

*The St. Lawrence County Historical Association*  
**QUARTERLY**

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*Volume XLI - Number 1 - Winter, 1996*

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# The St. Lawrence County Historical Association at the Silas Wright Museum

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a private, not-for-profit, membership organization based at the Silas Wright Museum in Canton, New York. Founded in 1947, the Association is governed by a constitution, by-laws, and Board of Trustees. The Historical Association's membership meets annually to elect its officers and trustees.

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The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is an educational resource center and museum that researches, collects, preserves, and interprets St. Lawrence County history through collections development, publication, exhibition, and programming; whose purpose is to help establish the intellectual and cultural connections that expand awareness and place St. Lawrence County in its state and national context, while revealing its unique identity. The Association examines different aspects of life in St. Lawrence County from multiple and diverse resources through community partnerships and collaboration. SLCHA values quality, integrity, and accessibility and operates within established museum standards befitting its American Association of Museums (AAM) accredited status.

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Membership in the St. Lawrence County Historical Association is open to all interested parties. Annual membership dues are: Individual, \$25; Senior/Student, \$20; Family, \$35; Contributor, \$50; Supporter, \$100; Patron, \$250; Businesses, \$50 to \$1,000. Members receive the *SLCHA Quarterly*, the Historical Association's bi-monthly newsletter, and various discounts on publications, programs and events.



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*Melissa A. Barker*

**Cover Illustration:**

*Emotions ran high for dairy farmers and their families during the milk strikes of 1937 and 1939. Shown here are picketers in Heuvelton during the 1939 Dairy Farmers Union (DFU) milk strike.*

(Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Giffin and Thomas J. Kriger.)

# “Power Lies in Their Milk:” The Story of Archie Wright and the Dairy Farmers Union

by Thomas J. Kriger

**W**hen five hundred dairy farmers filed slowly into the Canton Town Hall on September 23, 1936, there was a noticeable tension in the air. Their task that night was to vote on a milk strike—in other words, to forcibly raise prices by keeping their milk off the market—an approach North Country dairy producers had deliberately rejected in the summer of 1933. Yet, surprisingly, the strike vote never came. Following a spirited address by Stanley Piseck, a Boonville farmer and milk strike movement firebrand, the proposed strike was postponed because local organizers were absent. Instead, the farmers in attendance elected a five member committee to consider the idea of a new organization representing North Country dairy farmers.

By the fall of 1936, for many local farmers the past few months must have seemed like a recurring nightmare. Beginning in 1930, farmers watched as their prices began a long decline that eventually hit bottom in the turbulent summer of 1933, when western and central New York milk producers led a series of

tumultuous strikes. By spring 1936, however, milk prices had steadily improved, reaching the \$2.00 per hundredweight which farmers had received in 1929. But in the summer of 1936, just as most farmers assumed their troubled industry had finally turned the corner, milk prices fell again by nearly fifty percent. The result was yet another crisis in the dairy industry,

exacerbated by a late summer drought that sent feed prices skyrocketing.

That the Depression meant hard times for North Country farmers is obvious. But what is less well-known is that North Country farmers created an organization in 1936 that placed St. Lawrence County at the heart of a powerful, statewide movement of



*Logo of the Dairy Farmers Union (DFU).  
The Union's motto was "Power Lies in Their Milk."*



dairy farmers. The formation of the Dairy Farmers Union (DFU), as this organization was known, thus constitutes an important, if neglected, chapter in St. Lawrence County history. Beginning that night at the Canton Town Hall and unfolding over the next three years, these events provide valuable insights into how the Depression played out within the sprawling New York State dairy industry; how North Country farmers responded to the recurring dilemma of low milk prices; and how the DFU, organized and led by a Heuvelton farmer and political organizer named Archie Wright, eventually generated both recognition and controversy as a powerful, regional farmers' organization.

Prior to the Depression, there had been a long tradition of farm associations that had either been founded or promoted in the Empire State. These groups can be divided into two categories. The first type had their origins in protest, and tended to represent New York's smaller, less affluent farmers. Examples included milk strike movement organizations such as the Erie Mutual Milk Producers Association, which organized the 1883 Orange County Milk War, and Stanley Piseck's New York Milk Producers Federation, which organized the 1933 milk strike, and later, the aborted strike of 1936. This category also included the Grange, which was a fraternal organization for most New York farmers, but which led the fight for railroad rate regula-

tion in the 1880s. Another example was the Farmers Alliance, which was organized in 1877 by New York grain and beef producers in reaction to low prices and increased competition from Midwestern farmers. The Alliance, when spread to Texas and other Western and Southern states, became the driving force behind the Populist Movement, the strongest third party in American history.

The second type of organization familiar to many New Yorkers was the scientific or business oriented farmers' association, represented by such venerable institutions as the New York Agricultural Society, founded in 1841. The most famous of these was perhaps the New York Farm Bureau, which was founded in 1911 by the Broome County Chamber of Commerce, with support from the Lackawanna Railroad. In 1919, representatives from various state bureaus founded the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) in Ithaca, as a counterweight to "radical" farm groups such as the Farmers Alliance or Nonpartisan League. Over the years, the New York Farm Bureau, much like the AFBF, evolved into the conservative voice of the state's larger farmers.

### **Archie Wright and the Dairy Farmers Union**

In contrast, the Dairy Farmers Union had a much different lineage. The DFU was largely the creation of Archie Wright, the Union's guiding spirit and lead

organizer. Wright was born in 1891 in Westville, near the Franklin County village of Fort Covington. Wright's parents, William and Mary Hanna, then moved to Ogdensburg, still within the St. Lawrence valley's hardscrabble dairy country. An excellent student with strong leadership capabilities, Wright graduated from the Ogdensburg Free Academy in 1911. In 1917, he gained notoriety when he was arrested and jailed for refusing to register for the draft. The *Ogdensburg Republican Journal* reported that "Wright became a 'conscientious objector' through socialistic influences in his home city, and declined to go to the polls on registration day." After serving one day in the Onondaga County jail, Wright was eventually "compelled" to register for the draft.<sup>1</sup>

Little is known of Wright's life following his brush with the law. Sometime after 1917 he left Ogdensburg and joined the Merchant Marine. In 1921, Wright described himself to a New Orleans newspaper editor as "an advanced socialist" who, like many other American sailors, had been radicalized by his exposure to injustice and inequality throughout Europe and Asia.<sup>2</sup> On November 17, 1921 Wright joined the Industrial Workers of the World as an able bodied seaman. The IWW, or Wobblies, as they were known, was a syndicalist labor union noted for organizing typically unorganized segments of the American working

class such as lumberjacks, migrant farm workers, and sailors. Wright remained an IWW member and organizer until 1926, having traveled the world as a seaman, and also having worked at an IWW lumber camp in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to Heuvelton in 1927, after a stint as a reporter for the Springfield, Massachusetts *Union*, Wright worked on his father's thirty-nine cow dairy farm, and also served as a clerk and notary public at the law offices of St. Lawrence County Judge John D. Van Kennen. In 1936, however, Wright turned his attention from dairy farming to dairy politics.

As a wave of discontent swept through northern New York's dairy industry in 1936, Wright helped establish the DFU, which

employed innovative tactics used by the Congress of Industrial Organizations' (CIO) powerful and growing unions.<sup>4</sup> In the coming years, for example, DFU farmers would conduct sit-down strikes similar to those used by the CIO; bargain collectively with milk dealers as industrial unions did; have their dues "checked off" (collected) at local milk plants; and seek alliances with organized labor across New York State. According to Wright, the DFU's power was grounded in the farmer's control over production; its motto, therefore, was "Power Lies in Their Milk."


Moreover, Wright and the DFU sought to avoid many of the problems associated with earlier farm strike movements in the Midwest and in New York State. Previous milk strike movement

organizations, for example, were usually loosely-bound, anger-driven, and often beyond the control of their leadership. In 1932, striking dairy farmers in both Iowa and Wisconsin clashed with local police and the national guard in a series of violent milk strikes across the Upper Midwest.<sup>5</sup> Similarly in 1933, the Piseck Brothers' New York Milk Producers' Federation organized two contentious milk strikes in western and central New York that quickly spread beyond their control. According to a *New York Times* reporter, it was the 1933 milk strikes that "possibly . . . brought New York State closer to marshall law than at any time since the Revolutionary War."

A further problem with earlier farm strike organizations was that once their immediate goals were accomplished such movements quickly dissolved, producing few long term gains for striking farmers. DFU milk strikes, on the other hand, were organized and conducted much differently. First, reflecting Wright's insistence on strict organization, they were more closely supervised by local strike committees. DFU milk strikes in 1937 and 1939 were relatively nonviolent, particularly in contrast to previous milk strikes. This helped in the important battle for public opinion. Second, when the DFU went on strike it was better prepared; the Union, for example, preferred that its members divert their milk rather than dump it. This meant that, when necessary, DFU strikes

"Labor is Entitled to  
All it Produces"

CONTINUATION



CONTINUATION

No money should be received without acknowledgment, in, this book. Members must see that the Financial Secretary places a stamp in the book for each month for which Dues or Assessments are paid.

Name Archie Wright

Initiated by J 353

Industrial Union No. 570

Branch No. \_\_\_\_\_

Nov 17 1921

Transportation  
Department

Marine  
Industry

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Gen. No. X 3156

ISSUED BY THE  
GENERAL EXECUTIVE BOARD  
Gen. Sec'y-Treas.

Identification page from Archie Wright's IWW membership book, 1921. The Industrial Workers of the World, known as "Wobblies," were committed pacifists during World War I.

Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University



Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*Archie Wright,  
Heuvelton area farmer  
and leader of the DFU.*

## The New York State Milk Industry During the Great Depression

In the 1930s, the economic despair experienced by North Country dairy farmers often provoked open rebellion. Following a period of relative stability in the late 1920s, during which farmers received prices well in excess of production costs, milk prices<sup>7</sup> fell sharply beginning in 1931. In September 1930, farmers who delivered milk to the Sheffield Farms plant on Buck Street in Canton received \$2.42 and 1/2 cents for their milk. By September 1931, this price had fallen to \$1.68 and 1/2 cents. It would hit bottom in March 1933, when farmers received only \$1.02 per hundredweight.<sup>8</sup> There were a number of reasons for this rapid decline in prices. Obviously the Depression played an important role because demand for milk declined sharply. When the Canton American Legion supplied free milk to needy families in the early 1930s, for example, this suggested that many North Country families could no longer afford to purchase milk. But there were other reasons for low milk prices besides lack of demand. One reason was a milk surplus which developed during the flush, or peak, production season. Still another was cutthroat competition among milk dealers in New York City, the final destination for fluid milk produced in the North Country.

