

Lehigh, Country Belle

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Cumberland, Md., coop which gets milk from producers in western Pennsylvania. It reportedly will be going into receivership in early June. Country Belle had a management contract with Lehigh until Lehigh's president and general manager, Richard Allison, was fired several weeks ago for mismanaging the cooperative's business.

Country Belle discovered their troubles when they found out they didn't have \$960,000 to cover producer checks which had already been mailed out.

A spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of

Agriculture said Friday morning that the department was checking into the legal problems of helping Lehigh members. He was doubtful, though, that much could be done to recoup the \$3.8 million loss which members are pumping into the coop coffers in the form of lower milk checks for May and June.

Lehigh's biggest chunk of business in Lancaster County comes from the 120 members of the Mount Joy Farmers Cooperative. We asked Mount Joy manager Sim Horton on Thursday about the status of his coop's milk shipments to Lehigh. "We have a contract with

Lehigh, and a guaranteed price. We're not members, just a supplier, so we're having no problems. They're picking up our milk and they're paying us for it, so we have no reason to be dissatisfied."

Bill Stout, Lehigh vice-president, said Thursday morning that so far the coop has lost a total of 128 members, but that some had left and come back. He said that five had come back so far.

Where the shippers are now sending their milk is hard to determine. Penn Dairies in Lancaster is rumored to be getting some, some shippers have gone to other coops, some may be shipping to Hershey Foods, and one hauler from the northeastern part of the state is reportedly taking his farmers' milk to a receiving point in Virginia.

Stout said the future looks good for Lehigh. A new general manager is expected to be named early next week, and it looks like they're going to be able to pay federal order prices to their farmers for the rest of the year.

"We have plenty of milk to keep our plants going," Stout said, "even without the shippers who've left. We need 54 million pounds to keep our two bottling plants and our cheese plant going in

June, and we have commitments for 58 million, so that's no problem at all. We have a surplus, in fact.

"Our problem was one of cash flow. The \$3.8 million our members will be pumping into the coop will eliminate that problem. We have the bottling plants and the manufacturing plant with enough capacity to handle our own members."

Stout noted that since the beginning of February, the entire output of the cooperative's cheese plant has been going to Kraft Foods Co., for use in their finished cheese products. Stout, himself a former Kraft Co. employee, said there was absolutely no truth to the rumor that Kraft owned half of the Lehigh stock, through dummy corporations, and that the giant food concern would soon be taking ownership of the \$7 million Lehigh plant.

"Only milk producers are eligible to join Lehigh," Stout said, "and I'm just about certain that Kraft isn't tied up with any of our producers. I know, from my experience with them, that Kraft isn't interested in going through the problems of producer relations and creating their own supply of milk. They buy it as they need it."

Locally, the effect of the Lehigh situation is hard to assess. All shippers have been hurt, some have gotten out, but more seem to be staying in. A members-only meeting of the Lancaster local has been scheduled for next Friday night at the Gap Fire Hall to discuss the problems.

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One very knowledgeable Lehigh member said that it was his opinion that bad luck went hand-in-hand with mismanagement to bring about the coop's present travails. The member, who didn't want to be quoted, said that he knew Dick Allison was withholding information from the board of directors to make the situation look better than it was, and that was unforgivable.

But he said that if the cheese plant had opened on schedule in October instead of four months later, and if the USDA hadn't eliminated the butter-powder snubber formula when it did, and if consumption hadn't taken a 16 percent dip, the picture today might be entirely different. "With the proper management decisions, I don't see any reason why Lehigh can't make a profit from here on out," he concluded.

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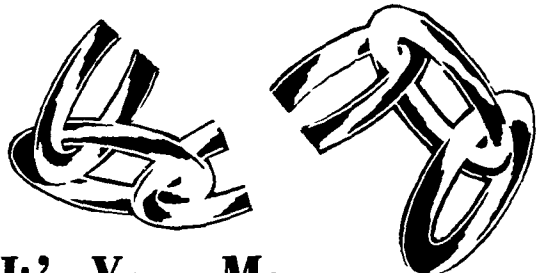
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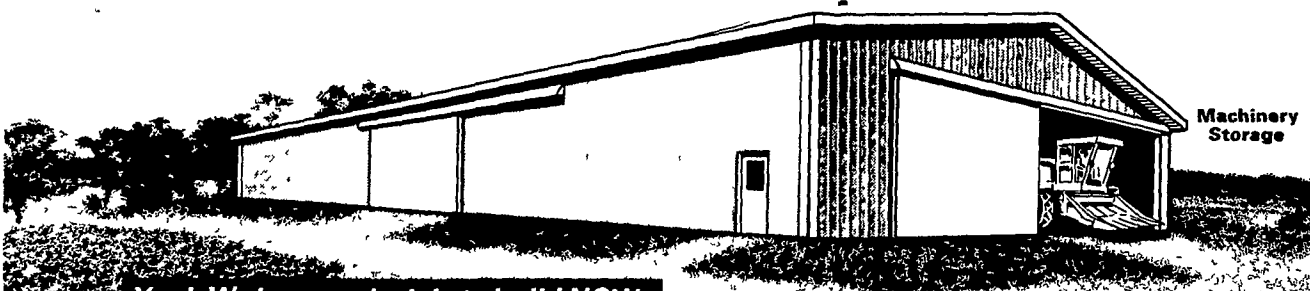
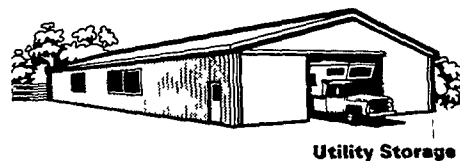
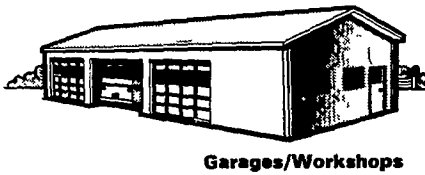
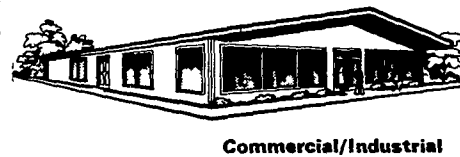
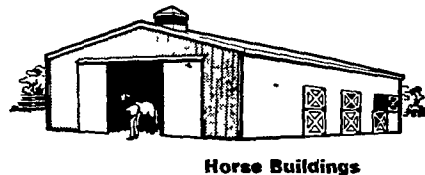
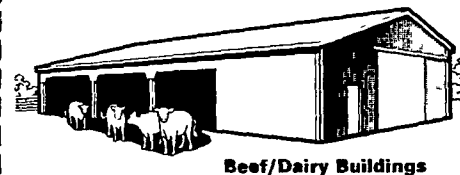
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