

# A Brief History of the Bellows Falls Co-operative Creamery, Inc.

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Milk bottle collectors everywhere are likely to have encountered embossed quarts and half pints from the Bellows Falls Co-operative Creamery (BFCC or Creamery) in Bellows Falls, Vermont. I present a brief history of this co-operative and their bottles.

*Early Years.* In 1920 there were 300 farmers (owning in the aggregate about 3,000 cows) who became interested in setting up a farmer-owned co-operative in Bellows Falls to help local farmers deal with that bane of their existence—the milk surplus. By comparison, The Milk Plant, a co-operative in nearby Brattleboro, Vermont, had only about half as many farmers and cows. So in 1920 the BFCC was organized. As a member of the New England Milk Producers Association, the Creamery would produce and sell milk and cream at established prices with the surplus going into butter and cheese (Lovell & Lovell 1958).

Among the local farmers and businessmen who spearheaded the project was one James F. MacLennan. MacLennan's background was in the farm machinery business. He traveled to Boston seeking investors. He found one in Charles F. Adams of the John T. Connor Co. Incorporated in Massachusetts in December, 1915, the John T. Connor Co. owned Brookside Stores, a chain of 300+ grocery stores that was concentrated in eastern Massachusetts. MacLennan and Adams struck a deal to send fresh milk from Vermont into Boston by railroad. Shipping directly from the farmer-owned creamery to the chain grocer eliminated middlemen—it was a marketing *coup de grace*. MacLennan was very successful in attracting investors to the new venture. Calvin Coolidge was listed among the stockholders. (Lovell & Lovell 1958; George & Jerard c. 1988).

The newly-formed BFCC chose to locate in a part of town known as “the Island,” a transportation and industrial hub between the Bellows Falls Canal and the Great Falls of the Connecticut River and in 1920 the Creamery purchased a cluster of industrial buildings near the railroad yards. Included in the purchase was a two-story wood frame building constructed by the short-lived Boston Dairy Company (c. 1906-12) and a concrete building constructed in 1918 for the Liberty Paper Company as a “paper gumming factory.” The latter building, known as the Graustein Building, was converted to a modern creamery for the sum of about \$10,000. MacLennan designed and oversaw the renovation. When the plant opened in November, 1921, it was hailed as “the best equipped and most complete of its kind in New England.” It handled milk received from 215 member-farmers and employed 21 men. In the same month the first shipment of bottled milk departed Bellows Falls for Boston. The Creamery quickly became very successful (Lovell & Lovell 1958).

In 1925, The Ginter Co., another Boston grocer, consolidated with the John T. Connor Co. to establish First National Stores, Inc. (Finast). The Connor Company's trademark “Brookside” name survived the merger and Finast continued to use of the label for milk products

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sold in its stores. Not all glass bottle versions from BFCC carried the "Brookside" name, but the caps always did, as did the paper cartons that replaced the glass bottles in 1947.

*Middle Years.* A major plant expansion that included installation of a pair of coal-fired boilers to supply steam and heat to the plant occurred in 1932, doubling the plant's capacity. Another expansion in 1938-39 added more equipment to handle the volume of milk now coming from as many as 1,300 member-farmers scattered about Windham and Windsor Counties in Vermont and Sullivan and Cheshire Counties +in New Hampshire. A satellite dumping station was opened in Windsor, Vermont in 1946. As late as 1954 there were still 1,000 member-farmers. Employment peaked at 75 men in 1955.

The BFCC shipped huge volumes of milk to Finast. In 1927, 50,000 quarts of pasteurized whole milk and 7,000 half pints of cream, all in glass, went to Finast's facility in Somerville, Mass. daily. By 1947, production was 90,000 quarts/day. After the switch to paper in 1947, production soared to 350,000 quarts/day within five years (Lovell & Lovell 1958). BFCC milk under Finast's Brookside label was sold not only in the Boston area, but in the chain's stores all over Massachusetts. BFCC milk was also sold at First National Stores at Manchester and other places in New Hampshire (Clark, R.H., Jr. 2005). The packaged milk was probably trucked to all these locations from Somerville.

It should also be mentioned that in 1943, the Edelstein Co. leased space from the Creamery for the making of kosher cottage cheese, which was shipped to New York City and sold (in tins) under the "Tuxedo Brand" label as "pop-corn style" large curd cottage cheese. The Edelstein plant was expanded in 1955 (Lovell & Lovell 1958; Stewart Read, Bellows Falls Historical Society, pers. comm.). Although BFCC and Edelstein were separate companies, the two were operationally integrated within the plant. When the BFCC was forced to scale-back milk processing in mid-1964 (see Last Years below), production synergies that had existed between the companies were lost and, finding its relationship with BFCC no longer economic, Edelstein left Bellows Falls.

