Queen Cow and the Eau Claire Rule

EAU CLAIRE AS THE NEW DEAL BASE POINT FOR THE FEDERAL MILK MARKETING ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

There has not been any formal research done on this topic. Any sources that do concern this very topic are brief and vague, so this paper seeks to fill the void of knowledge. As such, we now bring the reader up to the present day, for this paper primarily concerns subsets of the topic: agricultural history of Wisconsin, agricultural economics, Depression Era history, geographic perspectives and economic policy history. Many scholars have written on early state agricultural history in Wisconsin. Edward Janus and Norman K. Risjord’s works on Wisconsin history as America’s Dairyland were consulted for this paper. To better understand the nuances of agricultural policy in the United States, scholars with a concentration in agricultural economic history also had to be consulted, including Laurie Winn Carlson’s 2005 book William J. Spillman and the Birth of Agricultural Economics on the history of agricultural economics and John A. Cross from UW: Oshkosh explores the impact of dairy farming on the landscape of Wisconsin through cartography through many of his publications. He and other scholars, like Loyal Durand Jr., also explore patterns of spatial distribution on the landscape, like the regionalism of milk and manufactured dairy products and the industry, differentiating them from each other. Geographers primarily explore the topic of agriculture through various studies and cartographic analyses of geographic distributions of phenomena. The Federal Milk Marketing Order (“FMMO”) was established as a part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal in 1937, supposedly established Eau Claire as the national base point, or the site from which minimum fluid milk prices are set. It was colloquially known as the “Eau Claire Rule” (Risjord 2018, 43). In the 1975 Price Structure for Milk map by Floyd Lasley, one can see that prices generally increased as one got farther from the state’s capital city of Madison, Wisconsin. Durand examines locational factors in Wisconsin source regions of dairy products in order to better understand the causes of geographic shift in markets in his 1947 paper, “Recent Market Orientations of the American Dairy Region.” This type of analysis is even found in R. H. White’s book from 1912, “industries of Wisconsin and their Geographic Basis,” which is a comprehensive geographic and cartographic analysis of Wisconsin’s industries.

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For those coming to Wisconsin in the late 1840s, it was not milk that reigned king, but wheat. The “wheat error” by Edward Janus, the newly colonized land of Wisconsin was virgin and fertile, and “wheat miner” farmers were taking advantage of the new cash crop (Janus 2011, 6). However, wheat destroyed the fertility of Wisconsin’s soils, and multiple blights upon farmer’s crops drove many West in search of productive land. While sheep were an original favorite for farmers, as they are quickly profitable animals, cattle slowly became a mainstay of the farm. Soil exhaustion and declining wheat yields in southeastern Wisconsin had risen from a state of economic and moral depletion to become a national icon of wholesomeness and rural America. “We have urban myths, and we have rural myths,” said Mark Stephenson on On Wisconsin Magazine, “Eau Claire is a rural myth,” started in the 1920s and rolled out in the 1930s (Allen 2013). While Eau Claire may be in a part of the United States with a surplus of milk. As such, while there was no specific federal proclamation as the city as a base point for the Federal Milk Marketing Order, Eau Claire can be most likely understood as a contemporary general geographic mean center of milk production in both the upper Midwest and the United States as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Upon going through every bit of language concerning the Federal Milk Marketing Order, there is not one mention of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, or the base point. Statistically speaking, however, the upper Midwest was and remains a bastion of dairy production in the United States. The Eau Claire Rule has become a part of Wisconsin culture as well as a myth of dairy farming in America. “We have urban myths, and we have rural myths,” said Mark Stephenson on On Wisconsin Magazine, “Eau Claire is a rural myth,” started in the 1920s and rolled out in the 1930s (Allen 2013). While Eau Claire may be in a part of the United States with a tendency to produce dairy products over livestock products, there are other parts of the country with the same propensities (e.g. New York). However, agricultural production costs in the upper Midwest tend to be lower than in other parts of the country, contributing to this continuation of myth (Lasley 1975, 1). Well after FDR’s America, the power of that base point is being weakened today, with the California FMMO as an example (USDA 2018). However, the silent power of a mid-sized community in the west-central part of Wisconsin has held both the milk prices in the state and the rest of the country captive for almost a century. Therefore, the Eau Claire rule can be associated with a paradigm shift in agriculture policy and the interaction between the federal government and citizens during times of crisis.

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