



Hands-on job

Brent Gray (left), and Steve Nicholson start work early in the morning at Empire Cheese, Northumberland County's lone cheese factory, owned by local dairy farmers.

John Campbell photos

The old fashioned way: Empire Cheese

by JOHN CAMPBELL
The Independent

Just how good is the cheddar made at Empire Cheese?

Well, it's sold across Canada, from the East Coast to a shop in Vancouver that sells cheese from around the world. More than 300 locations throughout Ontario carry it.

A lot even gets sent through the mail, believe it or not, and "it's not uncommon for some out-of-town customers to buy a \$1,000 worth of cheese and take it back to their friends," says manager Jack Oliver.

Then there's the walk-in business; customers who drive to the factory on County Road 8 east of Campbellford to make their purchases of mild, medium and old cheddar. Perhaps it's marble, colby, caraway, onion, garlic and other flavoured cheeses that they're looking to buy, or a bag of fresh curds, or maybe a cheese basket.

The lone surviving cheese manufacturing plant from among a great many that operated in Northumberland County a century ago, Empire is doing so well these days that it's expanding. A 60 by 40 ft. addition is being built on the east end, along with a new parking lot, to better serve customers.

"We seem to be moving more product through the

store every year," says Dale Loucks, president of the 15-member co-operative that owns the plant. "We've outgrown the old facility ... (so) it was worthwhile to go ahead."

The new part will include offices and an expanded sales area, which will free up more space in the older building for cold storage. Currently, Empire keeps between 130,000 and 140,000 kilograms of cheese on the premises and about another 75,000 kilograms in Belleville.

"It's expensive to store it down there," Loucks said, as well as an "inconvenience." But for customers who like their cheese aged two to three years, or even longer, "you've got to carry a fair bit of inventory in order to have that aged cheese available when it's ready."

With so many people from Toronto showing a fondness for Empire cheese, Oliver hopes to extend the co-operative's reach into the country's largest city "one store at a time." The owner of three Toronto outlets has already shown an interest in helping him gain a foothold.

"The product will sell itself ... the more people try it," Loucks says.

Empire can't match the production of its much larger rivals, who, in one plant, will use as much milk in a day to

make cheese as Empire uses in an entire year. But Empire holds a competitive edge when it comes to flavour, Oliver asserts. "They don't make the quality of product that we make."

While it's the superior taste of its cheese that has enabled Empire to prosper, another important factor in its survival has been its structure, Oliver says.

