

Cheese Factories Facing Squeeze

The cheese factories of Ontario have recently formed an Association to fight for their survival. They have presented a Brief to the Milk Commission of Ontario asking that the supply of milk to cheddar factories be maintained at the average level of the past two years.

The 25 factories in the Ontario Cheddar Cheese Association (OCCA) are deeply concerned about a projected 75% decrease in the quota of milk available to them for 1978-79. Their milk supply has dwindled steadily. This year it may reach a new low of 49.4% of the Base Plant Supply which was set 8 years ago.

The plants feel that their survival is threatened if they are required to run at only half capacity. This inefficiency is expensive. Bob Akins, Cheese-maker at Plum Hollow, says, "It's very provoking. The biggest problem is the cost of producing—our chemicals just went up 7%. It costs as much to run 1 batch as it would to run 3."

Talmage Stone of Forfar Dairy points out that maintenance of plant and employees in very low supply months increases the cost of production. He says, "We can't stand any more reduction (of supply). Another cut would be critical for any of the factories... If they want a cheddar cheese business left they must act right away." Mr. Stone is a representative for Eastern Ontario on the OCCA Board of Directors.

The milk supply problem stems from two levels. According to the OCCA the Market Sharing Quota allotted to Ontario by the Canadian Milk Commission is too small. This problem is compounded within Ontario because an increasing share of the Industrial Milk Supply is given to Specialty Cheese producers. Cheddar producers who can expand into European-style cheese production can get quota. Those who cannot, the small local factories, are left out in the cold.

