

# LeRaysville Cheese Factory: An Award-Winning Enterprise On a Back Country Road

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LERAYSVILLE (Bradford Co.) — As you roam the back roads of Pennsylvania, the last thing you might expect to find is a world class cheese manufacturer.

But if you follow the bright yellow and white signs to the north-eastern part of Bradford County, up a dirt road, you'll see a small white building, not much larger than a small house, which is the LeRaysville Cheese Factory.

Founded as a farmer cooperative, the LeRaysville Cheese Factory got its start when the local milk processing plants stopped accepting milk in cans.

"It was built in 1976 by the Amish community," said Jim Amory, owner of the plant. "There was no other market for the canned milk."

The factory was built much like the old creameries. A dumping station and weigh scale still stands in one corner of the plant, right next to an oversized dishwasher made especially for the heavy milk cans.

"It took one year to build the place," Amory noted. "It was done with all volunteer labor."

At first the only product that was made — at what was then called the Pleasant Valley Cheese House — was a raw milk cheddar with a black wax coating.

The Amish workers learned their trade from the old-time cheese makers and had a lot of help from a program sponsored by the University of Wisconsin. When the University program ceased to exist, the old-timers were their main source of information.

The plant also operated for the first five years with no electricity, no phone, and with an old boiler as

the only source of heat.

"All the agitating was done by hand," noted Amory.

Despite problems with consistency, the gourmet cheese was marketed as far away as Bloomingdale's in Manhattan.

As times changed there were a series of non-Amish managers of the Amish cooperative. Amory was the last of the string of managers.

"I started here in 1987 and changed the name to Up Country Cheese House," said Amory.

Amory, who was originally from Massachusetts, and his wife, who was raised in California's San Fernando Valley, moved into the area in the 1970s.

"I was interested in the economic development of the area," he noted. "when I started, I did research on the regulations involved in making cheese."

For the next five years, he struggled to make the cooperative work.

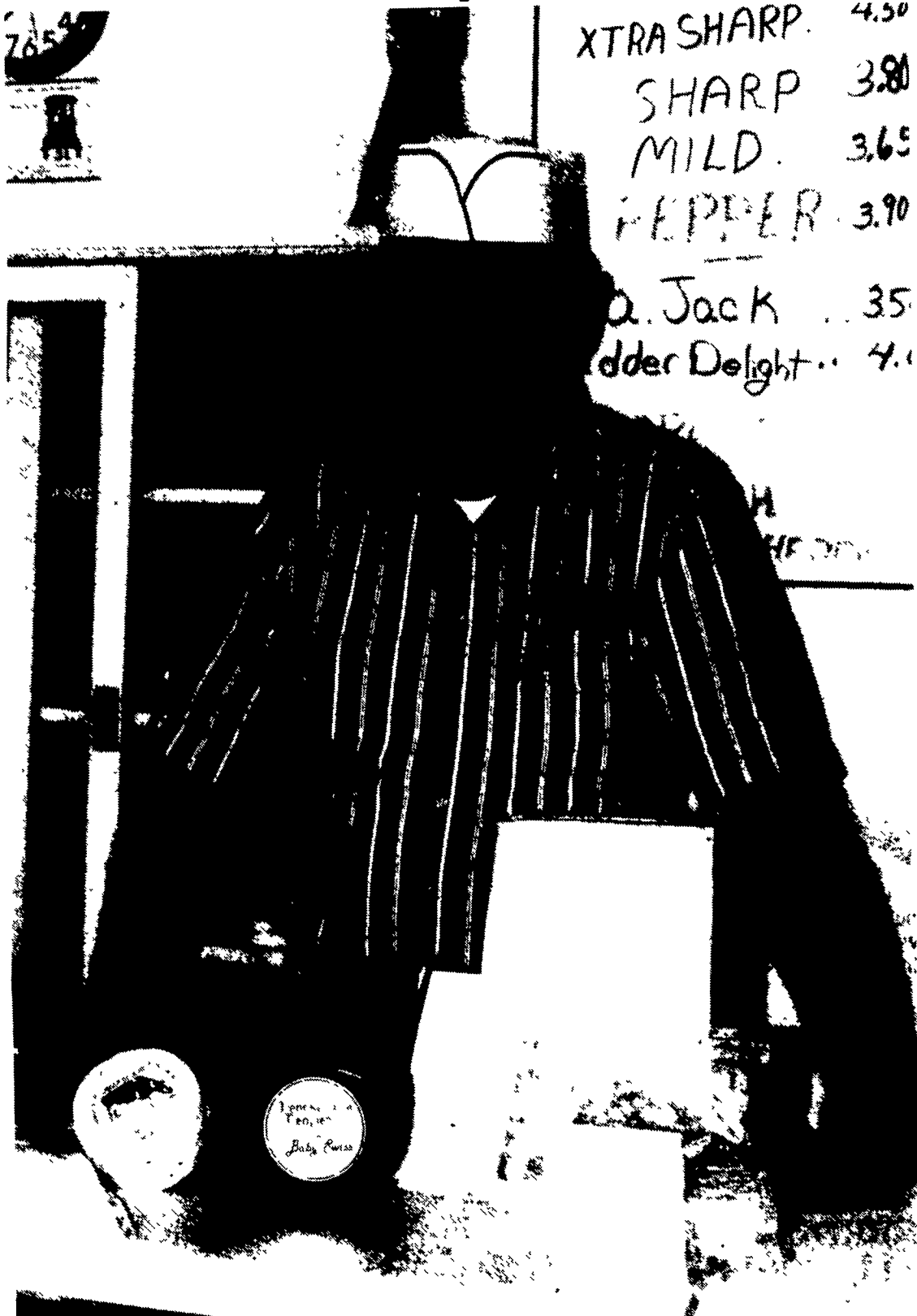
"We never had the right amount of milk. We always had too much or too little," he explained.

