

Empire Built On Butter

By Barb Fraser

Everything's better with butter, and in 1992 Stirling Creamery will produce three million pounds of the sweetest butter you can buy using the same batch and churn method used in 1925. That's when William C. West, grandfather of present owners, Bob and Dick, started his creamery and butter business at 1 Front Street in Stirling, Ontario.

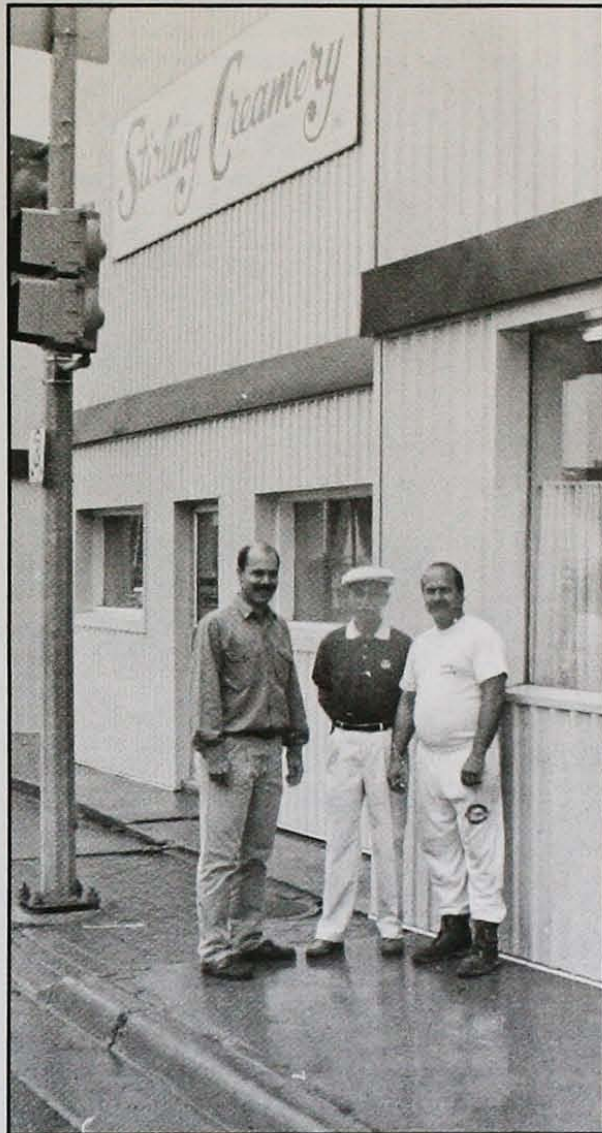
The original plant was torn down in 1935, and over the years the business has grown to fill three buildings on the edge of Rawdon Creek.

The first stage of construction was undertaken last fall when a 1,000 square-foot addition was built at the back; it doubled the storage/freezer capacity. A new loading dock was also added. Dick West said, "When the back was completed, we decided to finish off the rest to brighten it, and clean it up, and get the three buildings uniform. It was overdue."

More than a century ago, the Wests were renowned for their cheese. Madoc pioneer Annie Elevier, great-grandmother of the present owners, won the award for the highest scoring cheese at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. She taught the art to her husband and their sons. One of the sons - William C. West - had been the cheesemaker at Harold and Stockdale before he got into the butter business.

When William was ready to retire, his three sons - Russ, Harold and Clare - took over. Russ died in 1977, and a year later Dick and Bob, Clare's sons, came into management. Then, around 1986, Harold walked in on his 65th birthday and said, "I retire. I'd like you to buy me out." They did. Clare West is semi-retired, but he is still active in the business and comes in every morning to keep his sons in line.

Dick and Bob are sound businessmen and the recent expansion will barely con-



Clare West (centre) with his two sons Dick (left) and Bob (right) who are presently managing Stirling Creamery.

tain their business growth. In 1990 they purchased the production and distribution of Sunderland Creamery. "That's when we just about doubled our capacity," said Dick. "At the time we probably employed about ten; now we employ eighteen. And we service the majority of the province from St. Catherines to Pembroke. It's been good for us. In this business there are really only two independents left, ourselves and Alliston. The rest have been bought out by the conglomerates."

Producers for conglomerates use a "continuous churn" method to make butter. The cream goes in at one end and comes out as butter in a constant flow; they just continue pumping in cream. But the key to the superior flavour of Stirling butter is the original batch and churn method. Each batch of cream is churned until butter is produced before the next batch is started. Three huge stainless steel churns have replaced William's large old wooden, belt-driven churn.

In the past year the Wests have made another major acquisition. From the American owner Turner & Pease, Stirling Creamery obtained exclusive Canadian rights to manufacture and distribute a product called Butter Balls; a solid roll of sweet cream butter.

Stirling Creamery produces creamery butter, unsalted creamery butter, and is the only producer/distributor of whey butter in Ontario. In fact, outside of Hastings and Prince Edward Counties whey butter is hardly known. "I eat whey butter myself," said Dick. "It became popular in this district because there have always been so many cheese factories."

"We primarily deal with independent grocers," said Dick, "who are not governed as to what they can and can not sell; whereas the corporates are governed by their head office." He added, "But we don't have to stockpile or sell to government. We sell all the butter we can manufacture."

Stirling Creamery is in good hands with these young, hard-working, third generation proprietors, and the future also seems assured.

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