

**Dairy Farming in Wisconsin During the Depression:
The Milk Strikes of 1933**

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the Wisconsin Milk Strikes of 1933. To understand what happened during the Milk Strikes, this paper will go over a general history of farming in the state up to the Depression in 1933. Upon understanding the history, it will dive deeper into what was going on in 1933, and explain what caused the Milk Strikes and how they came to an end.

Introduction

On May 19th, 1933, two teenage boys were driving their car in Racine County trying to deliver supplies to protestors during the May Strike. They didn't stop their vehicle while they drove past a guardsman near a creamery. The guardsman opened fire on the teens, killing one and injuring the other.¹ This was the scene and a common theme as strikes continued to occur throughout the state during 1933. Dairy farmers had grown sick and tired of not getting paid well for the product they were trying to bring to market. The theme of someone dying or getting severely injured at an organized strike gathering was too common a theme for the strikes. The dairy farmers were just trying to make enough money to live on, despite high inflation on all products during the Depression, especially on farm products and produce. The strikes were coordinated by the Wisconsin Milk Pool, while trying to get larger farm groups to join their strikes, primarily the National Farm Holiday Association and the Wisconsin Farmers' Holiday Association. It was with these main groups that the cooperative milk pool wanted to try to fight back against inflation on dairy products, but to no avail. As the strikes continued to happen, dairy farmers in the state were losing more and more money. The farmers that were typically losing more money were those producing dairy for cheese, butter and other products. Farmers producing dairy solely for milk did not lose a lot of money during the strikes, and were ultimately unaffected. They were trying to produce more milk to bring the price of milk back to a stable level to where they would start to make more money again, instead of losing more money. Overall, the strikes would not work out the way that many farmers had hoped they would. With continual inflation on dairy products, it was hard to fight that to break even in

¹ "One Killed, Two Shot," *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 19, 1933, 14.

profits. The strikes themselves occurred in increments of time, getting longer and more violent as the year went on.

This paper will briefly examine the history of farming in general in Wisconsin up to the strikes of 1933, taking into consideration the influence and creation of the College of Agriculture in Madison, as well as looking at the role of the National Farm Holiday Association. The milk strikes themselves will also be explored, broken down by their main times of February, May, and October into November of 1933. This paper will explain how the strikes were not a very smart idea, since it caused problems for farmers, and did not meet its goal of trying to make dairy prices higher for production.

Historiography

There are many sources to look over and read when it comes to farming in Wisconsin during the Depression Era, but very few that specifically mention or only discuss the milk strikes. This topic has not been extensively covered, but is mentioned many times in books and newspaper articles. Understanding what was going on for farmers across all rural America is quite important to help understand what was going on with dairy farmers in Wisconsin. Quite honestly, what was affecting Wisconsin dairy farmers is what was affecting many rural farmers of many different types of produce across America. Many farmers began growing wheat in lands west of the Mississippi. Wisconsin was no exception to this, and began to realize that they needed to diversify their crops and products that they produced. They eventually began to specialize in dairying after thinking about what could be grown in this state. This idea of specializing in dairying was especially well received by members of the Wisconsin Dairymen's Association, which was founded in 1872². The roots of dairy farming in Wisconsin can be seen going all the way back to the 19th century. This shows how important dairying became to the state when it came to food production and specializing in a specific product. To understand how important dairying was to Wisconsin at this time, the state was the nation's leading producer of milk in the 1930s. Of the land that Wisconsin had, 63% of the land was farmland, and of that 63%, 71% of the land was used for dairy farming, accounting for over 125,000 dairy farms across the state³. This just shows how important producing dairy was to the state at the time.

² Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Stevens Point, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 165.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

With Franklin Roosevelt coming into office during the Depression, he had ideas which were laid out in the New Deal which would try to help farmers. The recovery of the agriculture sector of the economy was the administration's primary goal. Relief agencies that were operating in rural America helped to improve buildings and transportation facilities, hire unemployed individuals, maintain institutions, and overall enrich the lives of farmers⁴. These programs that were established were responses to a severe crisis and thus of largest necessity for the agricultural economy. Most policy makers at the time agreed that it was necessary to immediately provide greater security for the property of farm debtors caught in the deflationary spiral⁵. Cooperation was a necessary and long-term solution for all agricultural problems going on in the US, especially in Wisconsin with dairy farmers. Production control was not a new idea at the time of the Milk Strikes, but was in the process of being implemented in 1933. With the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in May of 1933, it would help try to curb this idea of producing more dairy products to try to change the price at which they would be sold and make profit of. The act itself was created to implement the acreage-limitation program. The goal was to have producers of seven basic commodities, including milk, to participate in voluntary programs to reduce production. Most of this was through limitation of planted acreage. In the case of the strikes in Wisconsin, they didn't pay much attention to this, as milk only farmers were still making more and not in poverty while dairy farmers producing for cheese and butter were all moving into extreme cases of poverty. Roosevelt's early advisors, especially economist

