

## The Formation of Cheese-Specialty Areas in the Mid-West

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In the eighteen sixties and seventies, Wisconsin and its neighboring states began to develop specialized economies. Wherever abundance of corn could be matured, hogs and beef cattle increased and the Corn Belt emerged, but Wisconsin and northern Illinois, handicapped by soil, relief, and climate, turned to dairying as the most viable alternative.

Although farm butter was made almost universally, historical circumstance made cheese the chief *commercial* product. Factory methods which eased production and improved quality were applied to cheese, while butter lagged as a domestic product. Simultaneously, the British cheese market expanded vigorously, stimulating production in America, and cheese could be more safely shipped without refrigeration. The presence of some experienced cheesemakers from Europe and the east undoubtedly helped, but became effective only when economic pressures were compelling. It was this which caused the almost simultaneous growth of cheese production in separate localities.

The earliest center was northeastern Illinois. Wheat decline, the proximity of Chicago, and the presence of many Yankees caused an early shift into dairying, at first for market milk, and then as overproduction became apparent, for cheese. In 1863 Wanzer and Herrick built the first factory at Elgin; before the decade ended they were spreading into southern Wisconsin.

Here the district merged with centers which were forming simultaneously but independently. Goaded by falling wool and wheat prices, and stimulated by the example of an easterner, Chester Hazen, the farmers of western Fond du Lac began large scale production. Other centers mushroomed into existence further south, especially in Jefferson and Waukesha counties, and by the mid-seventies cheese factories studded the countryside from Elgin to Fond du Lac.

Other easterners led by Hiram Smith and DeLand, pioneered the industry in Sheboygan. Favored by the difficulties of wheat production in this wooded, clay soil area, by cool and humid summers, by the low freight rates which resulted from the possibility of water transport, and by strong local leadership and financial backing, cheese factories multiplied. German immigrants quickly learned the industry, partially displacing the Yankee pioneers and in turn spreading the factories to the north and west.

Similar cheese centers were formed in the hill-country of southwestern Wisconsin, where soil erosion and wheat decline compelled an urgent change from wheat to dairying. In Richland County the change was initiated by immigrants from the cheese center of New York, Herkimer County: in Green County by Swiss who, like other frontier farmers sold wheat until impoverishment threatened and cheesemakers from Europe and the east introduced factory methods. Nor were Swiss types originally favored, rather American Cheddar, introduced it seems, by a German, and Limburger, brought from Holland by a 'Switzer' trained there. Only in the eighties did emphasis shift to Swiss cheese, fostered by economic success and immigration from Ohio and Switzerland.

A further cheese-specialty area arose in Dodge County, Wisconsin. Jossi, a Swiss immigrant, discovering that a rival's success was due to the sale of ordinary cheddar in brick form, originated a new cheese of the same shape. This "Brick Cheese" quickly found a market and spread among the Swiss and German makers nearby.

Thus Limburger and Brick became accidentally associated with Swiss people, and along with American and Swiss cheeses spread westward into

two other areas of Swiss settlement. One such area, in hilly Buffalo County, failed to flourish and was finally eliminated by creameries, but the Swiss groups of southeastern Minnesota—whose history is little known—tenaciously supported their factories when surrounding areas abandoned cheese for butter. Decades later, however, American cheese and American cheesemakers replaced the initiators of the industry.

Production, however, was not wholly confined to the areas the origin of which has been mentioned. A scattering of cheese factories spread throughout the Corn Belt and Minnesota, thickening into significant nuclei in central Illinois, in Monroe and Kossuth counties, Iowa, in parts of Northwestern Wisconsin and central Minnesota. Leading dairymen in both Iowa and Minnesota confidently expected to rival Wisconsin. Yet not only did these promising beginnings prove abortive, but by 1900 the thoroughly consolidated cheese district between Elgin and Fond du Lac was eliminated and replaced by butter—not market milk as commonly supposed. Only in some Wisconsin areas did cheese maintain and extend its territory; districts to south and west abandoned cheese for butter.

The causes were complex. From 1870 on, butter competition intensified with the transfer of butter-making from farm to creamery, with the adoption of cream-gathering, and a remarkable succession of inventions such as the Babcock test and mechanical separator. The cooperative movement (which affected butter much more than cheese), Scandinavian immigration, the influence of individuals such as Haecker, refrigerated transport and cold storage—each contributed to an expansion which was furthered by refined grading and lucrative markets. At the same time, cheese prices faltered as the English market was lost to Canada and the home market demoralized by 'skim' and 'filled' cheese—low quality products manufactured from skim milk or skim milk 'enriched' by animal or vegetable fats.

Such factors seem to account for a general expansion of butter and contraction of cheese: they also selected between areas. For some Wisconsin districts, because of early development had invested more heavily in cheese than Minnesota, for instance, and were less willing to change to butter. Nor did the Lakeshore and southwestern Wisconsin cheesemakers abandon whole-milk cheese, while those of the southeast and Illinois made the easy and profitable change, separating the cream for butter and manufacturing the skim into 'skim' and 'filled' cheese. They completed the shift to butter when such cheeses were banned.

Other factors helped maintain the Wisconsin cheese industry. Though climate and location relative to markets and freight costs are often assumed to be most significant, research indicates that the character of farming was more important. Where milk was produced through the winter, butter was favored by high winter prices; where hogs and calves were numerous, as in the Corn Belt, skim milk was in demand and cheese failed; where dairying was scattered as in northern Wisconsin, *cream* shipping was economical and butter was the product.

These effective factors were epitomized in the emergence of a new cheese area in north-central Wisconsin. Dairy leaders deliberately promoted cheese rather than butter, urging that many areas could produce butter but few had such climatic advantages for the more exacting product cheese. Local enterprise and an influx of cheesemakers, often German, from the crowding eastern districts resulted in an expansion which was abruptly checked at the boundaries of the Colby silt loams. The soil factor, however, was indirect in its influence, restricting grain corn and favoring luxuriant pasture. The district was terminated by sands to the south and east, and the Laurentian Shield to the north—areas but sparsely settled which found cream-gathering more economical. Further west, soil and climate permitted corn, hogs, and beef cattle (with greater demand for skim milk) to enter the economy, while Scandinavian and Minnesotan influences strengthened the bias for butter.

Cheese districts were also formed elsewhere by Swiss in Barron County, by local American enterprise in Polk and St. Croix, by a priest anxious to check the emigration of his French-Canadians in northwestern Minnesota on the fringe of the wheat belt. Social and historical forces thus created cheese-specialty areas, but these were permanent only where dairying was intensive both absolutely and in relation to competing farm enterprises. In short, cheese production was initiated in many places but survived only in the intensive dairy zone between Corn Belt and Cutover.

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