

Long Grove History

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Long Grove & The Milk War

Why is the price of milk set by the U.S. government and not the free market? A twenty-five-year fight, fought partly with eggs that failed to grade — and a cartoon cow who ended up on the glue bottle.

By Aaron Underwood · Long Grove Historical Society



LONG GROVE · 1921 The Long Grove family of **Ed and Clara Lauffenburger**, with their milk cans outside the barn — a photograph that ran in a national dairy-manufacturer's advertisement (*De Laval*) in 1921.

The USA is often thought of as the model for capitalism — if you make a product, what you get paid for it is a function of supply and demand. So you might be surprised to learn that one of your most frequent purchases — milk — has its price controlled by the U.S. government and *not* the free market. Why is this? And what does it have to do with Long Grove?



Butter, cheese & the problem of spoilage.

When Long Grove came into existence in the mid-1800's, local families produced enough milk for their own needs and not much more — there simply wasn't a good way to transport milk anywhere before it spoiled. One technique around this was to convert the fresh milk into products that lasted longer and traveled better: *butter* and *cheese*. Around 1880, area farmers joined with **George Quentin** to build a local creamery — The Long Grove Creamery. The Creamery would take in fresh milk from local farmers and manufacture butter and cheese. The farmers not only got a fair price for their milk, but many also shared in the profits.

LAKE COUNTY INDEPENDENT · 1896

There is no better location for a creamery in the State than at Long Grove. The absence of direct railway facilities makes it inconvenient and expensive for the farmers to ship their milk to the city, and for this reason the farmers of this vicinity organized the company. Owing to its superior quality, the butter commands a higher price than is available at the nearby Elgin market, and instead is sold to New York. The cheese has found a ready market in Chicago.

By 1885, the train line had reached Aptakisic and Prairie View and offered another outlet for area milk. Dairy farming in Lake County boomed. As technology continued to develop, so did economies of scale — and the inevitable consolidation of the market. In 1908, the Long Grove Creamery was bought out by one of the emerging "mega" retailers — **Bowman Dairy** of Gurnee. By 1916, Bowman's, along with **Borden's**, controlled enough of the demand for milk in the area that they were effectively able to set the price paid to farmers.

If you're guessing that they set a price that didn't allow much farmer profit, you would be correct. If you're guessing that area farmers weren't going to stand for that — also correct. The *Great Chicago Milk War* was on.

Blockades, eggs that failed to grade.

The farmers banded together very effectively and agreed that if they couldn't get a fair price for their milk, they'd *dump* it instead. Roads leading to the milk plants were blocked; attempted deliveries were turned away or "spilled" by force. Punishment was retroactive for those who managed to sneak some milk through the pickets, as illustrated by this report from an Elgin trade publication in 1916:

ELGIN DAIRY REPORT · 1916

One of the farmers... succeeded in eluding the pickets and delivering his milk... but on the way home through the streets he had to run the gauntlet of several hundred farmers who were provided with eggs that failed to grade, and was pretty well plastered by the time he had broken away from his tormenters.

Don't you just long for the good old days, when a spirited egg pelting was an acceptable form of social expression?

The big retailers tried importing milk from out of the area. This, too, was met by the farmers' blockade:

THE MILWAUKEE SENTINEL · JANUARY 19, 1929

ARMED SQUADS GUARD CHICAGO MILK CARGOES

...deliveries to Waukegan have increased... since armed guards have protected trucks. A long line of trucks was halted yesterday at Long Grove, twenty miles west of Waukegan, but no milk was spilled.

No downgraded egg throwing in Long Grove? Well, maybe we did and it just wasn't reported — that's the way I'd like to think it went down.

The public generally sided with the farmers, and this scene repeated off and on for the next twenty-five years or so. Whenever the farmers wanted a raise, they would strike the milk plants for a higher price; after a few days of no milk, the big retailers would honor the farmer's "fair" price. When the Great Depression hit and demand for milk dropped significantly, the U.S. government stepped in and took control over setting the price paid to farmers — and that continues to this day.

Aftermath — and the cow on the glue bottle.

Bowman Dairy never really returned to its position of dominance. Ongoing anti-trust lawsuits throughout the 1940's and 1950's plagued the company, and it eventually sold out to Dean's in the mid-1960's. Borden fared better. To counter a public opinion that had gone very negative, Borden launched a new ad campaign featuring cartoons of a "cow" couple — *Elsie* and *Elmer*.



Elsie the Cow

BORDEN DAIRY · 1936-

At her peak, the most recognized corporate symbol in America — a cow drafted to soften the brand's public image after the Milk War.



Elmer the Husband

ELMER'S GLUE · 1947-

Skim-milk casein, plus a bit of vinegar, baking soda, and heat — and the husband on the bottle. Sales rose immediately.

The ads were a big hit. Elsie, at one point, became the most recognized corporate symbol in America, and Elmer came to adorn another household and school staple — *Elmer's Glue*. How does the cartoon husband of a dairy company end up on a glue bottle? With a bit of vinegar, baking soda, and heat you can turn milk into *casein*, which makes pretty good glue — and this happens somewhat naturally as a byproduct when skim milk is produced.

Borden's casein glue, "Casco Glue," was virtually unknown until they decided to cash in on the popularity of the Elsie ads and gave Elmer his own product. Sales rose immediately, and it's been the most popular glue in the U.S. ever since. Technology has changed, of course, so Elmer's no longer contains milk — *don't try it on your corn flakes*.