⁴ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

Raymond Moley, believed that the depression had been caused by overproduction, especially in the agricultural field⁶. A downside to these government programs, however, was that commercial farmers were the majority to benefit from these new programs. Those who only produced for themselves or for a small market did not manage to receive any benefits from government programs. By the time of the strikes in Wisconsin, about one third of the income for commercial farmers came from the government in some way, shape, or form.

Understanding these policies that had been put in place before the main take off of strikes in Wisconsin helps understand what was trying to be done to help farmers, especially dairy farmers in the state. Being that the policies were established and put in effect during the times of organized dairy strikes, at this point there was no turning back from striking against low prices for the majority of dairy products.

⁶ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 210.

College of Agriculture

To understand what was established for many dairy farmers prior to the strikes of 1933, understanding why the College of Agriculture was established in Madison is essential. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the regents at the University of Wisconsin in Madison established the Agricultural Experiment Station and created the College of Agriculture⁷. The purpose of establishing the college was to provide teaching, research, and the disbursement of information to farmers throughout the state, without having to leave their communities. This became very important to establish a specialized farming method with dairy farmers, especially between the production of milk and dairy for butter and cheese. The College of Agriculture also helped the nation during its huge development of mass agriculture by developing scientific agriculture. It was the use of scientific research that helped to advance and create new measures in dairy farming. This could be broken down by looking at how milk cows were to be fed and treated for disease, as well as good common practice among farmers.

Scientific research done in 1907 at the college discovered that what dairy farmers had been primarily feeding their cows, which was single grain rations, was causing an unknown dietary factor that was important to growth and for life of the cow itself. It wasn't until 1913 that an official name was given to this missing dietary factor, which was called "fat-soluble A" by E.V. McCollum, a professor in the college. This would eventually be called vitamin A, which is something known to everyone to this day⁸. It was thanks to this scientific discovery made at the

⁷ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin, vol. 5, War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Stevens Point, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 165.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

college that ended up helping dairy farmers start having healthier cows and started to produce better quality dairy products.

The College of Agriculture went through its times of criticism as well. Many in the agricultural academic community believed that the University was not helping the farmers at all. The investigation that ensued after, conducted by Eugene C. Branson of the University of North Carolina, would be a bad one. Branson's report on the college was inaccurate and filled with inconsistencies, which was the product of slipshod research⁹. He had made accusations that the college was unconcerned with the interests of dairy farmers. This of course was not true, being that many projects had taken place to help the farmers have healthier cows and improve the quality of their product. It was thanks to the research done by the College of Agriculture and the implementation of these practices that dairy farmers started to see a rise in profits, while it is known that it wouldn't last forever.

It was shortly after this time of investigation at the University that a new idea began to emerge within the dairy farmers of Wisconsin. It was an idea that was created at the college and spread to farmers. Many of the researchers and professors at the college believed that farmers needed to take co-operative marketing into their own hands. It was the college that told farmers that to buy fairly you farmers must organize, to sell fairly you must do the same thing¹⁰. With the oncoming of World War 1, that's exactly what farmers did, especially dairy farmers. They started to organize in these co-operative associations around the state to be able to make a profit from selling their products of milk, butter and cheese. Co-operative marketing associations

⁹ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Stevens Point, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 177.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

became a huge factor in keeping dairy farmers together and keeping their prices in check and to the point where they could make a profit and continue to keep up with maintenance of their farms. The Society of Equity took an extreme interest in this, and was able to persuade the college to start making a huge active part in meeting the problems of agricultural marketing. These successful co-operatives lead to huge changes in the ways in which the college would help farmers understand the importance of production costs and farm pricing.

Conflicts arose as the idea of a privatized co-operative would not benefit the equity and equality that dairy farmers shared. Many people believed that the huge success of Equity co-operatives had induced independent co-operatives all across the state, creating what some think would be an imbalance between independent and Equity¹¹. In reality, the issues stemmed from the breaking apart of the Equity itself. It was having internal conflicts with itself instead of competition with other farm organizations, as they had thought before. By 1934, Equity had merged with the Farmers Union, thus ending its impact and role in dairy co-operatives which they thought they would continue to have influence and control over.