In 1932, a special committee set up by the New York State

Legislature to investigate conditions in the milk industry heard firsthand of the effects of low milk prices on farmers. According to Frank J. Walton, a member of the Jefferson County Farm Bureau, nearly a third of farmers in Jefferson and Lewis Counties were behind on their Federal Farm Loan payments. Other farmers reported that their neighbors were having their telephones taken out, or they were keeping their high school and college-aged children home to help with chores. For some farmers, conditions were even more acute. As John Gosper, of Delaware County, explained:

Present returns are enough for not more than a mere existence... Farm families may apparently be well fed, but many are nearly destitute of suitable clothing, shoes and other present day necessities of life.<sup>9</sup>

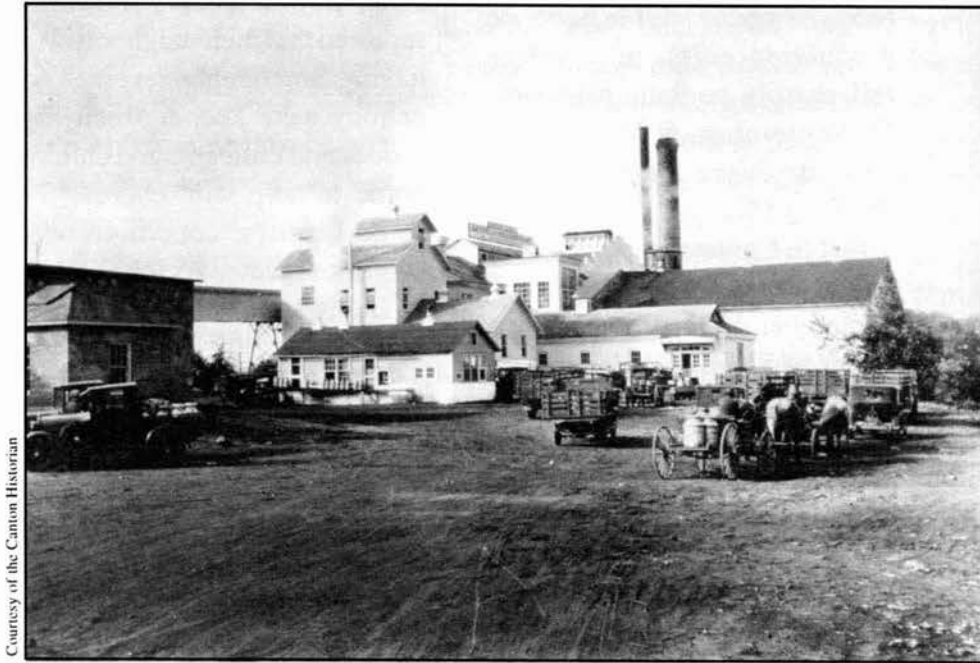
One important factor that limited the ability of New York's farmers to respond to the dairy crisis was the fact that they were divided into different regions, markets, and producers organizations. In essence, there were two distinct milk markets in New York State. One was for fluid (drinking) milk, which was produced mainly in the Hudson Valley, the other for manufactured milk products such as cheese and butter, which originated at the margins of the milkshed. Many North Country farmers, for example, sold their milk to local cheese plants; indeed, this region had a long and distinguished history of cheese production.<sup>10</sup> The prob-



lem with this regional imbalance was mainly one of price inequities. Fluid milk, which was needed to satisfy the ever-growing demand in the lucrative New York City market, brought a higher price. But this put northern New York producers at a disadvantage

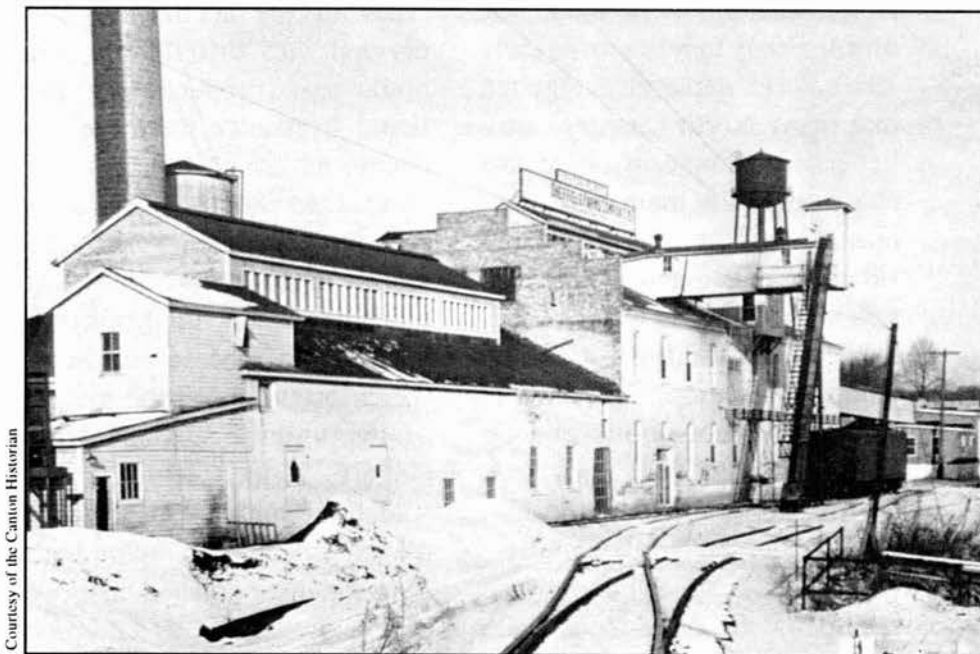
in relation to Hudson Valley farmers. The greatest problems for North Country producers occurred in the spring and summer when fluid production greatly exceeded market demand, because excess fluid milk meant lower prices for local producers.

New York's dairy farmers were also divided into a number of different and often competing producers' organizations. In the 1930s, three powerful corporations, the United States Dairy Products Company, Borden's Condensed Milk Company, and



Courtesy of the Canton Historian

*Two photographs of the Sheffield Farms Milk Company plant in Canton. The photos date from the 1920s (top) and the late 1930s (below). Although there were numerous milk processing plants in the county in the 1930s, the DFU focused much of its activities on the Canton Sheffield plant because of its size and prominence in the dairy industry.*



Courtesy of the Canton Historian



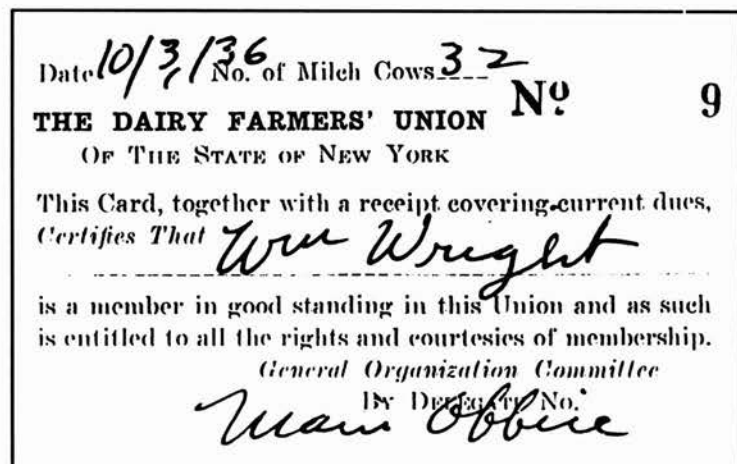
Sheffield Farms Milk Company, handled two thirds of the fluid milk sold in New York City.<sup>11</sup> Because these firms dominated the New York metropolitan market, they had to carry excess fluid milk capacity, called surplus milk, in order to satisfy demand during the fall and winter, when farmers produced less milk. The dilemma for the "Big Three," as they were known, was that they had to keep retail milk prices high enough to pay for their excess fluid capacity. Smaller dealers, in contrast, carried no surplus and thus could afford to cut prices below that of the large dealers. While retail price cutting often offered small milk handlers a competitive advantage, the practice of cutting prices locked them into an ongoing, destructive price war with the Big Three. As a 1934 Milk Control Board Report concluded: "Price cutting by milk dealers [in New York City] had reduced, and in some cases destroyed, [the milk dealer's] income."<sup>12</sup>

Two of the Big Three milk dealers maintained close working agreements with major dairy cooperatives. Borden's had a long-standing agreement to accept fluid milk from the Dairymen's League Cooperative Association (DLCA), which had 50,000 out of the 80,000 farmers in the milkshed under contract.<sup>13</sup> Sheffield Farms maintained a similar relationship with the Sheffield Producers Cooperative Association, its exclusive supplier of fluid milk, which retained 16,000 member-farmers under

contract. Membership in these organizations offered farmers the advantage of stable markets, as well as a method of eliminating the price disparities between fluid and manufacturing grade milk. Beginning in the 1920s, the major co-ops in New York "pooled" farmers' milk, and paid them according to what was called a "classified pricing plan." After farmers delivered their product, they were paid a "blended" or average price the following month. This blend price reflected the percentage of milk that the dealers channeled into either fluid (Class I, higher priced) or manufactured (Class II, lower priced) utilization.

Left outside of this universe of powerful corporations and their closely allied producers' associations, however, were the 10,000 or so "independents," or farmers who supplied the many smaller dealers and cheese factories across New York State. Lacking the

market stability offered by co-ops such as the DLCA, the independents, typically small producers milking fewer than twenty cows, suffered greatly when both prices and demand fell sharply in the early 1930s and again in 1936. Not surprisingly, most independents expressed dissatisfaction with the way their industry was organized. Many, for example, distrusted the DLCA and the Sheffield Producers Association because they were ineffective in fighting for higher prices; independents considered these organizations as nothing more than company unions for the major dealers. In particular, the independents scorned the DLCA because of its large network of milk processing facilities. As many independents (and even some DLCA members) believed, the DLCA's Board of Directors placed greater emphasis on co-op profits than on prices paid to its farmer-members.<sup>14</sup>



Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

The DFU membership card of William Wright, Archie Wright's father. As the card indicates, William Wright joined the DFU on October 31, 1936 as the ninth member of the Union. Just three years later in August 1939, DFU membership had grown to 14,962.