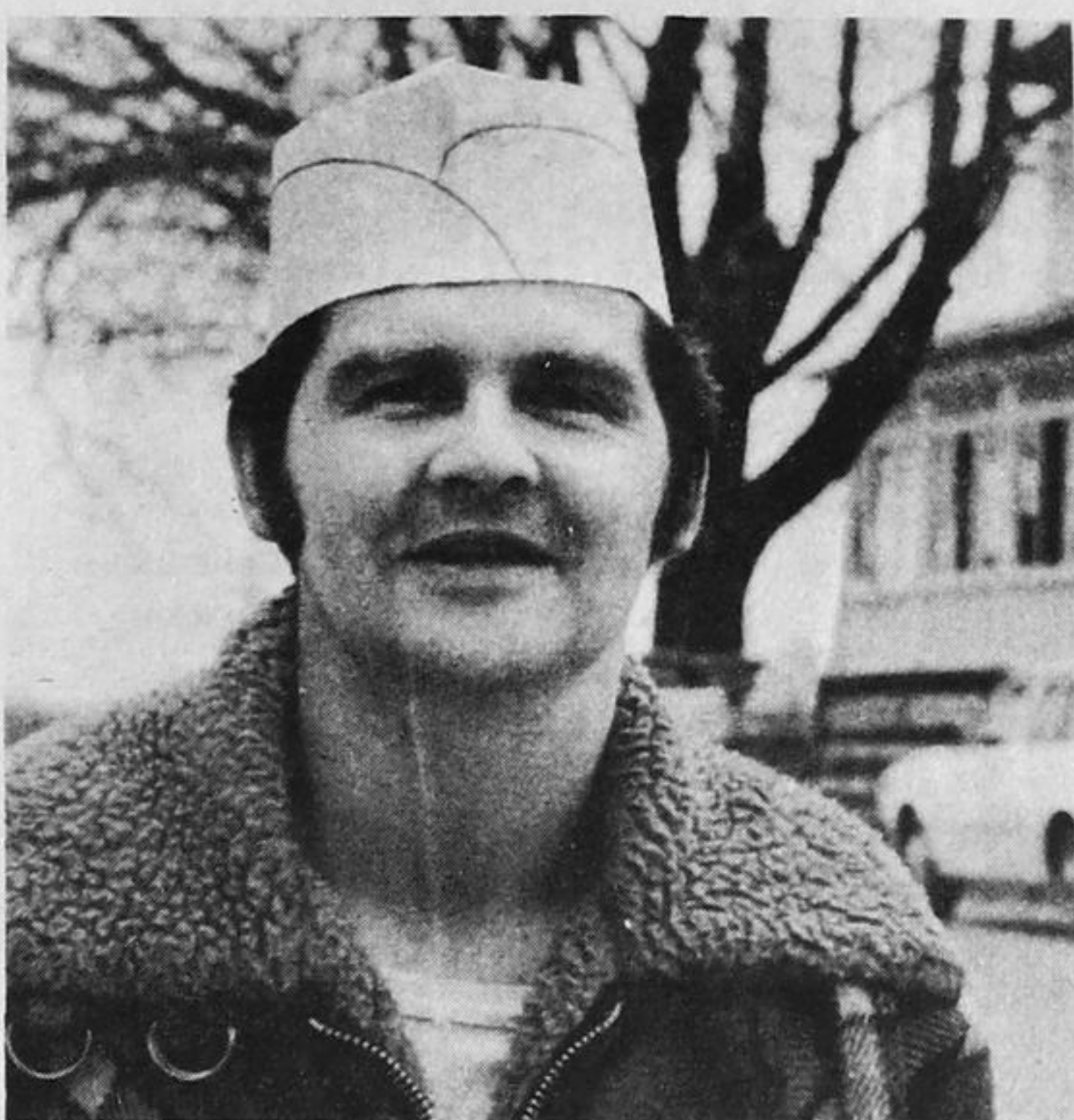


Lloyd Steacy making cheese at Forfar.

At the same time, Ontario cheddar producers are unable to meet the demand for their product. The OCCA Brief states that seven major buyers would buy 9.6 million pounds more cheddar for aging, were it available. They must buy out of province to meet their requirements.

The cheddar cheese makers are fed up with seeing their quota diminished year after year to the Specialty Cheese Market. The OCCA Brief asks the government, "Are we going to let this great industry wither and die or are we finally going to take the steps to preserve an industry that is as much of our Ontario Heritage as farming itself?"

The OCCA is going to the public for support of their cause. They are circulating a petition stating:



Bob Akins of the Plum Hollow Cheese and Cream Co-op.

DUE TO POLICIES BEYOND OUR CONTROL THE CHEDDAR CHEESE INDUSTRY OF ONTARIO IS BEING THREATENED BY EXTINCTION. IF YOU ENJOY ONTARIO CHEDDAR CHEESE AND WOULD LIKE TO SEE A CONTINUING SUPPLY AVAILABLE, PLEASE SIGN BELOW.

Copies of the petition are available at both Forfar Dairy and Plum Hollow Cheese Factories.

In the meantime, the two local factories are promoting over-the-counter sales. Milk for these products come under a different quota classification, and profits are better. At present, both Plum Hollow and Forfar do about 1/3 of their business over-the-counter.

Bob Akins at Plum Hollow is optimistic about this approach. The demand for local cheddar has increased steadily. The public is now aware of the nutritional value of cheese and its low cost compared to meat.

It would be most unfortunate if the Plum Hollow Cheese Factory and Forfar Dairy, both with history stretching back over 110 years, were to close. Closure would mean a loss of livelihood to the 13 employed at Forfar and 4 full-time employees at Plum Hollow.

After surviving fires, rebuilding, depression and changes of ownership, these two beacons of local enterprise may be choked out of existence by government policy. The marketing system which was designed to stabilize and protect the dairy industry appears ready to sacrifice the cheddar cheese makers.

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Historical Highlights

FORFAR CHEESE FACTORY

From information received from Mr. Talmage Stone, Forfar, Aug. 3rd, 1977.

This information was gathered during a Young Canada Works project and is on file at the Elgin Branch, Rideau Lakes Union Library.

Cheese factories began to be built in Ontario about 1865. As soon as cheese factories were built, people would buy more cows because this provided a market for their milk.

The first factories were very crude, with wooden vats and wooden presses. The cheesemaker bought the milk from the farmer all summer, then in the fall cheese was sent to England.

The cheese would be drawn to Brockville with horses on wagons, and then loaded on boats for Montreal, then on seaboats for England. When the cheesemaker was paid for the cheese, he would pay the farmers.

In 1878 there was a famine in England. Mr. Gile, Cheesemaker at Forfar at the time, regularly sold the cheese at 8¢ a pound. The English would only pay 5¢ a pound. Being a stubborn man, John Gile kept the cheese through the winter. Some of it froze and some rotted, so in the end he got 3¢ a pound.

Being an honest man, he mortgaged his farm and the factory to pay the farmers for the milk as he had promised. He never recovered financially from the loss so shortly thereafter he moved to North Dakota.

The factory was then bought by a man named Knapp, who moved it to its present site. It operated there until 1922 when it burned down.

Mr. Owens built the present factory. It changed hands several times until 1963 when it was bought by seventeen area farmers.

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