By this point, Wisconsin farmers were facing economic difficulties of a much greater magnitude than they had ever confronted. What has been said about Equity's influence in the twenties for dairy farmers, it was the College of Agriculture that took the lead in exploring and implementing ways to improve the economic position of dairy farmers in the state¹².

¹¹ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Stevens Point, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 180.

¹² *Ibid.*, 181.

Farmers' Holiday Association

The Farmers' Holiday Association is an association that was established by Milo Reno in 1932. The main function of the group was to endorse the withholding of farm products from the market. The purpose of this was to protest the low prices for many farm products, which was especially true for dairy farmers in Wisconsin in the early 1930s, leading to the strikes that occurred in 1933. Reno himself came to Wisconsin in the autumn of 1932, in which 5,000 people attended his initial meeting in Marshfield. It was at this meeting that the dairy farmers of Wisconsin named Arnold Gilberts from Dunn County the president for the Wisconsin state chapter of the association. Later that year, Reno came back to speak to farmers in Marshfield and Menomonee Falls, which numbered in 3,000 and 6,000 attendees respectively¹³.

Not only did the Farmers' Holiday Association begin in Wisconsin in 1932, that same year in April the Co-operative Milk Pool was established by Walter Singler of Appleton. This association that he created was independent from that of the Farmers' Union and the Holiday. Singler boasted that in the month of January in 1933 alone he saw membership swell from 4,800 to 6,800, which is a drastic increase¹⁴. The Milk Pool was a little different in their objectives that they wanted to accomplish in the state, as compared to what the Holiday was already doing and had been doing for close to a year. The Milk Pool wished to accomplish what dairy organizations in Sioux City and Omaha did, which was to win price advances by withholding produce¹⁵. Throughout the winter months of 1932 the organizations was building towards an

¹³ John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

impending strike call. On the other end, the with-holding movements of the Holiday Association were aimed at achieving cost of production by political, not economic, means¹⁶. The Association had resolved in November to refrain from withholding activity until the new administration had the opportunity to enact agricultural legislation. When Reno spoke in Menomonee Falls, he met with leaders of the Milk Pool and promised them that his organization would support any group that called for a strike to increase prices. His only stipulation was that a strike like that should be nation-wide. This promise did not please Milk Pool leaders, especially Singler. He complained to Reno that a statement made by Wisconsin Holiday leaders that they would not support a dairy strike caused by milk buyers, to cut back their prices¹⁷. This miscommunication, as it would be explained by Reno, later caused Wisconsin dairy farmers a loss of almost \$60,000 a day¹⁸, which was a substantial amount to the farmers.

It was the framework set by the Holiday Association that laid the path for the Milk Pool and their overall platform for striking that would occur in 1933. Prior to the arrival of Reno in Wisconsin to speak with farmers across the state, the majority of farmers had been involved in many anti foreclosure demonstrations. Foreclosure on many farms across the state had begun due to the Depression taking its effect on the state before the organizations had assembled. While the Milk Pool had the philosophy and ideas to make their strikes and demonstrations just a state function, the Holiday Association had spread its ideas and philosophies across the country. That is the biggest difference between the two organizations. Their hopeful end results were the

¹⁶ John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

same, but the ways in which they wished to accomplish these goals would remain different going into the strikes in 1933. Another key difference between the Milk Pool and the Holiday Association was their levels of violence. The Association was aiming for more peaceful means in which to accomplish their goals, while the Milk Pool was a little more violent in their protests, creating this idea of more militant all the time¹⁹.

The Association had huge followings in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa. The Association in North Dakota had begun on July 28th, 1932 in Jamestown. A convention at Bismarck in January announced that Councils of Defense had been established in fourteen counties and endorsed a program declaring the intention to halt foreclosures, refuse to sell products at less than cost of production, and pay no debts at existing prices²⁰. The idea of protesting existing foreclosure rates had been established in Wisconsin, which is a key similarity between the two organizations in the two states. Another key fundamental difference found within the North Dakota Association was that they were intertwined with state politics. Among their strongest supporters were Non-Partisan League veterans such as Governor William L. Langer, Senator Lynn Frazier, and William Lemke, who was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1932²¹. The president of the North Dakota chapter was Usher Burdick, who used his influences in the organization as a stepping stone to a very successful political career.