## The 1936 Crisis and the Formation of the DFU

Although divided, the sharp decline in milk prices in 1936 quickly brought North Country farmers together in a collective search for relief. By August 1936, a severe drought that started in the Midwest and spread eastward had pushed feed prices up by thirty to sixty percent. With milk prices falling and expenses rising, farmers besieged the New York State Milk Control Board, an agency created by the State Legislature in response to the 1933 strike, with requests for a price increase. Although the Control Board raised farm milk prices on August 11, a wave of price cutting by the metropolitan dealers kept a steady downward pressure on prices, and this moved the North Country's increasingly desperate farmers to seek alternative solutions.

On September 29, 1936, Boonville farmer and milk strike firebrand Stanley Piseck journeyed to Canton to drum up interest in a proposed milk strike by his organization, the New York Milk Producers' Federation. Piseck had made a similar trip in 1933 to no avail, but lately he had been speaking to larger and more receptive crowds around the state. For instance, on September 1, he had addressed a crowd of eight hundred angry farmers in Delaware County. Joining Piseck before an overflow crowd in the Canton Town Hall was Archie Wright, who was to play a much more prominent role in dairy protests in the coming weeks. Years

later, Wright attributed his involvement in dairy politics to an incident that took place on July 2, 1936, the day that Sheffield Farms rejected seven cans of his milk because of a "white clover smell." Wright subsequently sold the milk

at an Elm Grove cheese plant, and on August 14 received his July check from Sheffield Farms. It was then he noticed that the price he received at the cheese plant (for the lowest grade of milk) was actually fourteen and one-half

# DAIRYMEN of New York State

For seven long years we Dairymen have been taking it on the chin.

We have kept our machinery going with haywire.

Our barns are falling to pieces.

We have kept dealer profits at an all time high, and

Our families have been without comforts and conveniences.

For seven long years our industry and our lives have been the football of politics and gravy for the Dealers.

All we got from the politicians was promises and stalls.

All we got from The Dealer was the mercy of a mad bull.

The time has come to put the ring in the Dealer's nose and dehorn him besides

If we are going to make New York State a decent place for Dairymen to live

NOW IS THE TIME! - FOR YOUR FAMILY - YOURSELF  
- YOUR INDUSTRY - YOUR FELLOW PRODUCERS  
ORGANIZE! JOIN

## The DAIRY FARMERS' UNION

OF THE STATE ON NEW YORK

TEMPORARY HEADQUARTERS OGDENSBURG, N. Y.

*A DFU organizing flyer, probably dating from late 1936 or 1937.*

cents *higher* than Sheffield's blend price, which was supposed to reflect both fluid and manufactured milk utilization. "... it was on this occasion, Wright later recalled, "that the Wright family decided something had to be done about the milk business."

Wright spoke briefly at the meeting in Canton called by Piseck. After excoriating local strike leaders who failed to show up, he joined Piseck in announcing that the proposed strike had been postponed. Rather than voting to strike, the five hundred farmers in attendance elected Wright and four other farmers to a committee to consider the idea of a new organization representing the North Country's angry independents and disenchanted co-op members. Wright's closing comment to the group was this: "What we need is a constructive organization."

On October 8, 1936, Wright and the other members of the committee had their first meeting at the Odd Fellows Hall in Heuvelton. This was later called the first meeting of the Dairy Farmers Union. One week later, at another meeting at the Canton Town Hall, this one attended by thirty farmers, Wright announced the DFU's formation and upcoming membership drive. On this occasion he explained to local reporters that North Country farmers shared three main concerns. First, they shared a common interest in obtaining higher milk prices. Second, they believed that working through the existing

cooperatives was bound to fail. And third, they understood that any new organization should represent the will of its farmer-members.<sup>15</sup> With these concerns in mind, Wright summarized the Union's operating principles as set forth in the DFU Constitution. The structure of the DFU was decentralized and democratic, with day-to-day business conducted by the Union's county units. A president and general secretary-treasurer ran the main office and conducted Union business in conjunction with the Board of County Chairmen. Although not specifically mentioned, women were eligible and sometimes served as DFU officers.<sup>16</sup> The only individuals specifically prohibited from holding DFU office were those employed at "any milk cooperative association having . . . more than one [milk] plant at the time of [their] employment."

In order to further allay farmers' fears that the DFU was yet another undemocratic farmers' organization that showed little concern for its membership, the Union Constitution strictly specified that all important business be approved by a simple majority of Union members at the DFU's annual general convention. The one exception to this rule was milk strike votes, which required a much higher, eighty percent majority. According to Wright, milk strikes were the DFU's most potent weapon. But his main concern was that the raw, spontaneous anger that energized milk

strikes be harnessed for a constructive purpose, rather than be unleashed in the destructive and often pointless way previous milk strikes had played out. As he explained:

A milk strike without organization and preparation is just a blind rebellion. Organization puts the milkstrike on a business basis. It provides leadership, experience, program. The leadership must be of long standing, well acquainted with each other, and have mutual confidence and trust . . . . Farm organization is work, day in day out, week in, week out . . . . To live, you have to think.

Strikes, however, were only one part of Wright and the DFU's strategy to transform the milk industry. DFU farmers also sought alliances with consumer groups and organized labor. Locally, DFU officials helped create, along with representatives of organized labor, the Northern Federation of Farmers and Trade Unions.<sup>17</sup> Union locals represented in the Federation included the Massena Aluminum Workers, the Bombay Boot and Shoe Workers, the Malone Bronze and Aluminum Workers, the Remington Rand Union in Ilion, as well as various carpenters, truck drivers, and paper and pulp workers. In addition, DFU farmers initiated contacts with consumer and community activists in New York City, including an umbrella group known as the Milk Consumers Protective Committee. Out of these discussions came the Consumer-Farmer Milk Cooperative, the first and only



# ORGANIZE and FIGHT

The time has gone by when a New York State Dairyman can stay at home and do a good job of farming and caring for his stock and expect to make a Dollar.

Today it is necessary that he band together with his Fellow Producers to see that the middlemen who handle his product do not seize upon the lion's share of the consumer's money and hand over to the Producer barely enough to pay the help and feed bills.

Let George do it ? ? ?

George has attended to this matter long enough, the results are plain, - - and painful.

If you are satisfied with the prices you have been receiving for milk in recent years -- read no further. This leaflet is only for those Dairy Farmers who are ready to Organize and Fight. The Farmers' Union is being organized for you. It is your Union. It is designed and constructed so that its control remains at all times in its membership. No officer or representative can sell out the Union or any of its members. Provision is made to keep its finances straight and enforce discipline. Its one object is the Price of Milk. This is no fraternal society -- no political club -- it is a Union of Dairy Farmers and its only concern is the price of milk.

The immediate objectives of this Union are:

1. Cost of Production Plus, that is the selling price of our milk is to be somewhere between \$2.50 and \$3.00 per hundredweight.
2. The elimination of the present official classification system and the substitution for it of whatever plan the Dairymen of New York State see fit to introduce.
3. Fluid and cream markets of New York State are to be reserved for New York State Dairymen. Outside of State barn inspection to be discontinued and no more cream imported so long as any surplus milk is produced on New York State Farms.

We have given our milk away long enough. We have been the victims of funny plans long enough. We have been bamboozled with surplus long enough. We are now on the march and we are going to march in the Union to a new life, to the lifting of our mortgages, to educate our children, and we are marching away from machinery mended with haywire, from the second-hand car market and on to the comforts and conveniences of Life.

Join your Union today.

Initiation fee 10 c per milch cow.

Dues thereafter 50c per month.

None but Dairy Farmers can belong, and no Dairy Farmer can be barred from membership in

The Dairy Farmers Union of the State of N. Y.  
Temporary Headquarters,  
Ogdensburg, New York.

Yours for Cost of Production Plus

*Dairy Farmers Union organizing flyer, outlining the main objectives of the DFU and setting a Union initiation fee of ten cents per cow.*

American farmers' cooperative designed to serve the interests of both hard up farmers and poor tenement dwellers. With an "all-union policy," DFU farmers shipped milk to New York City where it was bottled by union labor and then sold in settlement houses and co-op stores. The Consumer-Farmer Co-op returned all proceeds back to its members with the exception of operating expenses. Consumers received one third of dividends, DFU farmers the other two. By September 1938, Consumer-Farmer Co-op sales in New York City reached two hundred thousand quarts a month.<sup>18</sup>

## The 1937 DFU Milk Strike

In 1937, the DFU confronted an unexpected opportunity which allowed the Union to test its nascent power and expand its membership. In July, Sheffield Farms announced it would close twelve fluid milk plants located in St. Lawrence, Franklin and Clinton counties. The twelve plants would then be re-opened after August 1 as manufacturing plants. The Sheffield Condensed Milk Company, which along with Sheffield Farms were wholly-owned subsidiaries of the National Dairy Products Corporation, would assume operation of the twelve plants and pay farmers a lower price for manufacturing grade milk. Faced with the loss of their lucrative fluid milk market, the DFU immediately began prepa-



rations to strike the twelve Sheffield plants. On July 15, eight hundred farmers attended the regular monthly DFU meeting at the Canton Town Hall, where Wright and other Union leaders formulated their demands. The *St. Lawrence Plaindealer* estimated that “at least ninety percent” of the farmers present were currently under contract with Sheffield Farms. After deliberation, the DFU authorized a series of demands. First, the DFU demanded that Sheffield Farms pay a flat rate of \$1.55 for August milk. Second, they demanded Sheffield Farms end its mandatory deductions for membership dues for the Sheffield Farms Producers Association. Union leaders also wanted Sheffield to discontinue its exclusive policy of purchasing milk only from the Association. The DFU scheduled its next meeting for July 31; if its demands were not met by then, Union members would vote on a strike to begin the following day.

Other large meetings followed. On July 25, Wright addressed a crowd of 2,800 in Eel Weir Park, where he was followed by State Senator Rhoda Fox Graves and A. C. Pilger from Batavia, president of the Genesee County Milk Producers Association. On July 31, following unsuccessful negotiations with representatives from Sheffield Farms and the New York Department of Agriculture, hundreds of DFU members “jammed” the Canton Town Hall “to the doors,” in what the *St.*



Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*State Senator Rhoda Fox Graves, from Gouverneur, was a vocal supporter of the DFU. She is pictured here in an advertisement in the DFU Journal for 1939-40.*

*Lawrence Plaindealer* called “the largest farmers meeting ever held in this village.” On this occasion DFU farmers voted nearly unanimously to strike following a report that Sheffield Farms had rejected the Union’s demands.

