

How Bottles Talk to Us, and the History They Tell

(And listen as Orange County, N.Y., artifacts will butter us up)

By Alex Prizgintas

I often read of how glass bottle collectors are drawn towards unique colors and shapes, the swirl of the glass near their tooled tops, and the roughness of the pontiled bases. Some of these features reveal unique facts about their age and tell us the story of when, where, and how. I think it is those mysteries that we ardent collectors appreciate when finding a fascinating bottle.

Understanding these traits helps us to travel back in time to when these gems were first blown, creating the very artifact we cradle in our hands. As curators, we either rejoice in retrieving them from the earth's clutches or when acquiring them from another collection. As a community, we sometimes find a treasure that we recognize will benefit the collection of a fellow guardian as we forward it onward. I have been very fortunate to know other generous collectors who contact me with their finds in the hope of enriching my research.

My interest and research lies with milk bottles, which are sometimes referred to as the "ugly sisters" of antique bottles due to their uniform shapes and bland colors. However, I find them to be intriguing, as they provide a narrative to the colorful history of dairy farming, filled with innovation and conflict. This narrative is further enhanced by the fact that I live in Orange County, N.Y. — which in so many ways is the birthplace of milk transportation, milk advertisement and,

of course, milk bottles. This is a brief tour of Orange County's dairying history as seen through the lens of the ubiquitous milk bottle.

While the United States' earliest milk bottles originate between 1870-80, it is important to recognize that Orange County's dairy products were renowned decades before that time. The region's geography made it ideal for agriculture, with mountains on the southeast and northwest sides that act as natural barriers and made the interior of Orange County a haven for agricultural development. This valley between the Hudson Highlands and the Shawangunks varies between 500 and 1,000 feet above sea level, protecting it from the fungi and algae that are found in low coastal areas.

Dairy production began here in the late 18th century and, by the 1800s, butter was widely produced and exported from Orange County. The village of Goshen was the center of butter production in the county and was popularly known in the region as the "Butter Capital." It is not surprising that high-grade butter of this era, whether from Orange County or far away, was coined with the name "Goshen Butter."

One beneficial aspect of butter is its long shelf life that allows for it to be shipped over great distances. The same cannot be said for milk. While it was needed to make the savory Goshen Butter, trans-

porting milk over extended distances was considered by most as simply impossible. However, those thoughts changed when an industrial wonder better known as the New York and Erie Railroad made its way through Orange County in the 1830s.

Upon reaching the village of Chester, the railroad workers encountered a serious problem. The black dirt, a commodity that was fertile in nutrients and most valuable to the farmers of the area, proved to be very spongy and weak in supporting the weight of a railroad. The solution was to first construct a wooden trestle with deep pilings that would provide the sturdy foundation for the railroad. Once completed, the trestle would then be backfilled with gravel and fill so that the railroad would blend in with the surrounding scenery.

What did this transportation-related construction technique have to do with the legacy of Orange County's dairy industry? Well, it is precisely how the birth of milk transportation came to be. One of the individuals who was granted the contract to construct the railroad in Chester was Thaddeus Selleck. The construction of the trestle was arduous. To make things worse, the New York and Erie Railroad went into bankruptcy and was unable to pay Selleck for his work. Once the railroad reorganized, Selleck was compensated by being appointed as Chester's first station agent. That would soon prove revolutionary in the history of milk.

When Selleck was appointed a station agent in 1841, butter was still Orange County's most popular dairy export. However, Selleck's attention was drawn not towards the rich butter but rather the superior quality of the pure Orange County milk. Having spent much of his time in 19th century New York City, Selleck recognized that residents had grown accustomed to the vastly inferior and dangerous swill milk that was produced by disease-ridden cows and resulted in the deaths of thousands of infants. Visualizing a very lucrative market on the horizon, Selleck was focused on solving what was considered impossible: transporting fresh milk, without it turning sour, to the New York City market.

Continuing to push forward, Selleck found that the largest obstacles were the farmers themselves who had become comfortable and satisfied with the strong and stable trade established through butter. Historian Robert Mohowski describes their reaction to the concept of transporting milk, stating that "they scoffed at Selleck and his idea in the same manner that had greeted most visionaries since the dawn of time." Farmers could not grasp the concept of milk traveling more than fifty miles, especially in the hot summer months, accompanied by jarring movements from the railroad cars. Still, unfazed, Selleck met with local farmers Philo Gregory, James Durland, Jonas King and John M. Bull to discuss his novel idea of shipping milk by rail to New York City.

Before the railroad arrived in Orange County, butter was transported to New York City first by horse and wagon to Newburgh followed by a trip on a barge down the Hudson River. However, the railroad greatly reduced the time it took to reach New York City, and accessed

distant regions of the county rich with dairy farms. In Selleck's proposal, the milk would be transported in butter churns 41 miles from Chester to Piermont and then an additional 21 miles by barge to a storefront located at 193 Reade St. in New York City, the location where Selleck would consign the milk.

