

The milky way: The past and present of dairy production

10/17/2022

The milky way: The past and present of dairy production



The second annual Cheese and Dairy Festival was held at the Cache County Event Center during the first weekend of October — an event held to showcase the dairy industry in Cache Valley.

This year was the first time I attended. I walked around with my kids trying different cheeses, ice cream and milk. It may not look like it with the homes being built, but Cache Valley is still the top producer of milk in Utah according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. If you read the front page article from The Herald Journal in September titled “[Goodbye Bessie](#),” you got a look at how the dairy industry is changing; less total farms but the same number of milking cows. This trend is found in Cache Valley and in the nation.

My grandparents operated dairy farms in Hyrum and Paradise. I have to admit, it was sad to see when the family decided to give up milking cows to focus on crops. I look back on my childhood and have fond memories of running around on the farm. I showed my grandparents’ dairy calves in 4-H at the Cache County Fair as well as Richmond’s Black and White Days. I think I preferred the latter because I got out of school.

Though both grandparents operated dairies, they had two different styles of barns. The Clawson farm had a more modern milking parlor than the Richman farm. When I was

in high school the Richmans purchased the neighbor’s barn, which was more modern, and I helped move the cows to the new location. I’ll insert the dad joke here — it was a moo-ving experience in many ways.

It was an end to one location and the beginning of new era. It changed how the cows were milked. They used to get grain in the barn during milking, but no grain was provided at the new location. It was also a time when many were looking to milk three times a day instead of the normal two.

I remember coming back from Nebraska, after 2 years away, and milking with my grandpa for the next weeks while my uncle and aunt were at a Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers Convention. I had just met a gentleman in Imperial, Nebraska, that had been 10 years old during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. I’d also seen these huge farms and and appreciated history.

While milking one day, I asked my grandpa when the first automatic milking system arrived on the farm. He said it was during World War II — not the answer I was expecting. He was the youngest brother and his other two brothers were serving in the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy while the farm was on a waiting list to get an automatic system. They needed the new system so that his father could milk alone while the boys were off to fight in the war. The automatic milkers were made of stainless steel and, due to the war, supply was limited.

The milking system arrived in 1944, and he left for the Navy shortly after that. I found a photo a few years after his passing of the system he described to me. It was one set of four suction cups and a belt that held the cups on the cow. The milk was pumped into a small portable tank. If you have been to the fair, or even at the Cheese and Dairy Festival, and witnessed a cow being milked, you saw a system that is very similar. They milked this way until the 1960s before expanding to a system that could milk nine cows at once.

Now we use robots to milk cows! I recently got to watch a robot milker in action at the USU Caine Dairy. I was amazed by the milk machine. I never thought I would see anything like this when I was a kid milking with my grandpa. The cow has an electronic collar that tells the computer when the cow was milked last and if it’s time to get grain and be milked again.

Think of it as the self-check-out system at your local store — we find it a convenient and the store also saves on labor. The dairy isn’t too far from that same issue. During the summer, dairies need more help to harvest crops and

during the winter they need less help. The robot solves this issue and keeps labor costs down. The computer even monitors how much milk the cow is producing and if there is any issue with the milk or health of the cow before it makes its way to the main storage tank. This is a major advantage as it prevents the milk collected in the main tank from being dumped because of contamination.

I took pictures and video of the experience and had this great idea for a social media post of my grandpa with the milking machine from 1944 and the robot milking next to each other. As I wrote the post I decided this could be more than just a simple social media post. We have come a long way in a short amount of time if you think about how the dairy industry has changed and will continue to change in the future.

Writer: Justin Clawson

Contact

Justin Clawson

justin.clawson@usu.edu

Questions?

Cache County Extension office

[435-752-6263](tel:435-752-6263)