

The Food Industry in Stratford - Part 2: Cheesemakers

In our April 2021 newsletter I wrote about the food industry in Stratford, basing my information on the extensive number of people and occupations listed on our plaques. As mentioned in that newsletter, Perth County contains much prime agricultural land, and is one of the most diverse farming counties in Ontario, known primarily for mixed farming, dairying, and hog production. Of course, without our extensive railway system that was developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, our local products would have had difficulty reaching their markets.

Last April I focused on meat processors and butchers. Now it is time for the other elements of the food industry to shine, beginning with cheesemakers. Perth County has the highest concentration of dairy farms in Canada.

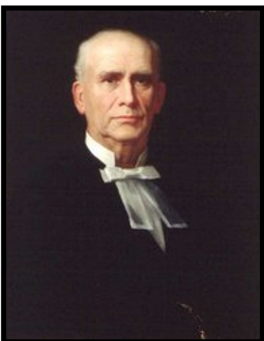
Until the 1860s in Ontario, cheese and butter were primarily made by women in farm dairies, both for subsistence use and local commercial sale. Beginning in the mid-1860s, cheese production moved from farm dairies to small, rural factories where the milk from neighbouring farms was pooled and made into cheese by factory craft workers, who were often but not always men. The first such factory in Canada was opened by Harvey Farrington in Oxford County in 1864. Factories proliferated quickly, reaching a peak of 2300 cheese factories and 570 combined cheese and butter factories at the turn of the century. In 1867, 200 cheese factories were established in Ontario alone. Exports of cheese, chiefly to England, played a major part in Canada's early economy.

Many fine cheeses are still made in Ontario today, including in Perth County. Millbank Cheese and Butter was opened in 1908 by local farmers and is still in operation today. Monforte Dairy was established in 2003 and continues to make fine cheeses using local goat, sheep, and cow milk. Stonetown Artisan Cheese near St Marys makes an excellent selection of Swiss-style cheeses from cow and goat milk. In Mitchell, the plant founded by the Stacey family over 125 years ago, owned more recently by Parmalat, is now owned by Lactalis, one of the largest dairy companies in the world, with over 280 plants worldwide in over 50 countries. This plant in Mitchell receives milk from local farmers 365 days per year. Among other dairy products, the plant makes cream cheese. And of course we have several excellent cheese producers just outside of Perth County, in Bright (Bright Cheese), Woodstock (Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese), and New Hamburg (Mountainoak and Oak Grove).

To quote from Monty Python: "Blessed are the cheesemakers"!

Allan Tye

Ballantyne Cheese



Thomas Ballantyne

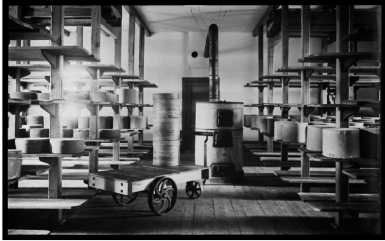
Thomas Ballantyne was born in 1829 in Scotland, emigrating with his family to Downie Township, Perth County in 1850. Thomas taught school from 1853 to 1861, and then returned to farming. It can be assumed that Thomas was already dairying on the farm before he visited the pioneer cheese factory which Harvey Farrington had recently opened in Oxford County. After touring the birthplace of industrial cheese production in upstate New York, he founded a factory at a bend in the Black Creek near Sebringville. Black Creek was initially a cooperative factory where the farmers provided the capital, but cooperation soon gave way to sole proprietorship. Ballantyne sold his farm and, with the help of a provincial grant, bought the factory outright. The business would remain under proprietary ownership until it was sold by his son in 1925.

Ballantyne Cheese continued

Ballantyne soon thought in terms of overseas distribution. His support in 1872 for a railway link coincided with his opening of a warehouse in Stratford and his first selling trip to England. One of his three-year-old cheddars won top marks from international judges and a gold medal. By 1880, though virtually unavailable in Canada (it was served in a few expensive hotels), Black Creek coloured cheddar was one of the best-known and highest-priced North American cheeses sold in England.



