

# A BRIEF EARLY HISTORY OF THE DAIRY INDUSTRY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: 1827 TO 1900

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The first recorded dairy farm in British Columbia was the Hudson's Bay Farm near the present town of Fort Langley.

In the 1820's the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) needed to end the company posts' reliance on expensive imported goods to compensate for the waning of the fur trade.

HBC Governor George Simpson directed that "living was to become much plainer and the posts made more self-sufficient".



Fort Langley was established in 1827 and immediately land clearing for agriculture began. The first cattle arrived in 1829. The main farming operation was moved from the Fort to two thousand acres of land on Langley Prairie, between the Salmon and Nicomekl rivers.

In 1839, the HBC entered into a commercial agreement with the Russian American Company in Russian Alaska. In the agreement, the HBC was to provide foodstuffs for the Alaskan colony and butter became an essential commodity for sale to Alaska. In the same year, Chief Factor, Dr. McLoughlin added to the Fort Langley herd by bringing 29 milk cows up the Fraser on board the HBC steamer the "Beaver". He also hired an English family to take charge of one of two dairies now established near the Fort.

According to Chief Trader, Ovid Allard, a Mrs. Finlay was in charge of the dairy in 1840. There was a fire at the Fort that year and Mrs. Finlay was so distraught at the impending loss of her cream, she temporarily forgot her infant child was still in the burning barn. Fortunately the child was rescued but the cream was lost. Mrs. Finlay cried. "Oh dear, what a fine batch of butter will never be made now."



With the impending move of the Canada- USA boundary to the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, the HBC company moved its headquarters from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River to Fort Victoria on the southern tip of Vancouver Island.

In 1843, construction began on Fort Victoria and three farms were established nearby. The Fort Farm on the flat where the business section of Victoria now stands, Beckley Farms, south of James Bay and the North Dairy Farm. Cows “of Spanish origin, obtained from the Mission Fathers in California” were driven overland to Fort Vancouver and Fort Nisqually and when Fort Victoria was complete, many of these cattle and their offspring were transported to the farms near Fort Victoria. In 1846, 140 cattle were supplying the needs of the inhabitants of Fort Victoria.

The Fraser River, Cariboo, and Thompson River gold rushes of the 1850’s greatly increased the population of the province. Farms began to take root in the Okanagan, Thompson and Nicola Valleys as well as in the Kootenays and in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island.

In 1865, the Chadsey Brothers of Chilliwack produced 3,000 pounds of butter. In 1868, the Chadseys recorded selling 2,500 lbs of butter to the “Cariboo Gold Diggings”. Their butter was shipped to the gold fields in two, five, and ten-pound air tight cans.

The dairy farms of the Cowichan and Comox Valleys supplied butter to the growing population in the forest and coalmining communities of Nanaimo, Wellington and Cumberland.

In 1891, the Dominion Census listed 6,500 farmers living in the province. Most of these were mixed farms - they didn’t specialize, but instead produced a range of different products, including milk and butter, to feed their families and then marketed the surplus at local stores.

One of the first to specialize in the production of butter was A.C. Wells of Chilliwack. He used the centrifugal cream separator (developed in 1878) to make it easier and quicker for farmers to extract the cream from their milk for the manufacture of butter. A.C. Wells hired an expert cheese and butter maker from Ontario and opened a creamery to process his own Edenbank Farm milk. A.C. Wells was instrumental in the formation of the five member Edenbank Creamery in 1896. It was the first farmer’s co-operative in British Columbia. By 1901, it boasted 72 members.



In the early period of the development of the dairy industry, transportation of milk over great distances was difficult. In populated areas around the province, creameries were established to process the milk from local farms. Prosperity for farmers depended on the farm's proximity to population. By the early 1900's most communities in BC had farms supplying milk and cream to local creameries and many communities in BC had small dairy farms or milk vendors delivering fresh bottled milk to homes daily.

The above information was taken from the book "MILK STORIES - A History of the Dairy Industry in British Columbia, 1827 – 2000" written by K. Jane Watt and published by the Dairy Industry Historical Society of BC.

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