

Farm Talk

by
Jerry Webb

It's always worth while to note important milestones in agricultural history. Such is the case with the topic of today's column - the glass milk bottle. It's a hundred years old this year. No matter that during the past century the glass milk bottle was invented, accepted, rose to considerable prominence and has just about disappeared. You'll see more glass milk bottles in the Delaware Agricultural Museum than on any Delaware milk route and if you'll look closely at that museum collection you'll see the names of dozens of Delaware dairies, that at one time bottled and delivered their own milk, that don't even exist anymore.

Actually the first glass milk container was patented in 1878. Known as the Lester milk jar it was a glass container with a rubber gasket and a thumb screw holding down a glass cover. But the first real bottle that was nationally available was patented by Dr. Hervey Thatcher of Potsdam, New York in 1884. Thatcher who was a druggist and an inventor worked to develop a total system in milk

handling. He also invented a number of other milk handling items that aided in keeping milk clean during the filling process.

The early Thatcher quart bottles were 10 inches high and 4 inches in diameter and carried the words "Absolutely Pure Milk The Milk Protector." There was also an illustration of a Quaker milking a cow on the front of the bottle.

In the early days milk bottles were available in a variety of colors and sizes and with some truly ingenious closures. The Thatcher bottle had a small mouth and a short neck. And it was gradually modified to lower the cream line since lots of cream was the style in those days.

The dairy business was very different then with small dairymen operating their own processing plants and delivery routes. They sold raw milk, unpasteurized with nothing added, door to door. Some even sold butter, eggs and other farm produce. Back then there were no supermarkets and the daily delivery of a few quarts of milk to each household was expected. Refrigeration wasn't very

far along in the early part of the century and milk cleanliness wasn't that good either. Consequently, the smart homemaker bought only a few quarts daily - usually the amount her family could be expected to consume before the delivery truck came again.

In the rural neighborhood of my boyhood days there were three "Grade A" dairies within walking distance. Each had what was considered a large dairy herd of about 30 cows, a complete milk bottling plant and one or more delivery trucks. Each day they would pass our farm gate on the way to or from their deliveries in the nearby city. There were literally dozens of those small dairies serving a town of 30 or 40 thousand people. The glass milk bottle was the heart of the business. Each company had its own trade mark, some painted, others molded into the glass with colorful farm names like Twin Elms, Grand View, Sunnyside, Mapledale, and so on.

The old folks who were raised in the city can reminisce fondly about the horse drawn delivery vans, before my time incidentally, that plodded down the streets in the early morning light with the gently old horse stopping at all the right places and moving forward at just the right time without any signal from the driver. Most times the driver would load his carrying case with bottles of milk and move door to door down the street until it was empty. Meanwhile the horse would plod along unassisted stopping at just the right place for resupplying.

Milk wasn't always pasteurized, homogenized and supplemented with Vitamin D. In those days raw milk was all that was available. The breed of cows the dairyman

kept determined the amount of pure cream in the upper part of the bottle. Some dairies even used cream separator bottles to make it easier for the housewives to pour off the cream. These had a pronounced dent at the bottom of the neck. And some companies offered special little spoons that would fit down in the bottle to trap the milk so the cream could be poured off easily. Now those bottles and the spoons are collectors' items.

Sure there are still a few die hard dairies delivering door to door in glass bottles but the heyday of the glass bottle has come and gone. For a half century it was the primary container for all milk sales and then came supermarkets and the need for one way bottles. Disposable paperboard cartons and plastic containers were the answer. Fifty years ago virtually 100 percent of the milk that was sold went into glass bottles. Today they have all but disappeared. The most recent survey shows that paper is used for 42 percent of all milk packages. Plastic molded containers account for 57 percent.

Another big change in the milk industry has been in the size of the container. The original glass bottle held a quart of milk. Then some half gallon bottles came along and then disappeared. Recent information shows no more than 5 percent of milk sales in quart containers, and more than half the milk sold is packaged in gallon containers. That figures when you consider current life styles-fewer trips to the store, more and better refrigeration and changes in milk processing and packaging. The newest development, ultra heat treated milk, has a shelf life of 3 to 6 months. Although not completely acceptable to consumer tastes it is

no doubt the direction of the future. If you long for the good old days of milk bottles and delivery trucks then visit the Delaware Agricultural Museum. There is an interesting and rather complete display on the subject. Virtually every Delaware dairy that ever had its own bottle is represented in the collection.