On August 1, 1937, the DFU inaugurated the first large-scale milk strike in northern New York since 1919. From the outset, it was clear that this strike would be conducted much differently than previous strikes in New York State or the upper Midwest. First, the DFU sought to divert as much of its members’ milk as possible to other processing facilities rather

than dump it on the ground. The Canton and Morley cheese factories, for example, like many in the area, agreed to add extra shifts and worked around the clock to process DFU milk. The Union also brought in one hundred cream separators which were distributed throughout the strike area and used by striking farmers. The cream was then shipped to the Fairmont Creamery in Buffalo. Further, Carl Peters, DFU Chair in St. Lawrence County, led an effort to organize a co-operative stock company which would fund the construction of another cheese plant in Canton, where DFU farmers would have an additional, farmer-controlled outlet for their milk. (In February, 1938, the Canton Dairies Co-op plant, with 155 members, went into operation on Gouverneur Street).

The second aspect that set this strike apart from previous efforts was the DFU’s careful supervision of Union strike activity. A tri-county strike committee supervised picketing at the twelve Sheffield plants, composed of one delegate from each county together with Carlton Adams, Committee Chair, and Elizabeth Shonyo, Treasurer. Archie Wright issued daily strike bulletins and handled publicity. As always, Wright was careful to cultivate what he called “public sympathy,” which, at least for the time being, was on the Union’s side. In his first bulletin, he set the tone for the strike: “No violence and no destruction of property.” At the Canton Sheffield

Farms plant, for example, which was at the time the largest fluid milk receiving plant in the world, the DFU “dried up” the flow of milk with a minimum of disturbances. This was similar to what happened at the other twelve Sheffield plants. In Ellenberg, the DFU employed tactics drawn from the CIO’s recent successes in rubber and auto industry strikes.<sup>19</sup> Encouraging farmers to use “passive resistance,” Wright called for a sit-down strike (including women and children) on the road leading to the Sheffield Farms plant.

Given the amount of picketing employed by the Union and the number of farmers involved, the

strike was quite peaceful and effective. In the second strike bulletin, Wright noted that:

This is the first strike in the dairy industry which has not been accompanied by widespread violence and destruction of property. It is also the first strike called by actual vote of the producers affected and to enforce demands formulated by themselves.

In fact, the DFU’s success in its blockade prompted Williston Manley, editor of the *St. Lawrence Plaindealer*, to write:

I wonder if we realize that something very revolutionary has taken place up here without any revolution. Of course, I am writing about this milk strike . . . the union did something unexpected, unexpected

I know to citizens generally, and I imagine unexpected by Sheffield Farms. The union staged a one hundred percent effective strike, staged it without bloodshed, without tumult . . . It had the machinery all set up.<sup>20</sup>

With the DFU’s success in generating favorable publicity, Wright expanded the strike on August 25. The DFU’s willingness to act against Sheffield’s brought in many new members, especially among farmers who defected from the Dairymen’s League and Sheffield Producers Association. On the 25th, the DFU began picketing Sheffield plants outside the North Country. A broader strike, however, re-



Photo by Fred DASHAW, St. Lawrence County Historical Association. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.

Four unidentified DFU farmers wait patiently while on picket duty during the 1939 milk strike. The picture is believed to have been taken near Heuvelton.

vealed inherent contradictions in such an ambitious undertaking. In many respects the DFU strike had been a success. Very little milk had reached the twelve targeted plants. New members were joining the Union each day, and milk prices were definitely on the rise. On August 23, with no reference to the DFU strike, Sheffield Farms announced that it would pay farmers a flat rate of \$1.90 for milk delivered to its plant in Canton from August 25 to October 1. This price was forty-five cents higher than the price originally demanded by the Union on July 20. The plant manager, A. L. Anderson, also announced that participating farmers would be under no obligation to join the Sheffield Producers Association. Sheffield's announcement, however, signaled the Union's inability to force large dealers (like Sheffield Farms), which owned and operated plants across New York State, into a permanent settlement. Anderson's statement made no mention of the DFU. So the DFU pressed on.

Sheffield Farms, for its part, attempted to outlast the DFU by driving a wedge into producer solidarity with a series of progressively larger price increases. The company also received help from other DFU opponents. On October 12, the Metropolitan Milk Producers Bargaining Agency, set up under the provisions of a 1937 state law designed to regulate milk prices,<sup>21</sup> levelled a series of charges against the DFU. In a statement released at its head-



Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*Archie Wright, as seen in a newspaper clipping from August 23, 1939, during the peak of the DFU milk strike.*

quarters in Syracuse, the Agency claimed that the "Agrarian Division" of the Communist Party in New York City and the CIO were supporting the DFU. The report also claimed that Communist Party operatives led a number of DFU demonstrations in the North Country. The only evidence presented by the Agency, however, was an editorial sympathetic to the DFU which had appeared in the Communist Party's newspaper, *the Daily Worker*.

On October 29, 1937, Wright took a major gamble and expanded the strike into a statewide effort against the Big Three milk dealers, although this had little effect on the flow of milk into New York City. Where the DFU had greater success was in negotiating favorable contracts with smaller dealers across upstate New York. Such contracts typically included DFU recognition and a provision for the milk companies to collect DFU dues, as many companies did for indus-

came to the United States because of the 1956 revolution, with 35,000 Hungarians escaping their country for the United States (Family Tree 1). Historically, the largest Hungarian American communities have been in Cleveland and New York, although large concentrations can be found throughout the Midwest and Northeast.

The Hungarian people have contributed greatly to the history of St. Lawrence County. From the late 1890's they have manned the paper and pulp mills of Norfolk, built the power canal, and helped ALCOA become one of the major industries of the North Country. They have become farmers, teachers, restaurant owners, hairdressers, and priests. Hungarians are in virtually every profession in our area. They have supported the schools and churches. The Hungarian people have become American citizens while still keeping and honoring their rich traditions.

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Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.

*Women played an essential role in the DFU effort, serving as Union officers and, more importantly, as Union picketers. The 1939 DFU strike marked the first large-scale picketing by women in a milk strike. Women were often more effective in thwarting deliveries, or a least less apt to be run over if they blocked the road. The Ogdensburg Journal noted that in Heuvelton in 1939, "Women seemed to be just as active as the men [on the picket lines] . . . and more than one officer's face turned crimson at the remarks tossed their way by the fairer sex."*

again thrown into turmoil following the collapse of New Deal (federal) price controls enacted in the New York milkshed. In February, Federal District Court Judge Frank Cooper struck down the Federal Market Order system, which mandated the creation of producers and distributors (dealers) agencies that would bargain for milk price increases. As a result of Judge Cooper's ruling, New York milk dealers slashed prices to their lowest level since 1934.<sup>22</sup>

In July, 1939, the Supreme Court reinstated the Market Order system, but this occurred just as a midsummer drought scorched upstate New York, increasing the anger of already irate dairy pro-

ducers. In August, DFU locals across northern New York State met to discuss the implications of the dealers' actions, the third time prices had collapsed in the decade. Two hundred DFU mem-

bers met in Canton on August 3, where they voted to strike unless they received a blend price of \$2.35. The same day, two hundred more DFU farmers cast a similar vote in LaFargeville,

PLANT	Normal	Tues- day
DeKalb Creameries, DeKalb Junction -----	300	30
Sheffield Condensed Milk Co., Canton -----	300	4
Edwards Dairy Co., Edwards -----	100	0
Pioneer Ice Cream, Gouverneur -----	500	400
Dairymen's League, Hammond -----	132	100
Dairymen's League, Heuvelton -----	50	45
Sheffield Condensed Milk Co., Heuvelton -----	200	100
Sheffield Condensed Milk Co., Lisbon -----	100	50
Waddington Condensed Milk Co., Madrid Springs -----	70	65
Dairymen's League, Massena Springs -----	224	112
Borden Co., North Lawrence -----	70	60
Northeastern Milk Co., Ogdensburg -----	200	155
Keystone Dairy, Potsdam -----	208	0
Waddington Condensed Milk Co., Waddington -----	70	70
Dairymen's League, Winthrop -----	60	50
Canton Dairies, Canton -----	352	2

*By the second day of the 1939 strike, the DFU was reporting a 60% reduction in milk deliveries to county milk factories, as shown in this Ogdensburg Advance-News chart from August 16.*

joined by a large number of LaFargeville businessmen ready to support a strike. Next, thirty-five DFU members voted to strike in Lowville, followed by one hundred thirty farmers at the Tritown DFU local (Antwerp, Evans Mills, Philadelphia). On August 10, the

call for a strike reached a crescendo when six hundred DFU farmers in Canton voted unanimously to strike. Later that day, one thousand Jefferson County DFU farmers cast a similar vote in the South Jr. High Auditorium in Watertown.<sup>23</sup> On August 12,

DFU farmers from the North Country joined representatives of DFU locals from the Mohawk and Hudson River Valleys, and from Northern Pennsylvania and Western Vermont, at a special convention. There, the DFU's 14,962 members voted to begin picketing and diverting milk in three days. The Union's primary demand was for a flat rate of \$2.35 on all milk produced from August to October, 1939.

DFU opponents were quick to attack the expanding strike movement. Charles Baldwin, Executive Secretary of the Milk Producers Bargaining Agency, raised charges similar to those made during the 1937 DFU strike. As the DFU strike began, he declared that farm families were "guarding [their] homes tonight in fear of armed invaders." He also stated that the DFU "is an out and out CIO Communist movement."<sup>24</sup> New York State Health Commissioner John L. Rice tried to minimize the importance of the DFU strike by claiming it "was insignificant, after its first day." Henry Rathbun, Vice-President of the Dairymen's League, declared that the DLCA was short only two percent of their normal deliveries; he attributed that shortage to "threats, intimidation and fear of CIO brutality."<sup>25</sup> The *Watertown Times*, in contrast, estimated that the Union had cut the New York City fluid milk supply by thirty percent after one day.<sup>26</sup>

By the third day, the DFU tightened its grip on the metropolitan milk supply with only scattered



Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.