Loading cheese in Stratford



Inside a Ballantyne cheese factory

Ballantyne was a strong advocate of exacting standards in the dairy industry. He advanced his aims through his membership in three dairymen's associations, the creation of a dairy school in Tavistock, and the establishment of the western Ontario association's travelling instructor service. He advocated the unionization of cheese-factory employees and the creation of an apprenticeship system. His factory was the first to use the Babcock test, which graded milk according to its butterfat content. Ballantyne also became involved in local politics in the 1850s to the early 1870s, followed by 19 years beginning in 1875 as a Liberal MPP for Perth South.

Duncan Scott - Cheesemaker

198 Albert Street, Built 1907

Duncan Scott was born and raised in Perth County. He was educated in Tavistock and later attended the Stratford Business School. By 1901 Duncan was living in Blandford Township, Oxford County, with Robert Johnston, a cheesemaker, and his family. Duncan married Annie McDermott from New Hamburg in 1905, and in 1907 Duncan and Annie moved into 198 Albert Street. At that time Duncan was still employed in the cheese business as a buyer for Thomas Ballantyne & Sons. He later became the secretary-treasurer for the company when it became R.M. Ballantyne Company Limited.

In 1927 Duncan became an insurance agent for John Brown Company Limited and two years later opened his own insurance, real estate, and brokerage firm, Scott-Crane Company.



198 Albert Street

Thomas Ballantyne Jr. - Cheese Merchant and Stratford City Treasurer

175 Cambria Street, Built 1921



175 Cambria Street

Thomas Ballantyne Jr. was born in 1863 and became associated with his father in the cheese making business when he was 18. When his father died in 1908 he took over the business and operated the cheese factory until 1925 when he was appointed City Treasurer, a position held for ten years.

Like his father, Thomas Jr. became heavily involved in politics and civic life. He served on ten city councils and was a member of nearly every committee of the council. He was a member of the Public School Board and of the Collegiate Institute Board. He was also heavily involved in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, the Stratford Rotary Club, and the Board of Trade.

In 1889 Thomas Jr. married Elizabeth Anne (Bessie) Clark, a member of a distinguished Elora family, her father serving as an M.P.P., as well as Speaker and Clerk of the Ontario Legislature. Elizabeth was heavily involved in civic causes.

Harry White - Cheesemaker

5 Douglas Street, Built 1905

Harry White was born around 1858 in Oxford County, and was raised there and in Perth County. When his father died in 1884, his remaining family moved to Exeter, Huron County, where Harry started working as a cheesemaker.

Harry was the first cheesemaker at Pine River Cheese, a farmer-owned cooperative established in 1885 on the banks of the Pine River in Huron Township, Bruce County, near Lake Huron. In 1888 the company built a new residence there for Harry and his wife. Pine River Cheese continued as a successful cheesemaking cooperative until 2019. In 2021 it was purchased by Lucknow Cooperative.

Henry's wife, Martha, died in 1897. Henry and his young daughter moved to Stratford, living at 5 Douglas Street (then Mill Street). He worked as a travelling salesman and later for 19 years as a buyer and inspector for Thomas Ballantyne and Sons.



5 Douglas Street

Henry had a son, Oliver Henry Johnston White, with his second wife, Lottie. Oliver followed his father's footsteps into the dairy industry. A graduate of the Ontario Agricultural College, now part of the University of Guelph, he authored several articles and publications on dairy equipment and held positions in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. The Oliver White Memorial Scholarship in Agriculture is offered annually to a student entering the MSc Program in Food Sciences at the University of Guelph.

William Gillard - Cheesemaker

181 Water Street, Built 1910



181 Water Street

Father and son, William and Charles Gillard, purchased the lot on what is now 181 Water Street in 1909, and they built the house in 1910.