The other Association chapters found throughout the rest of the US were not as strong as those found in the upper Midwest. An example of this is in Ohio. Mrs. Morris Self, a farm wife

¹⁹ John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

from Bowling Green, who believed her efforts were being harassed the Ku Klux Klan, the Farm Bureau, and conspiring clergymen. She wrote letters to Reno, attended several national directors' meetings, and in the end did very little to further the effort of the Ohio chapter to prominence in fighting against prices for products in the market²². Very similar cases to the Ohio chapter occurred in upstate New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, and Indiana. The one state that did not have an Association chapter was Missouri. The reason being because they already had the Missouri Farmers' Association, which was led by William Hirth. He already had been allied with Reno in the Corn Belt Committee, and was cordial if not entirely sympathetic with the Holiday movement²³.

The Farmers' Holiday Association had played a huge role in influencing dairy farm organizations across the country, especially in Wisconsin. It was in part due thanks to Reno and his approval of the Milk Pool that led to their existence. Reno did not approve necessarily of the more violent approach taken by the Milk Pool in their strikes in 1933, but none the less was the stepping stone that they needed to start their strikes in Wisconsin.

²² John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

Milk Strikes of 1933

The framework for the strikes had already been set up by the Milk Pool coming into 1933. They inaugurated a withholding movement that would start on February 15th, the first day of the first strikes in Wisconsin. The strikes within the state would occur over a span of three different organized strikes, occurring in February, May, and in October and November of 1933. Wisconsin's Past and Present lists the price of evaporated milk from 1927 to 1929 as \$4.79 / 100 lb with 46% to farmers, 33% to manufacturers and 21% to merchandisers. That price fell to an average of \$3.48 / 100 lb, with individual farmers receiving a smaller percentage of the proceeds: 30.5% to farmers, 43% to manufacturers and 26.5% to merchandisers between 1930 and 1933. This decrease, combined with inflation during the Depression, put small farmers in an extremely difficult position²⁴. From these numbers, it can be seen that dairy farmers in Wisconsin had seen a significant decrease in the amount of money that they were making in the production of their products. The first strike to take place would occur in February of 1933.

February 15th is the official starting date for the first strike. This strike saw pickets appearing on highways almost immediately and for a few days Wisconsin witnessed some of the most forceful and violent activity the depression had yet produced in the farm belt²⁵. This set of strikes would occur until the 22nd of February, primarily taking place in the Fox Valley. The first bloodshed in this strike would occur near Appleton, when milk convoy guards threw heavy objects, such as horseshoes, at a group of 100 strikers²⁶. Singler, who was president of the Milk

²⁴ Glad, 166.

²⁵ John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 91-92.

²⁶ "First Blood Reported in Milk Strike", *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 22, 1933, 1.

Pool and its creator, would head and organize this strike in the Fox Valley. As the strikes would continue, there would be more bloodshed, including deaths in a few.

The next strike to occur happened in May, running through the dates of the 13th through the 19th. These strikes would spread to a larger portion of Wisconsin, and resulted in more violence than the February strike. National Guardsmen were called to these strikes, which is the first time military personnel are seen and are a part of the strikes. They carried with them fixed bayonets and tear gas to force pickets that had been set up in Durham Hill, which is in Waukesha County²⁷. Another instance to occur during the May strike was in Farmington, which is located in Jefferson County. It was here that 25,000 pounds of milk were deliberately tainted with kerosene at a creamery in the city, which resulted in the milk not being able to be used²⁸. Yet another incident occurred on May 16th, when a guardsman opened fire on a car which was being driven by three teenagers helping in the strikes. One of the teenagers was killed, the others sustained injuries from the attack²⁹. The last major incident to occur during the May strike was on the 18th, when a farmer in his 50s was pushed off a running board on milk truck delivery. The truck had left a picketed road between Saukville and Grafton in Ozaukee County, resulting in the man being pushed off the truck³⁰. At this point in the series of strikes, this was the most violent

²⁷ “Guardsmen, Bayonets Fixed Patrol Strike Areas”, *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, May 18, 1933, 1.

²⁸ “Lake Mills Guard Doubled as Officials Hear Threats to Poison Milk, Bomb Plant”, *Wisconsin Daily Journal*, May 16, 1933, 1.

²⁹ “One Killed, Two Shot”, *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 16, 1933, 14.

³⁰ “Picket Killed in Fall; Scores Injured, Jailed; Singler, Pool Chiefs Face Charges at Shawano”, *Wisconsin Daily Journal*, May 18, 1933, 1.

strike to occur. The strikers would remain overall more quiet leading into the strike of October and November.

