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Rhineland Revisited: Over a century later, Lassig's legacy lingers

Stephanie Kuski
River News Features Reporter

Agriculture has been a mainstay in Wisconsin's economy since its infancy, but that landscape continues to shift as resources and technology come and go.

Wheat was the main cash crop for the first generation of Wisconsin farmers, and our state was dubbed "America's Breadbasket" in the mid-19th century, as one-sixth of wheat grown in the country came from Wisconsin (another reason why the brewing industry here was able to take off leaps and bounds).

But after the Civil War, soil exhaustion, insect infestation and cheaper wheat from states further west threatened the livelihood of the wheat industry here. At the same time, however, westward expansion enabled New York dairy farmers to settle southern, rural Wisconsin, bringing with them the skills needed for commercial dairying. German and Scandinavian immigrants were quick to make the switch to the dairy industry as well, specializing in European-style cheeses like Swiss cheese.

The establishment of commercial dairying was also supported by the University of Wisconsin. In the 1880s, the university began offering courses in Madison to educate rural farmers on the most up-to-date dairying practices of the time. In 1897, the university built their Dairy Barn on campus, which was used both as a teaching facility and as a site for agricultural research.

"As part of the 'Wisconsin Idea' ... it just seemed natural that they would pass on these innovative dairying practices," Pioneer Park Historical Complex Director Kerry Bloedorn explained. "They taught cleanliness and hygiene practices, they taught animal husbandry."

By 1915, Wisconsin produced more butter or cheese than any other state, paving the way for its current reign as the leading dairy state in the nation.

At the same time all of this was going on, the Homestead Act of 1862 afforded Americans the opportunity to acquire land. Families were granted 160-acre plots of land in exchange for residing on that property for at least five years and making various improvements, including building a home on it.

But if you'll recall, before this region was ever logged, massive old-growth forests spanned the area as far as



Homesteader Julius Lassig received the land deed to his family's farm in 1893, and the red glazed tile barn that still stands today was originally built in 1927. Today, the Deede family maintains that barn and property as a living historic preservation site in an effort to keep the Lassig family's rich history alive. Photo courtesy Kerry Bloedorn, Pioneer Park Historical Complex Director.

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the eye could see; now all of that is clear-cut with only the stumps left behind. For many families, however, it was a fresh start, albeit a difficult one.

"They rolled their sleeves up, went down to the local goods shop and bought some dynamite, a stump puller and a couple of horses and went to work," Bloedorn said. "They stumped all their land, picked rocks for decades, made fields - farmed - in a place that was less than hospitable."

German immigrant Julius Lassig was one such homesteader who arrived in Rhinelanders in the summer of 1887. Julius befriended Gene Shepard, who pointed out a good-sized, cut-over piece of property about five miles south of town with a beautiful creek running through it.

Julius spent years carving a home out of that wilderness: he transformed his original 160-acre homestead into a 240-acre dairy farm. The road running through his property was subsequently named Lassig Road, as was common with many homesteaded properties, and the adjacent creek and nearby lake was also named after its original homesteader. The Lassig Farm was originally called Evergreen Hedge Farm, however, named after a pine hedge that ran along Lassig Road, as Bloedorn explained.

Julius married a young Swiss woman named Mary Scheidegger - who he originally hired to work in his garden - in 1893. It was common at the time for farm families to have many children, and so Julius and Mary had 15 of their own.

It was also common for rural one-room schoolhouses to dot the countryside every five miles or so, and since the Lassigs had so many children, they had one such schoolhouse on their property called Ferndale School (it was known by locals as the Lassig School). All of the Lassigs and other neighboring children attended school there, and the teachers lived on the farm during the school year.

Carl, the oldest Lassig son, established his own dairy farm across the road from his father's homestead in his young adulthood, and Julius's second eldest son Ted took over his father's farm when he retired. Ted and his wife Hazel ran the Lassig Farm through its golden age, when Lassig became a household name.

Although there were over 250 dairies in Oneida County alone by 1950, Lassig's was unique in that it was a dairy production facility, Bloedorn explained, meaning they received milk from local farmers and processed it to make other dairy products like yogurt, cottage cheese, sour cream and ice cream. Milkmen - including even Ted Lassig himself, oftentimes barefoot, as some locals might recall - delivered glass milk bottles and other goods bearing the Lassig name door-to-door.