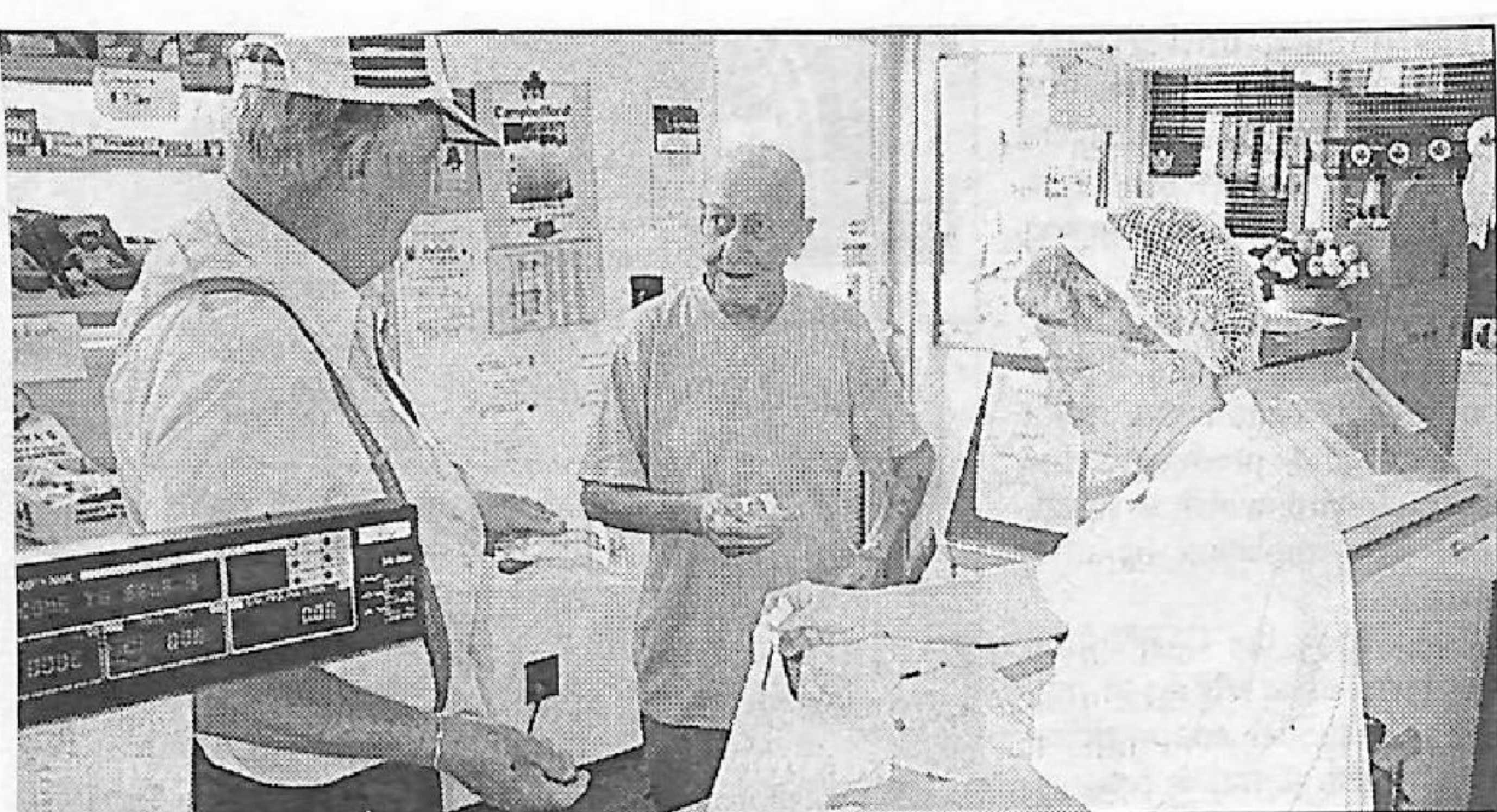
Membership is restricted to dairy farmers, making it unlikely they will ever want to sell out, as has happened at other small cheese plants where share-holders no longer had ties to the farming community.

Loucks says ownership in Empire is "a profitable investment" that supplements his farming income.

The cheese factory also represents "a nice option" down the road should the quota system for the sale of milk ever be dismantled, as has been talked about for years as a result of American pressure.

"It would be a way of marketing our milk if times change," he says.

"Probably the most important thing," however, is that it creates jobs for about 15 local people. Not to be forgotten is the "fair amount of spinoffs" that Empire generates for the local economy, Oliver adds.



Linda Thain serves customers Jim Presswood (left) from Georgetown, and Bernie Seuffert, of Hastings at the Empire Cheese retail outlet.

Council reviews roads report

BY BOB OWEN
STAFF WRITER

The roads report requested by Cramahe Reeve Jim Williams at the July 9 council committee was tabled July 16 with little of the fanfare that preceded it the week before.

After reading the July 10 letter to the editor in *The Chronicle*, Jane Boreham commented on Mr. Coombs' reference to a road plan. Councillor Boreham says she has never seen a plan.

Reeve Jim Williams responded that the three-year roads plan comes before council at budget discussion time every year. It is revised and "we do what we can each year". The roads department adds what they would like to do, and roads not completed one year are pushed ahead to the next three-year plan.

Councillor Mike Johnston suggested council look at a business plan for hardtopping high-traffic roads due to the high cost of calcium and the September 20-02 ban on the use of Dombind as a dust suppressant.

continued on page 2

Calborne Chronicle July 25/02

Council reviews roads report

continued on page 2

Currently, the township uses Dombind on roads unless there have been complaints from residents. In those cases, calcium is applied instead. About half of the roads treated in June and early July were treated with calcium. After September this year, the cheaper Dombind product has been banned by the provincial government.

Reeve Williams concurred with the Johnston suggestion.

Cramahe Chief Administrative Officer Merlin Dewing cautioned council about discussing roads issues and vacation concerns in open sessions, adding that "the press tends to blow these things

out of proportion".

He referred council to a May memo he had circulated to council members. In the memo, he listed all the telephone numbers where he can be contacted. He stressed he expects staff and elected officials to get in touch with him wherever he is on business matters. He explained he would have dealt with roads concerns raised at the July 9 council committee meeting on Friday, July 5 had he been informed.

In response to the concern raised by councillor Mike Johnston about four senior staff members being on vacation, Mr. Dewing replied respectfully that that was his responsibility.