Another dilemma of the cheese maker is the fact that the milk supply tends to be the highest in the spring, when the demand for the cheese is the greatest in the winter.

"The milk bills were the greatest when no one buys cheese," he said.

To even out the ups and downs, Amory suggested that they start making cheeses other than cheddar, which must be aged a minimum of four months, when it's considered mild, to a year or more, when it's considered sharp.

So they started making a Jack cheese that can be ready in a month and began selling cheese curds which can be sold the same day



The finished product: Jim Amory poses with the variety of cheeses that are sold from his store, including the award winning pepper cheddar and the Pennsylvania jack cheeses.

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Paul and Carolyn Moyer are surrounded by their children, Gregory, age 4; Charlie, age 5, and Andrew, age 2. The family lives on Ty-Ly View Farm in Tioga County. Carolyn has been a correspondent for Lancaster Farming for four years.

that they're made.

In spite of the changes, Amory still struggled to make the cooperative work. Finally in 1992, the cooperative was dissolved and Amory took on the responsibility of owning the plant. Two Amish workers, David Miller and Freeman Mast, currently fine-tune the cheese and handle most of the processing decisions.

Now, because there are no longer any Amish farmers shipping milk in the area, the milk comes in a steady stream from Progressive Dairy Cooperative. In effect, they are dipping into the milk stream as they need milk. What isn't used by them goes to Leprino Foods, which operates in nearby Sayre.

Now they have expanded their cheese making expertise to include other ethnic cheeses including Havarti, Portelet, and Sommelier.

They have also received national recognition for two of their cheeses. Dave Miller received first-place honors from the American Cheese Society for his pepper cheddar, and a former cheese house worker, Harvey Yoder, was awarded a second place award for his Pennsylvania jack, in 1995.

Marketing is one of Amory's biggest challenges now. He has a solid footing in several gourmet

markets, local stores, a mail-order business and a small store at the front of the factory. Still, he would like to expand his sales.

"I work with the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture," said Amory. "they put a lot of effort into marketing. Getting the money and finding reliable

markets is tough. It's like building a canoe while learning to paddle it — you will make mistakes."

He also garners support from multiple technical support people in the cheese making industry.

Although the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is

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Follow the signs to the LeRaysville Cheese Factory for a traditional taste of country goodness.