*Above: Local police officers often found themselves in a difficult position during the strikes. If they sided with the milk companies and arrested DFU pickets, they risked alienating friends and neighbors.*

*Below: The milk companies used their political clout to have the state police mobilized. The state police, armed with billy clubs, guarded the daily milk trains and escorted milk tank trucks.*

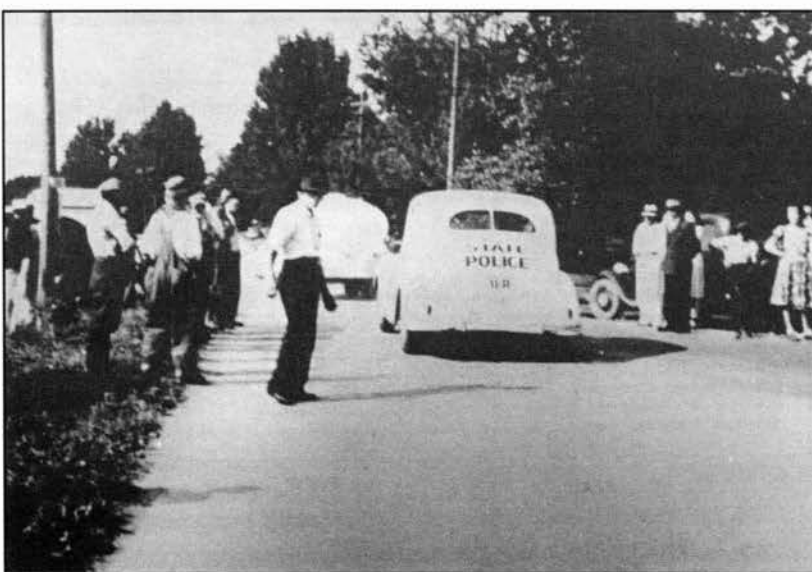


Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.



*Fiorello LaGuardia, Mayor of New York City, played a major role in the settlement of the 1939 milk strike.*

*DFU Journal, 1939-1940*

incidents of violence. The Union's ability to quickly accomplish this goal was due to two important factors. First, discontent ran so deep among the "rank and file" in 1939 that many farmers who were not DFU members joined the strike, either by refus-

ing to deliver their product or by arranging for DFU pickets to dump their milk. By citing the possibility of violence, for example, many League and Sheffield Farms member-farmers could contribute to the DFU strike movement and yet offer at least the appearance of trying to fulfill their contractual obligations. Women also played an important role on DFU picket lines. In many instances, women were more effective than men in shutting down milk plants. As the *Jefferson County Journal* reported,

In the Adams area the strike has been very active right from the first day and much of the credit for its success locally is due the women who have been credited with turning back more milk than the men.<sup>27</sup>

Second, community activists and representatives of organized labor proved to be invaluable Union allies. Nationally known

Union leaders such as the United Mine Workers' John L. Lewis sent telegrams of support, while the Transport Workers Union, headquartered in New York City, dispatched an organizer to help Archie Wright.<sup>28</sup> The Consumer-Farmer Milk Cooperative did its part in the important battle for public opinion, bottling free milk for hospitals and orphanages bearing the label "Compliments of the DFU."<sup>29</sup>

By the strike's third day, with the New York City milk supply cut by as much as sixty percent, the DFU received welcome assistance from New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. The Mayor, who felt the sting of protests by New York's milk consumers, and who had close ties to the labor movement in New York, appealed to the DFU and major co-ops and dealers to send representatives to a conference at the World's Fair Grounds in Queens. It was there,



*Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.*

*As seen here, another DFU tactic was to organize "flying squadrons" of Union members who patrolled country roads in search of farmers attempting to deliver their milk. These road patrols usually consisted of a large open truck filled with as many DFU farmers and supporters as could fit in the back.*



Courtesy of the Canton Historian



Courtesy of the Canton Historian

*The DFU was successful in closing the Sheffield Farms and Dairymen's League milk plants in Canton, primarily because the Union was able to mobilize large numbers of picketers. Typically, intense negotiations took place between drivers attempting to deliver their milk and the picketers (top). After much discussion, the picketers usually convinced farmers to peacefully surrender their milk. Union picketers then lifted the milk cans off the trucks and dumped the milk by the side of the road (bottom).*



on the strike's ninth day, that Archie Wright and Harry Carnal, secretary-treasurer of the DFU, endorsed a settlement signed by representatives of the Big Three milk dealers, following a marathon bargaining session. Drawn up by LaGuardia, this agreement called for the dealers to pay \$2.15 for all milk purchased between August 25 and October 31, 1939, an increase of forty-three percent over the July blend price. The DFU strike did not officially end, however, until the next day, when the full DFU membership ratified the agreement in Utica.

Farmers, editors, and merchants hailed the DFU's triumph across upstate New York. The *Watertown Times* pointed to "the overwhelming public support that the farmers received in their strike" as a significant factor in the Union victory, and added:

... The Dairy Farmers' Union emerges on top. In few short years it has become the dominant organization throughout the entire milkshed. And why should this not be so? The union was formed as an organization of producers for the benefit of producers.<sup>30</sup>

In the North Country, community celebrations marked the Union's victory. On August 23, Potsdam residents and merchants staged a celebration for DFU farmers. In Canton two days later, nine hundred people marched in a mock funeral procession down Main Street, complete with two coffins – one for the Dairymen's League, the other for the "Milk Monopoly."<sup>31</sup> Four hundred people



Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.



Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.

*In an effort to circumvent DFU blockades, Sheffield Farms mounted their own defense, sending out stake-rack trucks or closed vans to collect the milk of non-strikers, as seen in these photos from the Heuvelton area.*

Photo by Fred Dashmaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.



*Although the 1939 strike was peaceful for the most part, after four or five nights of continuous picketing, DFU farmers and other bystanders claimed that the manager of the Heuvelton Sheffield plant, along with two employees, attacked Union picketers with a baseball bat. The incident touched off two days of angry rioting. A local farmer, Charlie Anderson, was shot and wounded by a plant guard. Further violence, such as the destruction of plant windows, also occurred. This photograph shows an injured DFU picketer being carried from the plant.*

Photo by Fred Dashmaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author.



*Although denied by the DFU leadership, many Union opponents attributed the destruction of a local dairy barn to arson inspired by the milk strike. Many farmers believed the fire was set either in retaliation for the attack on DFU picketers, or as a warning to the few remaining farmers who persisted in delivering their milk.*

joined the celebration in Malone, two thousand five hundred in Evans Mills. On August 29, one thousand people attended a victory parade at the firemen's festival in LaFargeville.

The largest DFU celebration occurred in Watertown on September 30 with a rally and parade complete with floats, a motorcycle escort, and high school marching bands. The Lewis County DFU organization adopted a familiar theme with a float upon which solemn, black-clad mourners grieved over graves bearing the names of the Big Three milk dealers. Following the parade, which the *Watertown Daily Times* called "the best of its kind ever held here," rain-soaked farmers and their supporters moved to the Watertown High School Auditorium, where they heard

speeches from Archie Wright; Earl Latham, Jefferson County DFU chair; William T. Field, President of the Watertown Chamber of Commerce; *Times* Editor Harold Johnson; and Congressman Francis Culkin of Oswego. Culkin accused Governor Lehman of “indifference to dairymen’s needs,” and called for “the abolition of both the bargaining agencies and the ‘milk trust.’” Johnson called the DFU “a grassroots farmers’ movement which won,” and characterized Archie Wright as a “sturdy, resourceful, fighting Yankee.”<sup>32</sup>

In just three short years, the DFU had shaken up the old ways of business in the expansive New York dairy industry. First, the Union’s victory brought a substantial increase in membership, which reached 19,585 farmers in December 1939. In addition, the Union’s victory also transformed the balance of power in the milkshed, especially when combined with support from organized labor. For some farmers this meant greater control over the workday. Former DFU farmer Howard Crowe of Heuvelton, for example, recalled how the 1939 strike changed Sheffield Farms’ policy regarding milk deliveries:

But the one thing I always said [the strike] did, even if it hadn’t raised the price of milk, it got it so we could take our milk through the day, not exactly at 9 o’clock. Because I’ve been down there more than once when you were taking in a lot of milk and set and the plant would open – you’d go

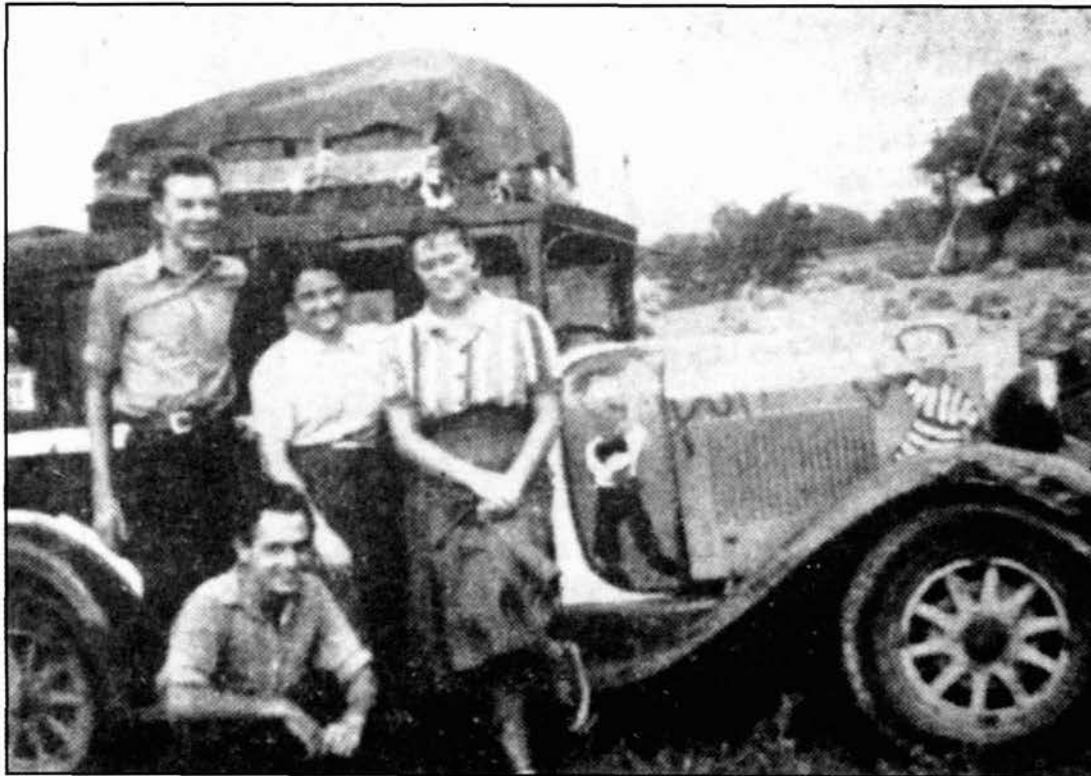


Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author



Photo by Fred Dashnaw, Sr. Courtesy of Claudia Griffin and the author

*When the state police began escorting milk into the plants past their picket lines, the DFU switched tactics. On a few occasions, DFU farmers greased the rails leading out of the plant, delaying the departure of the daily milk train. Here, Sheffield plant employees, accompanied by the police, inspect the rails near the Heuvelton plant.*



