

# ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

P.O. BOX 284 ORBOST VIC 3888



**President:** Beryl Macalister  
**Vice President:** Geoff Stevenson  
**Secretary:** Paul Dawson  
**Treasurer:** Paul Dawson  
**Museum Curators:** Geoff Stevenson  
Eddie Slatter  
**Research Secretary:** John Phillips

## *NEWSLETTER*

OCTOBER, 2003



ORBOST BUTTER & PRODUCE FACTORY 1950



ORBOST BUTTER FACTORY PROCESSING ROOM 1950

Information prepared by Denise Lynn for the *Farming in East Gippsland* seminar held at Bairnsdale on May 1, 1985.

### Dairying

Before the turn of the century, cows were milked by hand. The milk was also separated by a hand-operated machine. Mr J. Russell brought the first Alfa-laval separator into the district. Farmers delivered milk to two receiving depots in the district. There the milk was separated and the cream was delivered to the old original Butter Factory which was opened in 1892. Later, milk was separated at the factory.

The skim, or waste milk after separating was used to feed pigs. Later, farmers delivered cream to the new Orbost Butter and Produce Factory of which Mr J. Russell, founding director of the company, laid the foundation stone in 1915. Until the factory was well established (about one year) Mr Russell and Mr J. Cameron paid the butter factory wages and were not reimbursed until after the butter had reached England. By the 1920s milking machines were widely used in the Orbost region and some farmers were able to turn entirely to dairying. Herd sizes increased as farmers improved their pastures. Herd testing (to test the worth of each individual cow) was introduced into the area in the early 1930s which helped increase the herds' productivity.

Mr Alastar Cameron (son of Mr Hugh Cameron, who came to this region in 1874) was reputed to be the largest dairy farmer in Australia in the 1950s and 60s, at one stage running 20 dairy farms in this region. The first farm Mr A. Cameron had built was in 1916. In the 1970s, bulk milk collection came into the district, causing several of the less accessible of Mr Cameron's farms to close down. The same number of cows were still milked, but on fewer farms. The farms were inherited by Mr Cameron's two daughters and are still functioning today.

The first dairy in Orbost with elevated bails, owned by Mr J. Lynn, began operating in the early 1950s just North-East of Orbost. In 1960 the first herringbone dairy in the district, owned by F. and B. Ritchie, began operating at Brod-ribb, which was a vast improvement on the old conventional type walk-through dairy. A rotary dairy, owned by D. and B. Suter, also the first in the district, began operating in 1978 at Irvines Road, Orbost. The first rotaflow dairy in Australia, which has a floating concrete floor and cow platform, and owned by J. and M. McKeown, began operating in 1985 at Lochend. Artificial insemination began in this region in about the 1960s, which helped improve many of the dairy herds.

#### Bibliography:

Back to Orbost Committee. 1937. Back to Orbost, 1937 Official Programme and Souvenir.

Back to Orbost Committee. 1963. Back to Orbost Celebrations, 1963.

Gilbert, M. 1972. Personalities and Stories of the Early Orbost District. – Manuscript.

O'Bryan, D. 1983. Pioneering East Gippsland. Printed by Renwick Pride Pty. Ltd.

Newmerella Progress Association. 1978. Newmerella – Valley of Plenty. Printed by Snowy River Mail, Orbost. Rotaflow dairy – article. 1983. The Victorian Market Place News.

In 1906, the Butter Factory produced 103 tons of butter and had a total turnover of ten thousand nine hundred and sixty one pounds, three shillings and three pence. Thirty years later, in 1936, 524 tons of butter was produced with a turnover of sixty nine thousand nine hundred and twenty six pounds three shillings and seven pence.

In 1963, dairying in the Orbost shire employed some 500 men and their families. The local butter factory turned out annually 1,300 tons of first grade butter and 10,000 cows were milked on 137 dairies in the season. Five hundred and twenty four thousand, three hundred and twenty three pounds was paid to suppliers in 1962.

The Orbost Butter and Produce factory continued until 1969 when Gippsland Consolidated Milk Products became the new company. This company included suppliers from Bairnsdale and Maffra. Four years later, in 1973, the company changed to Gippsland Amalgamated Milk Products which included suppliers from Yarram, Foster, Traralgon and Heyfield. In 1976 there was a takeover of all these factories by Murray Goulburn Co-op Ltd., which draws from a large part of Victoria and also southern New South Wales. Following the closure of Bairnsdale and Orbost dairy factories, milk is now transported to Maffra at the farmers' expense.

Today, dairy herds are larger than in the past, but there are fewer dairy farms. Only about 55 dairy farms are now in existence in the Orbost district, compared to in excess of 150 in the early 1970s.

Dairying in the Orbost district has been a mainstay of the farming community but dairying generally is currently in a slump. The main reason is that most of Victoria's milk is used for manufacturing purposes such as butter, cheese and skim milk powder, of which a fair proportion is exported and there is a world wide surplus of these products.

Dairying in Orbost should remain a major enterprise in the future. Large capital investments in herds and equipment ensures that a large percentage of dairy farmers will have to stay in the industry. Because of Orbost's distance from the milk factory, cartage is an on-going problem with farmers paying the bill. If Murray Goulburn decides to stop collection of milk from Orbost, the future could be uncertain unless alternative companies or alternative marketing outlets can be found.