yeah, they did. And Yorkton was a real moving business there, really. We had a lot of workers, 100 workers in that plant.

Dick DeRyk

On York Road. Short walk for you to work, wasn't it?

Ed Spilak

It was very good for me, yeah.

Dick DeRyk

What kind of reaction when they found out that the plant was shutting down?

Ed Spilak

It wasn't very good. Couldn't believe it, I guess. One of those things happened, I guess.

Dick DeRyk

Did you get paid out? Was there severance pay at that time?

Ed Spilak

We got a severance package.

Dick DeRyk

It would have thrown a lot of people out of work who weren't expecting to have to look for a new job.

Ed Spilak

A lot of people went someplace else.

Dick DeRyk

Ed and I talked about the York Road building before I had a chance to find out more about it.

What's happening in the old plant now? I heard that they're growing marijuana in the basement.

Ed Spilak

They were growing marijuana for about a year here. And then all of a sudden it disappeared.

Dick DeRyk

Somebody's paying the taxes on it.

Ed Spilak

I wonder who. I have no idea.

Dick DeRyk

People drive by there, and I've got people asking, what's in that big building there? Nobody seems to know.

Ed Spilak

Nobody knows. I haven't been in that building for 20 years at least.

Dick DeRyk

The building itself, I'm sure, is still pretty good shape.

Ed Spilak

Oh, it was good shape when we left it, you know. It was all cement and well kept.

Dick DeRyk

Al Stupak started working at Sask Co-op Creamery at the poultry processing plant in 1970 and was among the last employees at the York Road plant when it shut down. He then worked at Harvest Meats and production planning and maintenance until he retired in 2018. He remembers the move from Myrtle Avenue to the new facility on York Road.

Al Stupak

The original creamery is long gone. They tore it down after the poultry plant burned down and the hatchery burned down with the poultry plant. So that was it. So Denson's was the only thing left after they tore it down.

Dick DeRyk

Where the plumbing shop is now was where the actual creamery is. You were there until the new plant went into production on York Road. There was a fairly large increase in staff at the time from what was left on Myrtle Avenue.

Al Stupak

Oh, yeah. When we had full staff with everybody, there was about a 100 in there all total.

Dick DeRyk

Myrtle Avenue, there wouldn't have been that many.

Al Stupak

In the plant itself, there would have been 10 with office. And then probably four or five milk routes that were doing door-to-door delivery. And then I think there was about three or four bulk tankers.

Dick DeRyk

Huge increase.

Al Stupak

So at the same time, they were starting to shut down all the smaller plants in Canora and Kamsack.

Dick DeRyk

So it was all being consolidated in Yorkton. What were they making at the new plant when it first opened?

Al Stupak

There's milk, bottling milk, and then there was the butter department, and then the drying room. That's where we dried all the powder, all the milk came in. I think there were three silos there, and they each held 100,000 pounds of milk in each one of them. And that was basically we'd be drying about probably about 150, 200,000 pounds a day.

Dick DeRyk

But long before Al started working in the milk business, he was, as he recalls, introduced to it inadvertently by a neighbor.

Al Stupak

Tom Broskie. He lived on Maple. And he was our neighbour because we lived kittycorner, and the only thing between us was the back alley. And he would be, he had the horse and wagon, and he'd pick us up every once in a while, me and my brother, and he'd take us on the route with them.

Dick DeRyk

It was for City Dairy.

Al Stupak

Yep. Dairy Producers had it too then. They gave up the last of horses, I guess it was what in 1959. City Dairy gave up the last one, I think was what, 1960. He'd pick us up, you know, every once in a while and take me and my brother in the wagon. He'd be driving a horse and go door to door, dropping off the milk and the bottles and stuff like that. And we'd just sit there and watch, but we'd go for a ride more than anything else. That I remember. I remember when we were kids, too. Back then they were paper cartons, but they were dipped in wax filled with milk. And then in the wintertime, we had a glass of milk, we were picking wax out of the milk yet, too.

Dick DeRyk

What's your best memory of being in the milk business?

Al Stupak

There was a lot of challenges because we always had the stuff thrown at us. We've got to figure out how to make it go. We'd have ideas and our managers would let us go ahead like when we were doing yogurt. You know, they there was a standard flavors of yogurt. But we were monkeying around sometime. We had a bit some yogurt left over. So we'd have Vi-Co syrup, make chocolate yogurt or cherry. We mix flavors up like that. But then we got in trouble for that too, because a lot of the stuff guys in Regina wanted this stuff made for them, so we, you know, have send the case up. But then managers didn't like that too much because all of a sudden this stuff was getting to be popular, and they had their eight flavors that they had to have, and nothing else. Like, you know, we have banana chocolate, we'd make up, you know, or chocolate cherry, you know, we were doing mixing Vicos syrup with cherry, and there it is. So we did that, but we got in trouble for that. They made us quit doing that, so we couldn't experiment no more.

Dick DeRyk

During the last few years of the York Road plant, milk powder was basically all that was produced there. You were one of the last ones after the plant when they shut her down.

Al Stupak

2003.

Dick DeRyk

What was the reaction of the people that were working there when things started to close down?