William was born in 1845 in Springford, Norwich Township, Oxford County, and he was raised in that county. He married Elizabeth Ann Reep in 1866. They had one son, Charles, who was born in Springford in 1868.

In the 1880s Norwich Township farmers were the first in Canada to adapt the American factory system for cheesemaking. Having lived and worked on farms in the area, it was not surprising that William became a cheesemaker as reported in the 1871 census for that township. William and his family then moved to Tavistock, and in 1878, along with Thomas Ballantyne, formed the Ballantyne & Gillard Cheese Manufacturers, later called the Tavistock Cheese Company. The frame building that William Gillard and Thomas Ballantyne built was later the home of the first dairy school in Ontario.

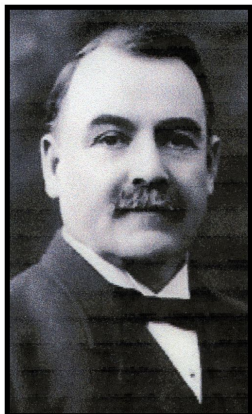
A widower in 1891, William was living at a hotel in Stratford and listed as a cheese manufacturer, likely at Thomas Ballantyne & Sons. In 1901 William was living and farming in South Perth with his son, Charles, and wife, Mary. William and Charles then built the house at 181 Water Street in 1910, although William lived elsewhere for a short time. In the 1921 census the family was living together, and William was listed as a retired farmer and Charles as a bookkeeper at a woolen mill - the R.M. Ballantyne Textile Plant on Ballantyne Avenue between Front and North Streets.

Alexander Ferguson MacLaren

Cheesemaker and Founder of A.F. McLaren Imperial Cheese Company

30 Waterloo Street South, Built 1890 by Thomas Orr

In 1890, Thomas Orr built the house at 30-32 Waterloo Street South on speculation. He sold it to Alexander Ferguson MacLaren.



A. F. MacLaren

Alexander MacLaren was born in 1854 in the town of Perth, and his family moved to Perth County when he was quite young, first settling in Mitchell and then in Cromarty. At the age of 17 MacLaren was taken on by a dairyman in Hibbert Township, Perth County to learn the craft of cheese making. In 1877 Alexander was hired as a cheese buyer by Thomas Ballantyne. Later he worked as a cheese buyer at a factory in Ingersoll. In 1891 he formed a cheese-export company of his own in Stratford, MacLaren Brothers, later incorporated as A.F. MacLaren Imperial Cheese Company Ltd. because of the introduction of a new product, MacLaren's Imperial Cheese, which became very popular. Made from ground cheddars and sold in small porcelain containers, it was evidently one of the first soft, processed cheeses to be distributed commercially.



30 Waterloo Street South



By 1892, MacLaren established a branch factory in Detroit, and within the decade had established offices in Toronto, New York, London, Chicago, Detroit, Mexico, China, Japan, and Africa. He was a director for numerous companies while remaining active in his own cheese business. Also, he was on the executive of the Dairymen's Association of Western Ontario for many years, and he acted as a judge of cheese at major exhibitions in Chicago, Buffalo, and various fairs throughout Ontario.



Alexander served as a Conservative Member of Parliament for Perth North from 1896 until his defeat in 1908. He subsequently relocated to Toronto.

In 1920, Alexander sold his company to processed cheese makers J. L Kraft and Brothers of Chicago. MacLaren's Imperial Cheese is still made by Kraft and is widely available.

Interested in Volunteering?

Do you like to write? We need people to write articles for our newsletters. The word count should be from 250 to 400 words. The topic? Something concerning the buildings in Stratford and Perth County and the stories that they tell. Contact Allan Tye allanjrtye@gmail.com

Interested in information about researching or having a plaque made? Get in touch with our plaque coordinator Carole Huband hubandca@rogers.com

Interested in advocacy for Heritage Conservation Districts? There is a group looking into this for Hamlet Ward. Get in touch with Mary Walton mmwalton1997@gmail.com or Richard Wood rwoodn618@rogers.com