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FARM FACTS

County Agent Takes Look at Milk Question on Both Sides

It is not often that we use material written by someone else in this column, but we think the following information pertinent for both producers and consumers of milk:

"There seems little hope that wholehearted agreement will ever come without true understanding on the age-old controversy that has become known as the 'milk question.' Over the years, no segment of the country's farm population has been criticized more bitterly by the consuming public than the dairy industry. Strife between consumer and dairyman producer has been marked by strikes, violent denunciations, heated arguments—and, little understanding.

"Because there is no substitute for milk, milk producer and consumer have been forced by necessity to do business with one another in an atmosphere frequently marked by distrust and unfriendliness.

Two Sides to Question
 "There are two sides to this question involving milk and its retail price. 'What Price Milk' is an attempt to tell at least a portion of the dairyman's story—an effort to show that dairymen have no 'rose road.' Their path, similar to that of the milk consumer, is beset with economic pressures. Rising costs, labor difficulties, and, yes, public relations are among them.

"Dairy facts and figures supplied in this fact sheet provided for your use during June Dairy Month are furnished by the following Oregon State College staff members: D. Curtis Mumford, head, department of farm management; L. R. Breithaupt, extension agricultural economist; and Roger W. Morse, extension dairy specialist.

"True, the Portland retail milk price has risen during the past 25 years from a low of nine and four-tenths cents a quart, 1933, to 20 and one-half cents a quart in May. Yet, the price was below the average retail milk price for the United States, as it has been consistently for the past quarter century.

13 Minutes for a Quart
 "For comparison's sake, meanwhile, how do those top and bottom Portland milk prices compare in terms of industrial wages? Figures published by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show the average worker employed in manufacturing in this country during the low retail milk price year, 1933, earned an average of 44 cents per hour. At that wage level, it took him just short of 13 minutes to earn the price of a quart of milk at Portland's 1933 retail level.

"In May, Portland had the highest priced milk in its history as expressed in dollars and cents — 20 and one-half cents a quart. But, during March 1949, Bureau of Labor Statistics figures indicate the average industrial wage in the nation was \$1.37 per hour. Again, in terms of labor, Portland's 20 and one-half cent a quart milk represents a labor output of exactly nine minutes. Thus, in terms of labor, milk today is cheaper than it was at the bottom of the depression.

"Similar comparisons for the past quarter century show milk to be on a continual price decline as expressed in time and industrial wages.

"Frequently, the five-year period, 1935 through 1939, has been named as a period of comparative economic balance and prosperity. Let us compare milk prices with the industrial wage level for that five-year span. Portland's delivered milk price during those five years averaged 11 and three-tenths cents a quart. Again, in terms of minutes of labor required to earn that quart of milk, the average industrial worker in the United States put in 11 minutes and 18 seconds of his time.

"During March this year, nine minutes was the 'price' of milk expressed in average industrial wages and the going Portland milk price. By comparison, if the 1935 through 1939 price level was fair, Portland retail milk now expressed in terms of labor would be priced at approximately 26 cents a quart. Nationwide, by the same comparison, milk would average 28 cents a quart.

Worse than Others
 "At current prices for milk, other farm enterprises are more attractive than dairying. A recent survey made by the department of farm management at Oregon State College indicated that labor income — what the operator gets for his own labor and management — in 1948 was more than three times as great, for example, from seed and grain farms as it was from dairy operations.

"Of 21 dairy farms studied, none returned their operators as much as \$6,000 per year in the form of labor income. More than one-half of them, in fact, returned labor incomes less than \$2,000 per year. Five showed a loss of more than \$2,000 for the year.

"Meanwhile, of the 30 seed and grain farms included, almost one-half of them returned their operators more than \$8,000 during 1948 as labor income. Farms selected for the study

something — it for milk producers, but profits could hardly be described as extravagant.

During OPA, \$5.22
 "Then, during OPA, October 1, 1943 to July 1, 1946, the cost of producing 100 pounds of grade A milk averaged \$5.22. The Portland milk quota pool price together with the subsidy averaged \$4.77 a hundred. Obviously, many dairymen were operating in red ink, and it was logical for many of them to select new farm enterprises, such as seed growing. Many did just that.

"Since OPA controls were lifted, the average cost of production for dairymen has continued to climb. For the period, July 1946 to May 1949, the average cost of milk production has been an estimated \$6.47 a hundred in the Portland area. In turn, the average quota pool price has averaged \$6.10. Thus, again, the average dairyman has failed again to meet his cost of production.

Cow Numbers Declining
 "Oregon cow numbers reached their peak in 1943 when 290,000 cows two years old and older were on hand. Slipping each year since, the cow population of milking age is now estimated at 238,000. Meantime, Oregon's human population has grown by leaps and bounds — about 50 per cent since prewar.