1939-1940 DFU Journal, courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*During the 1939 milk strike, DFU farmers were entertained by the Vagabond Puppeteers, a travelling group of college student performers. The Vagabond Puppeteers included, standing, left to right: Peter Seeger, Harriet Holzmann, and Mary Walton. Jerry Oberwager is shown seated. Only eighteen years old at the time, Pete Seeger later went on to fame as a folksinger and political activist with such groups as the Almanac Singers and the Weavers. As detailed in David King Dunaway's biography of Seeger, How Can I Keep From Singing, one of the Vagabond Puppeteers skits featured a fussy cow telling her farmer that he was selling her milk too cheaply to "Mr. Shorden Beffield." Finally, the cow convinced the farmer to join the DFU.*

there and sit and wait – to get unloaded. And if you wasn't there early enough, come 9 o'clock they'd shut the door. I remember twice that I went back and set the milk back on the truck and brought it home.<sup>33</sup>

For other DFU members, the Union's victory meant greater leverage in negotiating contracts with dealers. In January, 1941, when the Crowley's Milk Company ordered farmers in Broome, Tioga, and Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania to renounce their DFU memberships or lose their

market, local DFU members, along with the Binghamton Central Labor Council's thirty unions, pressured Crowley's into rescinding its threat.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Milk Dealers Fight Back**

Needless to say, the mock funerals held for the Big Three milk dealers were premature. As early as August 31, 1939, the *Watertown Times* reported that a "campaign to minimize [the DFU's] strike victory [was al-

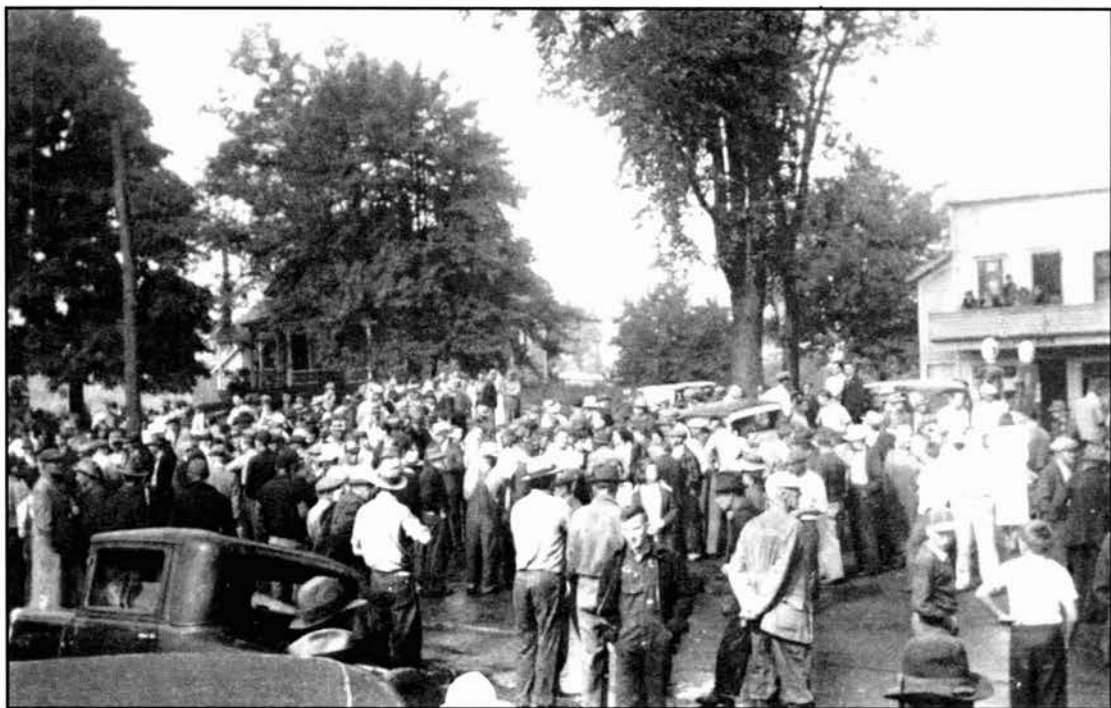
ready] under way." The dealers' first tactic was to ignore the settlement negotiated by LaGuardia. In August, 1940, Sheffield Farms and Borden's paid DFU farmers a lump sum of \$91,090.25 to settle a suit filed by the DFU and supported by Mayor LaGuardia.<sup>35</sup> Their next tactic, more importantly, was to continue raising questions in the press concerning the motives of Wright and the DFU. One set of allegations dealt with CIO and Communist Party involvement in DFU strikes.



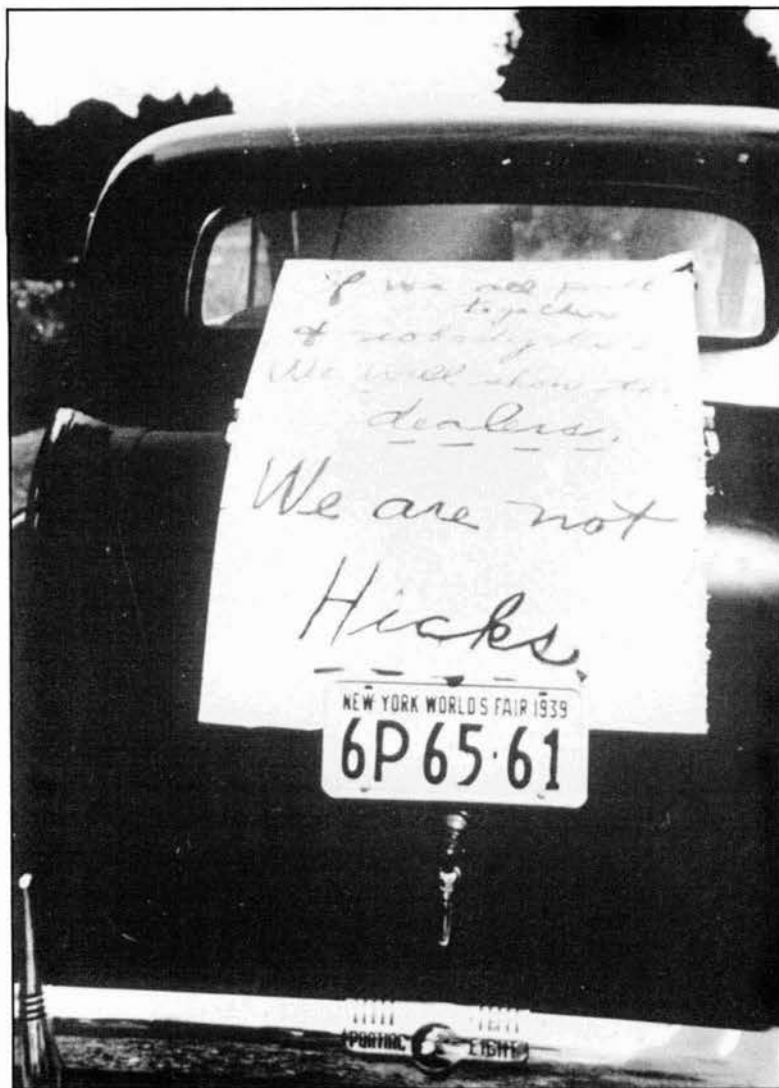


Courtesy of the Canton Historian

*During the 1939 DFU strike, some of the largest crowds in the North Country gathered on Buck Street in Canton, near the entrance to the Sheffield Farms plant.*



Courtesy of the Canton Historian



*On the one hand the DFU had to battle accusations of connections to international Communism. On the other hand, the DFU often had to confront powerful cultural stereotypes of farmers as ignorant and backwards. The outcome of the 1939 DFU strike, however, suggested a different perception of farmers: that when pushed, they could successfully fight back. The sign on the back of this striker's car reads: "If we all pull together, & nobody kicks, We will show the dealers, We are not Hicks."*

Other allegations questioned Wright's patriotism by pointing to his membership in the IWW and his refusal to register for the draft. Similar charges had been raised, with little effect, during and after the 1933 and 1937

strikes. But what made this campaign different was the amount of resources devoted to "red-baiting" and vilifying Wright and the DFU. The dealers also had powerful allies in Washington and Albany who repeated

such claims, giving them greater credibility.

Immediately following the 1939 strike, the Dairymen's League, Sheffield Farms, the Milk Producers Bargaining Agency, and the *American Agriculturalist*, edited by long-time DFU opponent Frank Gannett, published stories alleging DFU improprieties. On September 5, a *Dairymen's League News* editorial condemned the DFU for "CIO violence," and called for the formation of an organization like the Associated Farmers in New York, a vigilante group active in breaking California farm unions. Similarly, a Dairymen's League advertisement in the September 16 issue of *American Agriculturalist* pictured a sinister "CIO thug" lurking over a farmhouse, with the caption "A New Menace Over Every Dairy Home!"