*The Railroad Connection.* The Boston and Maine Railroad (B&M) was the crucial third leg that enabled the BFCC/Finast partnership to work. The Creamery was actually located within the switching limits of the Rutland Railroad, but by agreement, B&M switched the plant. B&M's yard was just across the river in North Walpole, N.H. BFCC milk cars were handled on Train 5500, the Milk Extra, which departed the Falls every night at 10:30-11:30 P.M. for its run over the Cheshire Branch to South Ashburnham, Mass. and thence over the Fitchburg Division Main Line to Finast in Somerville, Mass. Since the Milk Extra moved at night, few people along the route ever glimpsed it, but it was a familiar sound in the night for years and years. Milk cars returning to the Falls were handled on scheduled passenger trains including Train 5503—the *Green Mountain Flyer*, Train 5507, Train 5509—the *Monadnock*, and Train 5511. The power and crew for 5500 turned on 5511.

The milk cars used by the BFCC were unique on the B&M system in being "bottle cars," fitted out for carrying cases of bottled milk (paper cartons after 1947). The rest of B&M's milk traffic consisted of "can cars" and bulk tank cars. Out of 17,081 total milk carloads handled on

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the entire B&M system in 1948, only 893 were bottle cars, all from the BFCC. While the vast majority of the bottle cars traveled to Somerville, a few (at least in some years) also went to Providence, Rhode Island (Smith 2007).

The Creamery continued to ship packaged milk long after most milk plants in Vermont had switched to bulk tank shipments. B&M purchased 35 new milk cars (15 of them mechanically refrigerated) for handling packaged milk as late as 1957 (Anon. 1958) and these cars were justified by the contemporary volume of shipments from Bellows Falls. For example, during 1956 the Creamery sent 1,498 carloads to Somerville (Cowan 1978).

It is interesting that damage claims were minimal and there never arose serious disagreement as to liability amongst B&M, BFCC, and Finast. For example in 1963, the Creamery shipped 1,593,336 cases of packaged milk to Somerville. B&M's milk revenue for that year was \$195,486 and only \$675 was paid in damage claims (Cowan 1978).

The Rutland Railroad was crippled by a 41-day strike beginning September 16, 1960 and by a second strike on September 21, 1961 that ended with the railroad's liquidation. In the first strike, the Creamery was forced to truck milk across the river to the B&M yards in North Walpole, N.H., where the milk train was set. After five days, a restraining order was issued permitting B&M supervisors to enter Rutland territory to switch the plant (Cowan 1978). A similar arrangement was followed during the second strike. After the Rutland announced it would cease operations, the State of Vermont stepped in and purchased most of the Rutland's trackage and then leased the Bellows Falls yard to the B&M. Thus service to the Creamery continued seamlessly. About 75% of B&M's gross shipping revenues out of Bellows Falls yard derived from milk shipments (Anon 1964a).

*The Bottles.* Given the huge volume business the Creamery conducted with Finast, it is no wonder their bottles are quite common—so common in fact, that they have never attracted great interest among New England collectors. The Creamery never used but two sizes of embossed bottles—quarts and half pints, all with 56mm tops. At various times over the period from 1921 to 1947, the Creamery used five embossed bottle types, all of which carried a Mass ABC2, BB, or T Seal, making them legal containers for the sale of milk in Massachusetts. All five types are thus *bona fide* “two-state, cross-border” bottles! The types are numbered from the earliest to latest. *Type 1*, the only slugplate bottle version the Creamery ever used, is lettered “Bellows Falls Co-op. Cry./—.” These bottles may be found in both quart and half pint sizes, and carry the Mass ABC2 Seal. The bottles are undated but it is presumed they were used at the very beginning in 1921-22 and possibly longer for local accounts in the Bellows Falls vicinity.

*Types 2-5* are private-ware bottles, all with copy in large block lettering. These four types have the same front label: “Bellows Falls Co-operative Creamery, Inc. / Bellows Falls, VT.” The types are differentiated by their back labeling: *Type 2* bottles are labeled “John T. Connor Co. / Boston, Mass.” with “Brookside Stores” on the upper shoulder. The *Type 3* is labeled only “Brookside” on the upper shoulder. These two types appeared in the early years (1922-25) before the John T. Connor Co. merged into First National Stores, Inc. They appear to exist only in quart size and carry the Mass ABC2 Seal.