"Expressed in terms of a ratio, there were 24 cows per 100 Oregon residents in 1940; this year, there are less than 15 cows per 100 residents. In terms of pounds of milk available per person in 1940, the average was 1280 pounds. In 1948, the ratio of milk to people had shrunk to 790 pounds.

Seasonal Production Costs
 "As far as dairymen are concerned, pool prices set as they are in Portland make no allowance for seasonal production costs. Once established, the pool prices continue at the same figure until further change is made. Actually, it is cheaper to produce milk in April and May, for example, than during the winter feeding months, November, December and January, farm management specialists point out.

"Talk of leisure time and the 40-hour week has failed, thus far, to make an impression on the dairy cow population. It's the nature of the animals to require attention 365 days of the year with no let-up for Thanksgiving, Christmas or other holidays enjoyed by those in less confining occupations. Then too, for most efficient production cow milking hours must be as near 12 hours apart as possible.

"Good, competent dairy help is an exception rather than the rule; thus, little wonder many dairymen have turned to other enterprises, especially when dairy

returns are comparatively low.
 "From a farmer's standpoint, the dairy business is easily discontinued; it is much more difficult to establish. Efficient producing herds take considerable money and time to develop. The fact that other farm enterprises are not as confining and offer greater immediate returns makes the dairy future somewhat uncertain. It is especially so in view of the current growth in population in the Pacific Slope states. With declining cow numbers and increasing human population, unless changes are forthcoming, it does not seem unreasonable to believe that a point could be reached where milk supply will not meet demand."

Here is a bit of information not included in the report. In round figures, the producer obtains 12-25 cents a quart for 3.5 percent milk delivered to the plant. Two cents a quart goes for store mark-up. The remainder of the cost, about 6.75 cents is accounted for in cost of processing and distribution. This is not quite the whole story however, for most of the milk comes in considerably above 3.5%. This situation sometimes results in a surplus of fat and a shortage of milk which adds to the producers' troubles.

50,000 Fewer Cows
 "I recently heard this question," said Roger W. Morse, O. S. C. Dairy Specialist. "Are producers going to provide an adequate supply of dairy products at a price which consumers can afford to pay?" The answer involves not only a study of the dairy industry public relations, but also a study of the public's relations with the dairy industry. "There are facts regarding the industry and particularly market milk that should be better understood and appreciated. In round numbers, there were about 2,688,000 fewer cows of milking age on farms in the United States on January 1, 1949 than there were in 1943. Here in Oregon, there were approximately 50,000 fewer cows two years old and older on January 1st this year as compared with January 1st 1943.

"Although present milk supplies are adequate, how long this situation will exist is open to conjecture. After many years of effort to increase the supply of grade A milk in the City of Portland, milk has been shipped in from Skagit county, Washington, north of Seattle, within the past year to meet local production shortages. Fluid milk has also been shipped into Eugene from Grants Pass during the same period. Meanwhile, these markets are or have been in past years, the center of dairy producing regions. For example, a recent survey in Lane county showed there were 18 grade A producing units with an average of 30 cows each in the immediate Eugene milkshed which have been shifted to other farm enterprises. Similarly, there are many non-producing units in the Portland milkshed.

"Dairying is a long term farm enterprise that can be easily eliminated. It can only be reinstated with an efficient herd over a period of years. It is an enterprise that is easy to get out of, difficult and slow to get back into. "Dairying competes with other farm enterprises for use of land, feed and labor. In any period when conditions are more favorable for other enterprises, there will be a change from milking cows to these other enterprises. A few factors that enter into this competition are; relative prices, as compared to other enterprises that might be carried out on the farm; the supply and price of

feed, both forage and concentrates; and the labor requirements and labor cost of the enterprises. The quality requirements for grade A production also have an effect on which enterprise is adopted. Another factor has been the more or less continued agitation and campaign for lower prices and cheaper milk by people who have but little understanding of dairy industry problems. This is also added inducement for the dairymen to get into some other enterprise.

"Most farms have alternate uses to which the land can be put that will bring in just as much or more money with less hired labor and less grief than milking cows. Examples are cash crops, including seed, livestock such as sheep, beef and poultry. When the relative price for these products either brings an equal or greater net return per acre, there will be a decline in the dairy industry. "Milk is a necessary and a desirable food product. I do not believe that a producer can be expected to continue to the himself down to his dairy for 365 days a year and produce milk when there are other more profitable farm enterprises to take his time. Along with a reasonable price, there should be a sympathetic understanding by the public of the problems of producing milk if we are to have an adequate year around supply in our major markets."

COMING EVENTS
 Friday, July 22—Teen Age Dance at IOOF hall
 Monday, July 25—Odd Fellows meeting
 Tuesday, July 26—Teen Age meeting
 Wednesday, July 27—Chamber of Commerce meeting
 Thursday, July 28—Kiwanis meeting

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