The dealers and their co-op allies also made similar accusations in a number of new publications. In November, 1939, New York State farmers began receiving a free magazine called the *Dairy Farmers Digest*, whose goal was fighting "Communitic and CIO activities." Funding for the *Digest* was later attributed to the Dairymen's League. Another example, which appeared in January 1940, was a series of letters sent to farmers signed by Robert Eastman, whose byline frequently appeared in the *American Agriculturalist*, entitled "The Red Line From Moscow." In April 1940, Congressman Martin Dies, Chair-

man of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, issued further accusations alleging communist involvement on the part of Wright and the DFU.<sup>36</sup>

The third phase of the dealers' operation was a concerted, personal attack on Archie Wright, which eventually succeeded in splitting the DFU. In the *Dairy Farmers Digest*, editor V. R. "Tommygun" Tompkins called Wright a "slacker" for his draft resistance, and implied that the DFU was controlled from Moscow. Wright, for his part, denied ever having been a Communist, and pointed out the real purpose behind the dealers' red-scare. As the attacks wore on, he wrote:

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the attack on Communists was designed in great part to bring about the destruction of all trade unions and farmer organizations or to scare those organizations from protection of their people, and in this the campaign has been quite successful. Most people's organizations are now much more interested in proving that they are not Communists, by chasing Communists all over the lot, than they are in protecting the interests of their own people.<sup>37</sup>

Much as Wright described, however, such accusations continued until they divided the Union. The attacks also took a toll on Wright personally. In June 1940, he resigned because of ill health and was given a leave of absence by the DFU's General Organizing Committee (GOC). He returned two months later to regain his position at a Union

general convention, but there he had to forestall a resolution stating that the Union had no connections to the Communist Party. From Wright's perspective, this resolution deflected the attention of Union members from more important business, and the fact that this issue was still being raised signaled greater trouble brewing

from within the membership. In November, 1940, Wright filed suit against GOC members Frank Brill and Sam Schou for calling him a Communist. He eventually dropped his suit following yet another high-level Union meeting devoted to the growing discord within the Union.

**Who is the  
RUBBER STAMP  
for the  
Communist Party  
inside the  
Dairy Farmers  
Union?  
THE UNION  
declares no  
tieup with CIO  
groups still  
they donate  
to CIO strikes**

Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*A section of an 1940 broadsheet, sponsored by the milk dealers, attempting to connect Archie Wright and the DFU to the Communist Party.*

If the dealer's early accusations were designed to defame Archie Wright, later anti-DFU red-baiting was carefully timed to coincide with Union elections scheduled for December 1940. Just prior to the election, an "Open Letter" circulated throughout the milkshed signed by 51 DFU members (all from outside the North Country) who accused Wright of communist sympathies. Next, a series of broadsheets began to appear across the North Country, with Wright as the target, bearing headlines such as "Mr. Wright Denies It, But Communism Is In Dairy Farmers Union," or "Who Is the Rubber

Stamp For the Communist Party Inside the Dairy Farmers Union?" As might be expected in the climate of heightened patriotism given the looming war in Europe, this campaign undoubtedly influenced the DFU election results. When the votes were counted, Wright's opponents gained a decisive victory. Although Wright was elected DFU Chairman with by far the largest number of votes, his entire slate for the Union GOC was defeated by an alternative slate put forth by Wright-opponents Frank Brill and Sam Schou.

With Wright's frustrations running high, he forced a confrontation with his critics within the

Union the day after the DFU election. Using heavy-handed tactics quite out of character with the DFU's typical decision-making process, Wright personally called a Union special convention to expel the 51 DFU members who had signed the "Open Letter." But when DFU delegates meeting in Utica voted against him, by a vote of 118 to 52, Wright immediately resigned his position, most likely as a last ditch effort to provoke a purge of his enemies. Wright's strategizing aside, one thing was clear: the dealers' well-financed red-baiting campaign had fatally split the DFU.

## Conclusion

In the months following Wright's resignation the DFU was rent by conflict. DFU locals in the North Country remained loyal to Wright, while other locals elected new officers who professed allegiance to the GOC. In Jefferson County, Earl Lathan, the chairman of the second largest DFU local, resigned after a failed effort to reinstate Wright. In St. Lawrence County, home of the largest DFU local, DFU Chair Carl Peters cut off payments to the GOC following Wright's resignation. When the GOC elected its own officers in St. Lawrence County, Wright's followers shouted down the GOC at the Canton Town Hall on May 1, 1941. This meeting, like many others around the state, ended only after the Canton police were called in to clear the Town Hall. Five days later, the St. Lawrence



DFU Journal 1939-1940, courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

*The 1939-40 St. Lawrence County Committee of the DFU: Seated, Carl K. Peters, chairman; Mrs. Eva Locy, secretary-treasurer. Standing, Frank Jones, DeWitt Forbes, and Roy Henry. The St. Lawrence County DFU leadership remained loyal to Archie Wright during the internal Union conflicts in the early 1940s.*





Courtesy of the DFU Collection, St. Lawrence University

Cartoon by Rufus J. Quinn, entitled "The Farmer's Milk and the Dealer's Can." It was published as the cover of the first issue of *The Farmers Defender*, February 1942. Printed monthly as the official publication of the Farmers Union of the New York Milk Shed, *The Farmers Defender* was produced in Ogdensburg, with Archie Wright serving as president and editor. The original caption of the cartoon read as follows: "Waste, Inefficiency And Gouging Are A Crime in Peace . . . And Treason in War. This is a picture of the Milk Business. There is a lot in it so look it over carefully. . . ."

County unit joined Wright in forming a separate organization, known as the Farmers Union of the New York Milkshed (FUNY).<sup>38</sup>

Lacking Wright's considerable organizing and public relations skills, the remaining DFU officers led an unsuccessful milk strike in July 1941. In 1942, DFU history took a strange turn when the GOC voted to join District 50 of John L. Lewis's United Mine Workers. Unfortunately, this alliance proved of little use for DFU farmers, who received few resources from Lewis and the UMW. By 1943, the Dairy Farmers Union, once thirty thousand strong, had passed from the scene.<sup>39</sup> As for Wright and the FUNY, although they reached a membership of seven thousand farmers in 1947, and remained strongly committed to "family-farm" ownership in the North Country, they struggled through the 1950s as only a shadow of the once-powerful DFU.

Given the imbalance of power between the DFU and its adversaries, perhaps the more important question is not why the Union declined but why it was so effective in challenging the milk dealers in the first place. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the DFU faced almost insurmountable odds. The Union's primary constituency of small, hard working farmers had precious little time to picket or attend meetings. They had few financial resources, and even less in the way of political connections in

Albany and Washington, save a few, sympathetic local representatives. Nonetheless, in the late 1930s these same North Country dairy farmers organized a powerful social movement which at least for a time revolutionized milk production in one of the nation's largest agricultural markets.

When considering the resources employed by the DFU, which made the Union so effective, it is immediately apparent that the farmers of the 1930s were far removed from their contemporary counterparts. The DFU's significant support from the local community, for example, was a by-product of the closely-knit social fabric of the rural North Country. At a time when few farmers owned their own balers and threshers, small dairy farmers cut hay and chopped corn cooperatively. They also delivered their own milk to town, where they were the mainstay of the local economy. Today, however, dairy farmers are fewer in number and socially isolated. The result is that the tightly-woven networks of rural life, which served as effective channels of solidarity and communication, are no longer in place. The same is true of the DFU's support from, and close affinity to, organized labor. The contemporary American labor movement is in decline, itself a victim of the red-baiting inflicted on the DFU. As small dairy farmers today consider the many challenges they face within agriculture – from globalization, biotechnology

and capital-intensive farming methods – they might do well to remember the DFU. In the face of similar overwhelming odds in the depths of the Depression, North Country farmers put up a pretty good fight.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Ogdensburg Advance News*, 31 December 1967; *Ogdensburg Republican Journal*, 6 June 1917, 5; 28 June 1917, 5; 22 August 1917, 5; 24 August 1917, 5.

<sup>2</sup>*Ogdensburg Republican Journal*, 21 January 1921, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Tim Wright, March 14, 1995.

<sup>4</sup>For the history of the CIO, see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO: 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); for an analysis of the sit-down tactics, see Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), Ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup>For the strikes in Iowa and Nebraska, see John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1965), 41-57; for the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool strikes, see A. William Hoglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike." *Agricultural History* 35 (January 1961): 24-34.

<sup>6</sup>*New York Times*, 13 August 1933, Section 4, 1.

<sup>7</sup>Milk prices refers to prices at the farm gate unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</sup>Hundredweight is the standard unit of measure for fluid milk. It is abbreviated cwt., and represents one hundred pounds of fluid milk.

<sup>9</sup>New York State, Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Milk Industry, *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Milk Industry* (Albany: J. B. Lyons, 1933), 60-75; (Hereafter cited as the Pitcher Committee Report).

<sup>10</sup>See Eunice Stamm, *The History of Cheese Making in New York State* (Endicott, New York: Lewis Group, Ltd., 1991).

<sup>11</sup>Pitcher Committee Report, 165.

<sup>12</sup>New York State, Milk Control Board, *Report of the Milk Control Board to the Governor and the State Legislature* (Albany: J. B. Lyons, March, 1934), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Years later, it was revealed that the DLCA leadership paid thousands of dollars in secret rebates to Borden's executives.

See John J. Dillon, *Seven Decades of Milk*, (New York: Orange Judd Publishing Company, 1941), 193.

<sup>14</sup>Throughout the 1930s, the Dairywomen's League typically paid the lowest prices of all major co-ops, in large part because the DLCA "had to make deductions from its members' checks to finance its substantial investment in plants and transportation equipment." New York State Senate, Legislative Commission on Dairy Industry Development, *Review of Dairy Regulations* (Albany: New York State Senate, 1988), 9.

<sup>15</sup>*Ogdensburg Journal*, 15 October 1936, 5.

<sup>16</sup>See Linda G. Ford, "Another Double Burden: Farm Women and Agrarian Activism in Depression Era New York State," *New York History*, (Oct. 1994): 373-98.

<sup>17</sup>*The Union Farmer*, 25 July 1938, 3.

<sup>18</sup>*Consumer-Farmer Foundation, 1937-1987* (New York: Consumer-Farmer Foundation, 1987), 3.

<sup>19</sup>See Zieger, 32, 46-54; Fine, Ch. 5.

<sup>20</sup>*St. Lawrence County Plaindealer*, 31 August 1937, 1.

<sup>21</sup>For a brief history of the 1937 Rogers-Allen Law, see *Review of Dairy Regulations*, 24-33.

<sup>22</sup>United States v. Rock Royal Co-op., Inc. et al, Federal Supp.26 (Dist. Court, N.D. New York 1939).

<sup>23</sup>*Watertown Daily Times*, 10 August 1939, 3.

<sup>24</sup>*New York Times*, 16 August 1939, 25; 17 August, 1939, 42.

<sup>25</sup>*New York Times*, 15 August 1939, 1.