It may be worth while to reminisce about the history of the milk bottle and perhaps long for the good old days of door to door delivery and that World War II song "Milk Man Keep Those Bottles Quiet." But it's really what's inside the container that counts and today's milk is or at least can be a better product. Technology has improved on nature's most perfect food. Today's milk products are pure, fresh and well packaged. There's no question they're better than ever.

It will be interesting to watch the upcoming milk promotion campaign. It's financed by dairy farmer dollars and aimed at expanding the milk market. Millions of dollars will be spent to convince consumers of something they should already know - that milk is good for you and a much better choice than all of those other beverages. As the slogan says it: "Fitness You Can Drink."



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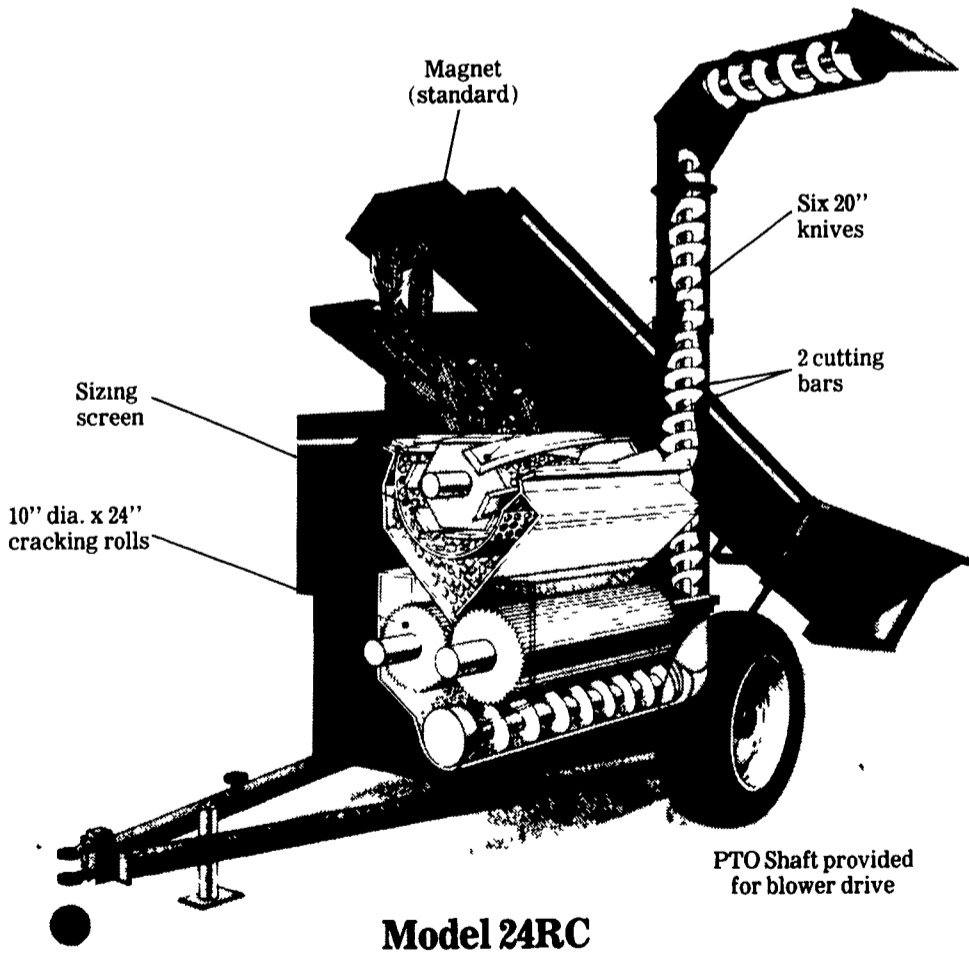
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