Al Stupak

They were closing down, they were trying to centralize, see. And there was Saskatoon, Regina, and Yorkton, because we had the dryer there. So we were expected to get cut any day. And as it turns out, they shut down Regina and kept Yorkton going. And we were the backup for Saskatoon that couldn't, when Saskatoon couldn't handle the volume of milk, it was coming to us. And then from that we started, instead of just drying skim milk, basically that was left after the milk was separated, got the cream, went into butter. We had the skim milk that we dried into powder. We had a DeLaval dryer, and it turned out it was one of the most versatile. And then we found out how to dry different products with it. So we started out with skim. The next thing is whey from cheese in

Saskatoon, and they were bringing the whey to Yorkton, and we had to learn how to dry whey powder, and that's where they make your powdered cheese products, you know, like Kraft dinner, you know, that's whey powder. So we got that down, but it was an awful mess. And then they needed a new market for whole milk powder. You know, not just skim milk, they wanted a whole milk. So we had to find out or work out how to dry. We were already doing skim and whey, we had to learn how to do whole milk. So we were doing it, but it was terrible stuff to work with because the fat contents were still in the milk, you know, going under heat, that would catch on fire in the dryer, right? So we had a lot, a lot of fires in that place just from the fat catching fire. And then just before it shut down, they wanted they wanted us to figure out how to dry colostrum for baby food. I had tons of colostrum frozen up in freezers all over the place. Instead of keeping it frozen, they were figuring out trying to figure out how to dry it. And that was what we were supposed to do. We never got around to doing it though. We just basically ended up doing skim, whole milk, and whey.

Dick DeRyk

Where did that go?

Al Stupak

All over the world. It was going to Nicaragua and the States and all over the place.

Dick DeRyk

Out of Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

Al Stupak

Yeah, there's dryers all over the place. Like the closest dryer that was the equivalent of ours was in Winkler, Manitoba. They had the identical dryer, but all they were doing there was whey, because there was a lot of cheese production in Manitoba. Then they they branched off into doing skim. So they're doing skim and whey. Saskatoon had an ultra modern dryer and everything else, but it wasn't versatile. Could only do one thing and one thing only. So basically they were doing skim, but they had three unions in Saputo. They were in Saskatoon, so no one worked on weekends or anything else. So we had our own milk coming in all week, and they had to take up the overflow from Saskatoon on the weekends. So we were going 24-7.

Dick DeRyk

The last employees on York Road joined in an effort to keep production going and make it manageable for the small crew, when in effect the plant was operating and making milk powder around the clock every day. What was the mood like when you shut it down?

Al Stupak

We had six years. Six years like it was coming. Well, Larry Donison, he used to be a salesman there. He was over in Brandon, and they moved him to Brandon, and he was an assistant manager there, and then Larry Therion was the terminator here for shutting down plants. Well, when we got notice that Yorkton's next on the block, Larry came in and took over for Larry Therion. And he said, we're going to make this go. So basically that's what we did. There was whatever was left of it. We were going 24-7, but we never had overtime. They were making money. They weren't paying time and a half out for all this stuff. But then we worked out our own schedule between ourselves that we could get it done with no overtime. We got a minimum crew, so it was a matter of cooperation, and everybody understood how to make this go. There was none of this union, you know, we can't

work weekends, none of that stuff. Everybody worked together to make it go. And that's pretty much it.

Dick DeRyk

At the end, how many people were still working there?

Al Stupak

Well, there was four of us in a drying crew, and then we usually had two or three engineers that looked after the boilers. Then a couple of truck bay attendants were unloading trucks, probably six boat tanker drivers, and then two or three that were in unloading. Three, three engineers and then manager.

Dick DeRyk

Jack Light has a listing in here somewhere. Let me see if I can find it. The last employees to work at the Yorkton plant were Larry Donnison.

Al Stupak

Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

N Leson.

Al Stupak

Oh, Norm, yeah, he was in the office.

Dick DeRyk

W. Dove.

Al Stupak

That's Willie, he was in the truck bay.

Dick DeRyk

H. Tratch.

Al Stupak

And he was a driver, then he went into the truck bay.

Dick DeRyk

Al Stupak.

Al Stupak

Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

L. Coutts.

Al Stupak

Les Coutts.

Dick DeRyk

L. Light.

Al Stupak

Lance Light.

Dick DeRyk

That would have been Jack's son. R. Breitkreuz.

Al Stupak

Roy and Dan Breitkreuz.

Dick DeRyk

B. Hryniuk.

Al Stupak

Billy Hryniuk, he was in the truck bay.

Dick DeRyk

R. Swejda. Was that Joe's son?

Al Stupak

Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

And T. Pugh.

Al Stupak

That was Terry. He was an engineer. Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

Jack says that when the plant closed, those were the last people still working there.

One of the products made by Saskatchewan Creamery Cooperative and Dairy Producers Co-op in the late 1950s was a chocolate drink called Vi-Co, a name derived from vitamin concentrate.

City Dairy also made of chocolate milk under the name Topsy. But Vi-Co was the leading name across the province. It was celebrated for its rich taste and its association with local dairy cooperatives. The way it was made set it apart from other chocolate milk produced in Canada. Chocolate syrup was added to milk before heat pasteurization took place to prevent settling.

Al Stupak points out that at first it was referred to as chocolate milk. But eventually its richness diminished over the years as the milk used went from whole milk, 3.25% butterfat to 2% and eventually 1%. When Dairy Producers merged with Dairyworld in 1996, the name Vi-Co

disappeared. But it still endures in Saskatchewan as the common name for chocolate milk. Especially among those over the age of 40 or so who were raised in the province.

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