The *Type 4* and *5* bottles were produced post-merger in both quart and half pint sizes and are found with either a Mass ABC2, BB, or T Seal. *Type 4* bottles have a plain back. Lacking any grocery store labeling, they may have been intended for the Creamery's local accounts in and around Bellows Falls. *Type 5* bottles are back-labeled "First National Stores, Inc. / Boston, Mass." They frequently have "holdfast grips" on the underside of the finish. The Creamery's last embossed bottles were *Type 5* bottles dated 1947. Pre-merger *Types 1-3* are decidedly rare; following the merger and name change to First National Stores, Inc., most of these bottles—especially the *Type 2*—were very likely systematically destroyed as they came back to the plant and returned to the manufacturer as cullet. The *Type 4* is uncommon and the *Type 5* is so common that it will likely be found by collectors to the end of time.

After experimenting for some time, the Creamery converted to paper packaging in 1947 (Lovell & Lovell 1958). This rather early shift to paper was no doubt driven by Finast management who faced the end consumer every day and whose survival was all about satisfied grocery store shoppers. However in 1963, to address increasing competition and to reach out to new markets, it appears the Creamery again began offering milk in glass bottles. For a "new look," they chose to use square, red pyroglazed, 38mm "universal" top bottles sparsely labeled with "BFCC" and the phrase "Packaged Country Fresh" on both front and back (Fig. 3). These bottles (quarts, half gallons, and gallons), the last bottles the Creamery ever ordered, came from Thatcher and carry 1963–1965 dates. They represent the only square bottles, the only pyroglazed bottles, and the only glass gallons and half-gallons the Creamery ever used. These bottles are scarce and saw only very limited—if any—use in the last years.

*Final Years.* In the early 1960's, facing increasingly severe competition, the BFCC found itself not only in need of capital to stay competitive, but also in a struggle for its very survival. The Windsor milk station was put up for sale. In 1963, there was another round of investment in plant modernization and equipment, especially packaging machinery. Ed Masten, Plant Manager at the time, noted, "We can now bottle milk twice as fast as we can pasteurize it." Improvements also included a new cork-insulated, stainless steel milk tank. Reportedly the largest in New England, it towered 42 feet high, stood on a seven foot thick concrete pad, and could hold 129 tons of milk. By the end of 1963, milk pick-up from member-farmers was being almost exclusively handled by bulk tank trucks. Dumpage charges of \$0.10/hundredweight were instituted on can milk starting December 1, 1963 and acceptance of can milk ended April 1, 1964 (Anon. 1963).

Despite this modernization push, the Creamery's fortunes changed abruptly in 1964. Whiting Milk Co. of Boston outbid BFCC for the contract to supply packaged milk to Finast. On July 1, 1964, BFCC announced it would substantially cut back its packaged milk operations and that it would make its last rail shipment of packaged milk and cream to Finast on July 17, 1964, ending 42 years, 7 months and 17 days of unbroken service to Finast. Winsor C. Brown, President of BFCC, reported the change was the result of relentless pricing pressure by larger firms and fundamental "change in the concept of assembling, processing, packaging, transportation, and distribution on the part of the buyer." Brown also stated that, "First, we have no plans to go out of business. Second, we will continue to operate our bottling facilities and

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package milk and cream for our customers other than First National Stores. Third, we will continue to serve our wholesale customers, stores, and restaurants in Bellows Falls and vicinity." Excess raw milk would be transported by tank truck to the H.P. Hood milk station in Charlestown, Mass. About 35 people were laid off at the Creamery (Anon. 1964a, 1964b).

On November 29, 1965, the Creamery's member-farmers voted to join the Boston-based United Farmers of New England, then the largest dairy cooperative serving New England. The BFCC processed its last milk on December 30, 1965 and all shipping and receiving ended December 31, 1965. At the end, member-farmers had dwindled to less than 200. The last 25 BFCC employees were let go and the BFCC passed into history. For a short time beginning Jan. 1, 1966, the former BFCC plant survived as a bulk transfer station for new owner United Farmers of New England (Anon. 1966). The plant and processing equipment were liquidated and by the end of the decade the buildings had been sold to Flock Fibers.

History has dealt scarcely less harshly with Finast and the B&M. First National Stores, Inc. was acquired by British firm Royal Ahold NV in the mid-1990s, the Somerville facilities closed, and the First National Stores name, at least in New England, disappeared. The B&M's traffic on its Cheshire Branch steadily eroded throughout the 1950's. The last regular passenger train operated in 1958, lucrative interchange business evaporated in the wake of the Rutland's shutdown in 1961, and the last milk traffic from the Creamery rode the rails in 1964. Worn-out and exhausted, the B&M entered bankruptcy in 1970 and the once-busy Cheshire route was abandoned in 1972.

In the second quarter of the Twentieth Century, the BFCC had emerged as one of the largest and most progressive enterprises of its type in Vermont and a major contributor to the economy of Bellows Falls. It was unusual as a large-scale processing and packaging plant that was principally oriented to railroad shipment of packaged milk.

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