<sup>26</sup>*Watertown Daily Times*, 15 August 1939, 18.

<sup>27</sup>*Jefferson County Journal*, 23 August 1939, 1.

<sup>28</sup>*The Union Farmer*, 25 September 1939, 1; Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 172-3.

<sup>29</sup>*The Dairy Farmer*, 25 August 1939, 4.

<sup>30</sup>*Watertown Daily Times*, 22 August 1939, 4.

<sup>31</sup>*Watertown Daily Times*, 28 August 1939, 3.

<sup>32</sup>*Watertown Daily Times*, 30 September 1939, 18; *New York Times*, 1 October 1939, 12.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with former DFU member Howard Crowe in Heuvelton, New York, April 8, 1992.

<sup>34</sup>*The Dairy Farmer*, January 1941, 1.

<sup>35</sup>Ignoring LaGuardia's agreement, the dealers had issued checks based on prices

lower than those specified in the 1939 strike settlement. See *The Union Farmer*, 25 August 1940; Dyson, 175-6.

<sup>36</sup>For the dealers' red-baiting campaign, see Dyson, 177-81; see also Tim Wright, "Milk Strike: The History of the Dairy Farmers Union of New York, 1936-1941," (unpublished senior thesis, Princeton University, 1974), Ch. 5; for the Dies Committee allegations, see United States Congress, House, *Hearings on Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1938), Vol. 1, 913.

<sup>37</sup>*Ogdensburg Journal*, 19 July 1956, 4.

<sup>38</sup>See *Watertown Daily Times*, 8 April - 12 May, 1941.

<sup>39</sup>In May, 1943, Archie Wright noted in the FUNY's *Farmers Defender* that Lewis' organization had notified handlers to cease making deductions of dues for the "now extinct" DFU.

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## About the Author

Thomas J. Kriger, Ph.D., is Visiting Professor of Government at St. Lawrence University. He has written and lectured on farm activism, milk strikes and dairy policy in New York State.



## ***Author's Request For Additional Information***

### **The Socialist Party in Ogdensburg**

In my research on the life of Archie Wright there are a number of important questions still unanswered. One of these concerns the Socialist Party and its electoral activities in St. Lawrence County in 1912 and 1916, most likely the source of the "socialistic influences" on young Wright. The Socialist Party nominated and ran a full slate of candidates, from presidential electors to aldermen, in St. Lawrence County. For instance, the *Ogdensburg Republican-Journal* reported a Socialist speaker on the corner of Ford and Isabella Streets on August 30, 1916.

As James Weinstein noted in his *The Decline of Socialism in America*, after President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany on April 2, 1917, the Socialist Party's (national) Committee on War and Militarism declared the war "a crime against the people of the United States," and pledged "a continuous, active and public opposition" to conscription. Across the United States, eligible young men were called to register for the draft on June 5. On June 6, the *Ogdensburg Republican-Journal* reported that Wright "had announced his intention to refuse to register." Ironically, he was never drafted because he failed his induction physical.

If any reader has information on Socialist Party leaders such as Orville Babcock of Madrid, or Harry Dodd, Sr., George Brassard, and A. L. Miller of Ogdensburg, or any other information concerning Socialist Party activity in this period of St. Lawrence County history, I would greatly appreciate hearing from you.

### **Archie Wright and the IWW**

Another unanswered question in my research involves Archie Wright's passage into the Merchant Marine and eventually into the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Marine Transport Workers Union #510. In 1921, the *Ogdensburg Republican-Journal* carried a reprint of a story Wright had written for the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, whose editor prefaced the article with a brief description of its author. The *Times Picayune* editor claimed Wright had written the article on shore leave in order to raise money for new socks. He further noted Wright's experiences with "sailor-missionaries from Soviet Russia," and "of beer hall and forecandle proselytizing" on the docks in Trieste, Genoa, Hamburg, Liverpool, and Manchester. When asked about his own politics, Wright informed the editor: "I guess I am rather an advanced socialist; lots of us sailors are."

What is unclear is how Wright came to join the Merchant Marine. Further, what were the possible connections to international shipping on the St. Lawrence River? Did ocean-going vessels travel out of Ogdensburg between 1917 and 1921? And were there opportunities for county residents to join the Merchant Marine either on the Great Lakes or perhaps out of other river ports? Moreover, was the IWW active in St. Lawrence shipping during this period? Again, if any readers might be able to shed light on these and related questions, I would greatly appreciate it.

*Thomas J. Kriger  
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## From the Bookshelf

In the last few years, a number of valuable and fascinating local histories have been published in St. Lawrence County. What follows are brief reviews of six such local histories. All of the publications are available for use in the SLCHA archives as well as in many local libraries in the county.

### ***Historic Ogdensburg***

A city with a history that reflects the changing fortunes of empire, Ogdensburg was founded by a French priest, Abbé Francois Picquet, in 1748. Abandoned by the French, taken over by the English, the small settlement eventually took its name from the Ogden family which acquired large tracts of land in the developing North Country.

*Historic Ogdensburg* was previously issued in four editions from 1968 to 1987 by the former city historian, Elizabeth Baxter. The present city historian, Persis Boyesen, has revised the booklet and added a table of contents and index. The 52-page history includes a guide to the city's historic buildings and residences, and an interesting summation of the history of the settlement of the area from the French through modern times. Numerous black and white photographs enhance the text. *Historic*

*Ogdensburg*, published in 1995, is available for \$3.00 at the Ogdensburg City Hall.

### ***Massena Historic Sites, 1803-1995***

*Massena Historic Sites* was produced by Theresa Sharp and Marian O'Keefe to provide the Town of Massena Museum with a guidebook for visitors and residents.

The 28-page guidebook provides a tour of 81 historic sites with 50 illustrations, as well as maps to help locate each structure. The photos provide a series of capsule histories of Massena, from early settlers to the building of the Seaway. The captions provide more than simple identifications. The guide notes, for example, that Sacred Heart Church was built of fieldstone gathered by parishioners, and the American Legion building is the former Colonel Uriel H. Orvis House, built in 1829 with bricks made on the property.

The booklet also includes a brief history of Massena, from its early lumbering days and the famous "mineral springs," to its naming for Andre Massena, one of Napoleon's marshals. The rapids of the St. Lawrence had originally made settlers avoid the village. These rapids, however, provided the basis for water power

that drove development and offered a prosperity evident in the many photographs of historic buildings that make up this booklet. The guide brings Massena's history up-to-date with information on the power dams and Seaway projects that are key to the village's modern history.

Published in 1995, *Massena Historic Sites* has proven very popular and has already sold out. However, copies are available for use at the Massena Museum (200 East Orvis Street).

### ***Colton, New York, Story of a Town, II***

Anything good has a sequel so it is not surprising that the Colton Historical Society has revised and reprinted its township history under the title of *Colton, New York, Story of a Town, II*. The history of the town was revised and updated from the previous *Colton, Story of a Town*, published in 1976.

The hardcover book, is available for \$15.00, plus \$3.00 for shipping, from the Colton Historical Society (P.O. Box 223, Colton, NY, 13625). *Colton II* is also sold locally at the Town Hall and Hepburn Library in Colton.

The group putting together the new book confronted no easy task since many of the previous edition's articles were out-of-date and the original photographs were

no longer available. The editors wisely updated articles and added many new photos. The handsome, 166-page book covers Colton history with an interesting perspective on how the town developed economically. Early lumbering operations are covered in both word and photo. The history of the town churches, schools and the incomparable Hepburn Library in Colton are reviewed, as is the background of the town's social institutions and groups. Taken together the articles present an excellent history of the development of Colton and the changes that flowed over a river town.

### ***The Story of Norwood, N.Y., A Nice Place to Live, 1850-1995***

Duck pond? Well, it did receive one vote . . . but "Norwood" received forty-two votes at a public meeting in 1875 that changed the name of the village from "Potsdam Junction." This readable 85-page booklet is full of many such anecdotes and articles giving the history and flavor of Norwood. *The Story of Norwood* was put together by Susan Lyman, Town of Potsdam and Village of Norwood historian. The booklet may be purchased for \$2.50 plus \$1.25 postage from the Norwood Museum (39 N. Main St., Norwood, NY 13668).

The booklet updates the previous history of Norwood published in 1972, and includes substantial new and updated material. *The Story of Norwood* covers the early

history of the village, as well as the history of civic institutions, churches and schools. From the advent of electricity and railroads to the origins of the Norwood Brass Firemen, it's all here.

As for the name of Norwood: Where did that come from? Henry Ward Beecher had claimed he could write as good a novel as his sister, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He called his novel *Norwood* and though it was a flop, the Reverend Mr. Chase, a Methodist minister in the village of Potsdam Junction, took a shine to it. He pointed out to the townspeople what an easy name it was to write, with no "t's to cross or "i's to dot, and no letters going above or below the line. Thus, "Norwood" was chosen as the village's new name.

### ***The Falls Revisited***

A souvenir booklet published last year, *The Falls Revisited* is available from the Rensselaer Falls Historical Society (Rensselaer Falls, NY 13680). The 54-page booklet was published as an update to the 1989 sesquicentennial history of the hamlet, *The Falls*. Included in the new publication is a history of schools and education in the village, a compilation of the records of military veterans in the Civil War and World War II, and a history of local sports teams. The booklet also includes a helpful index of names in the back of the publication. *The Falls Revisited* was compiled and edited by Sally

and Kyle Hartman, with the assistance of many other community members, including the village historian, Dorothy Crane.

### ***Canton: The Town Friendliness Built***

*Canton: The Town Friendliness Built* has been re-issued by Saltbox Publishing in Canton. The book is available from Linda Casserly at the historian's office in the Municipal Building in Canton for \$10.00. The 100-page book is a reprint of the volume published in 1986 by Judith Liscum and her students at Canton Central School. Out-of-print for several years, it will be of interest to area residents and natives. The book covers the history of the town, including the villages of Canton, Crary Mills, Rensselaer Falls and Morley. Generously illustrated, the book offers numerous views of many recognizable historic buildings.

A key element in the book is the history of the local institutions providing the foundation of life in the town. While much is familiar, there are also persons and places that have slipped out of time. The writer Irving Bacheller, for example, once enjoyed a fame that was nationwide, and was well-known on the streets of Canton. Interesting tales, sidelights of Canton history, the background of many buildings and homes, and the story of Canton's founding and development, make this book a pleasure to read.

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