"It was very personal; you knew your milkman," Gail Bloom, daughter of Gladys Lassig and granddaughter of Julius and Mary Lassig, said. "There was a lot of caring, when you had your milkman that you knew and you knew the family that owned the farm too."

But the life of a dairy farmer was hard work, and growing up on a dairy farm was a 24/7/365 job, as Steve Lassig, grandson of Carl Lassig Sr. and son of Carl Lassig Jr., recalled.

"When I was 8-years-old, I got to learn to drive the tractor so my dad could sit in the wagon and stack hay, and I was driving a pickup truck by 9," he said. "Starting at the age of 12, I got up at 5:30. Dad would drive us to the pastures across the lake, and then we'd chase the cows to milk them in the morning."

"During the summertime, it was all about getting crops and making hay," he continued. "My dad always said we had to have about 10,000 bales of hay up for the wintertime to feed all the cows through the winter."

"I remember when you milked all the cows by hand," Bloom recalled. "When my mother was young and lived there, she had to get up every morning to milk the cows before they went to school."

Bloom said the Lassig Farm included not only dairy cows, but cattle, chicken, sheep, horses, geese and other animals. She said they butchered chickens in the fall to eat for the winter and much of the fall harvest was canned. In this way, farmers maintained an intimate relationship with their food, and their farming systems were both self-sustaining and self-sufficient.

There were other family-owned dairy production facilities in the community too. James Cleary acquired ownership of the old Rhinelanders Creamery and the Oneida Milk Company in the early '30s, consolidating the two firms under the Oneida Milk name. By 1950, the name was changed to Cleary's Milk and Ice Cream Co., but by the end of that decade the firm merged with Consolidated Badger, one of the largest dairy processors in the state. The Cleary name was eventually replaced with Badger's Morning Glory label in 1979.

"Like any progression in time with any industry, there's innovation and efficiencies and how to best produce food for the least amount of cost," Steve Lassig commented. "Into the '60s you still had local farms that went to the local dairy... In the '70s, you started getting what I would call consolidation of farms, because it was more efficient: you had equipment like big tractors that could farm more land... My dad remembers farming with horses, and so you couldn't farm that much."

"Well now all of a sudden you've got these big tractors... and you can till a field that's a mile long and a mile wide," he continued. "So it just becomes more efficient... But when you start doing that, what used to be 10 farms now becomes one farm."

That shifting landscape made it difficult for many family farms to continue and has since altered modern farming practices dramatically. In a society that increasingly demands bigger and more products, family-operated farms have been traded in favor of mega conglomerates. Unfortunately, however, many of these investors will likely never sow their fields with the same tender loving care as Julius Lassig, his sons, grandsons and great-

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grandsons.

"The further away people get from farming and agriculture, there's this lack of understanding of what it takes to produce food," Steve Lassig noted. "It's just simpler times... As the population grows and our roads become more complex and cars go faster, things change, just like life does."

The Lassig Farm ceased operations in 1964 and Judy Lassig Robertson - the last Lassig to own the original homestead - sold the property to the Deede family in 2010.

Its current owner, Kim Deede, has since maintained the Lassig Farm as a private living historic preservation site. Bloedorn and his family reside at the former site of Ferndale School and started a preservation group in an effort to keep the farm's rich history alive.

"Among those 250 or so dairy farms that existed in Oneida County at one time, none of them are working dairy farms anymore, and many of the barns that graced those farms are gone," Bloedorn commented. "The majestic red glazed tile barn at the historic Lassig Dairy still stands, and is in such great shape... driving past it it allows people to mentally jump back in time and reminiscence about the golden age of Wisconsin dairy farms."

Indeed, for many local families, dairying was a way of life that has since ceased to exist.

Advances in the 20th century led to many changes in our tiny town, as consolidation and conglomeration altered the landscape of many rural communities.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series. Visit rivernews online.com to read previous installments.

Stephanie Kuski may be reached at stephanie@rivernews online.com to connect in candid conversation about the history of Rhinelanders.

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