The last series of strikes to occur would take place from October 21st until November 18th, and these strikes would affect a much larger portion of Wisconsin. This series of strikes would cause the most damage overall than any of the previous two strikes. On November 1st, a creamery near Plymouth was bombed, causing most of the creamery to be destroyed³¹. That same day, a cheese factory near Fond du Lac was also bombed, causing minor damage to the building³². Later that week, a cheese factory near Belgium in Ozaukee County was dynamited and burned³³. Another death had occurred during this series of strikes. A 60 year old farmer was shot and killed by a stray bullet that had been fired at a picket line in the town of Burke. The farmer himself was not part of the picket, he had been there to deliver food to the strikers³⁴. The bullet was fired by a man who's vehicle had been obstructed from driving down that road. He fired his gun after a striker had broken his headlight on his car, and fired a gun in anger over the broken light. The shooter was later to two to four years in prison after pleading guilty to manslaughter charges³⁵. In all during these strikes, seven creameries had been bombed and

³¹ "County Factory Is Bombed as Strike Ends", *Sheboygan Journal*, November 1, 1933, 1.

³² "Blast Damages Cheese Factory at St. Cloud", *Sheboygan Journal*, November 1, 1933, 1.

³³ "Dane Council Backs Truce; Milk Strikers Bomb, Burn 4th Cheese Plant", *Wisconsin Daily Journal*, November 2, 1933, 1.

³⁴ "Farmer Murdered in Picket Line", *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 28, 1933, 1.

³⁵ "McCorison Sentenced to 2-4 Years", *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 28, 1934, 1.

thousands of pounds of milk had been dumped. These strikes were by far the most damaging of the three that occurred during 1933, and resulted in several millions of dollars in damages.

In the end, local newspapers estimated and reported that farmers lost roughly ten million dollars during the strikes. After 1933, Singler's Milk Pool purchased creameries to help increase the profits of its members, but the Milk Pool later faded into obscurity. The economy eventually improved, helping smaller farmers to earn money³⁶. The strikes had come to an end in November, leaving many to question whether the strikes actually did anything to help the dairy farmers. From the evidence given in many of the newspaper articles published in 1933, farmers ended up losing a lot more money than gaining any from striking.

³⁶ Herbert Jacobs, "The Wisconsin Milk Strikes", *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 35: 1, Autumn 1951, 35.

Conclusion

In the end of it all, farmers gained very little to nothing at all from demonstrating these dairy strikes during 1933. Farmers overall lost more money than they could have imagined. Understanding what got the dairy farmers of Wisconsin to this point of striking is very important in understanding their story of why they ended up striking in the first place. Prices for dairy products in 1933 were low, and their idea and philosophy was to strike and stop producing hoping that this would help elevate the prices to the point where farmers would profit. It is clear that they did not profit from having these strikes. What led up to these strikes is important to once again understand the position they were in.

The College of Agriculture, once it was established in the late 1880s and early 90s, helped to establish better farming practices for dairymen in Wisconsin. The college also helped establish co-operatives to gain more money for farmers' product before World War 1 and after going up to 1933. It was having this economic base established that gave farmers more money for their product before prices started to plummet after the Depression started.

The Farmers' Holiday Association was also important in getting established the group of farmers that would strike in 1933. Having the Wisconsin chapter established by Milo Reno in 1932 gave a helpful start. It was Walter Singler in 1932 establishing the Wisconsin Milk Pool that would gain the farmers needed to start striking early in 1933. With no backing aid from the Holiday Association, the Milk Pool ended up causing more in losses for themselves by being more violent with their strikes. The Association did not approve of this violent approach, which is why the Milk Pool ended up essentially helping farmers lose more money in 1933 during the strikes.

The Strikes of 1933 would show what the Milk Pool and their supporters would do to try to help drive the prices of dairy products back up to a profitable margin. With the February strikes, nothing would really come from it, other than the first bloodshed of the strikes during the course of the year. The May strike would see the first casualty of the strikes, with a teenager being shot and killed by a guardsman while they were driving in a strike in Racine County. Again nothing really came from this strike, other than milk being dumped due to strikers contaminating it with kerosene. The October and November strike would yield the most damage, destroying seven factories and resulting in another death during this time period. Overall losses would be reported at ten million dollars by local newspapers towards the end of 1933.

The Milk Strikes of 1933 did not do what they were aimed to do. The purpose was to try to drive dairy prices back up to a profitable level. This would not happen in 1933, but rather come the next year in 1934 after the strikes had ended. The Milk Pool would fade away forever, and farmers prices would once again start to move towards a more stable level. The strikes were not overall necessary for trying to bring dairy prices back up, rather harming the dairy farmers who wanted higher prices for their product. One can learn from these strikes, however, that striking to bring prices back up does not always work, especially when approached from a more violent perspective instead of a peaceful one. Had the strikes been more peaceful, prices may have possibly changed, but overall they did not.

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