It took some time for Selleck to convince any farmers, but by the spring of 1842, farmer Philo Gregory of Chester agreed

As his business improved, other farmers joined with other merchants to transport their milk, knowing more money could be made shipping milk than by churning it into butter. By 1897, more than 7,000 milk depots had opened in New York City, selling close to 750,000 quarts of milk a day to the eager city residents!

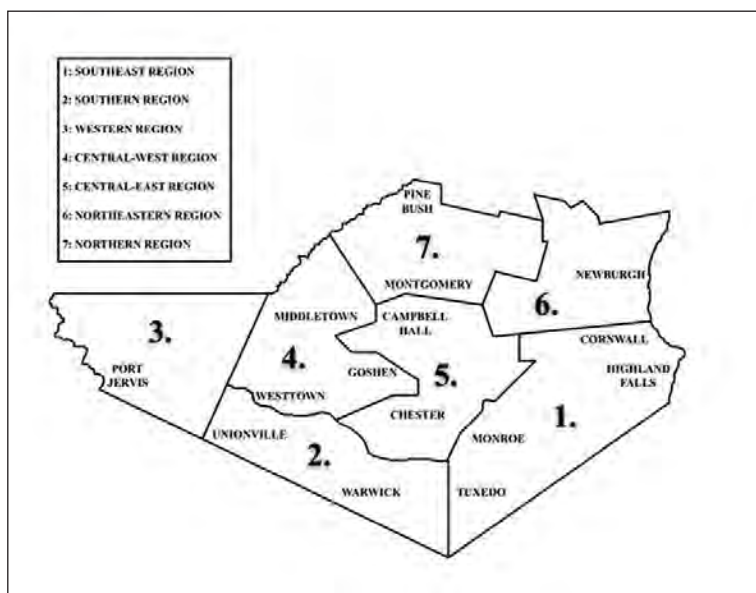
Selleck's successful 1842 shipment started a period where farmers, better known as producers, gained control over this new

and vibrant industry. They were able to control the price of milk for the dealers, who acted as middlemen by purchasing the milk from the producers and then selling it to the public. This profitable period for the producers lasted between 25 to 30 years, until the terms of sales gradually shifted in favor of the dealers. Since farmers were spread far across rural areas, organized dealers trading with the individual farmers gained control of the powerful tools of distribu-

tion. This gave dealers the power to usurp the producers' inherent rights and to fix the prices of milk paid to farmers, as well as the price for the public.

Confronted with this hostility, farmers faced two choices. The first was to submit to the often corrupt terms and conditions of the dealers. The second, however, became available after 1880 when farmers began to sell their milk independently in their villages due to the innovation of a new tool — the milk bottle.

Milk bottles, aside from their respective town name, had gained a uniform appearance. However, the earliest milk bottles looked nothing like today's examples and more closely resembled large fruit jars, the earliest of which were pontiled. Even the first patented glass milk jar, invented by George Henry Lester in January of 1878, looked like a



An overview of Orange County, with the seven main regions of dairy production outlined.

to send approximately 240 quarts of milk bound for Gotham, which successfully arrived without spoiling. He accepted Selleck's proposal since he also had a business in New York City and made an agreement with Selleck that the milk would be sold immediately upon its arrival.

Surprisingly, the milk was not popular among the city crowds. They found the yellow "scum" on top of the milk repulsing. This was the rich layer of buttery fat that made Orange County's milk so vastly superior to the milk produced by the sickly cows fed on swill in the city. It did not take long for the city folks to envy the smell, taste, and look of fresh milk sent directly from country farms and the demand became so great that Selleck was forced to open additional milk depots.



An example of the Lester Milk Jar, the first U.S. patented glass object to hold milk.



An early Warren milk jar from the New York Dairy Company Ltd.



Example of a tin-top milk bottle advertising "Pure Orange County Milk."



A tin-top bottle from the Orange County Milk Association.



A bottle from Pavek Farms, located in Highland Falls, N.Y.



The baby-face milk bottle used by the CFS Milk Company of Newburgh, N.Y.



RIGHT: A rare bottle from the Depot Restaurant in Middletown, N.Y.

large fruit jar and featured a glass lid that was secured by a metal clamp.

The reason for using a glass jar to transport milk, as explained by Lester in his patent, was to protect the milk from the corrosion and contamination of metal cans which, up to this point, were the main form of storing milk. Milk bottle pioneer Hervey Thatcher of Potsdam used a similar rationale when creating his successful milk jar in 1884. While Lester thought of the idea six years prior, his jar had a significant flaw. Between the glass top and the body of the jar, there was no leather or rubber gasket for protection. If the lid was too tightly closed, which was often the case, the glass would easily crack and because of this, the Lester milk jar quickly became unpopular and drifted into history. I am aware of only five examples in existence today.

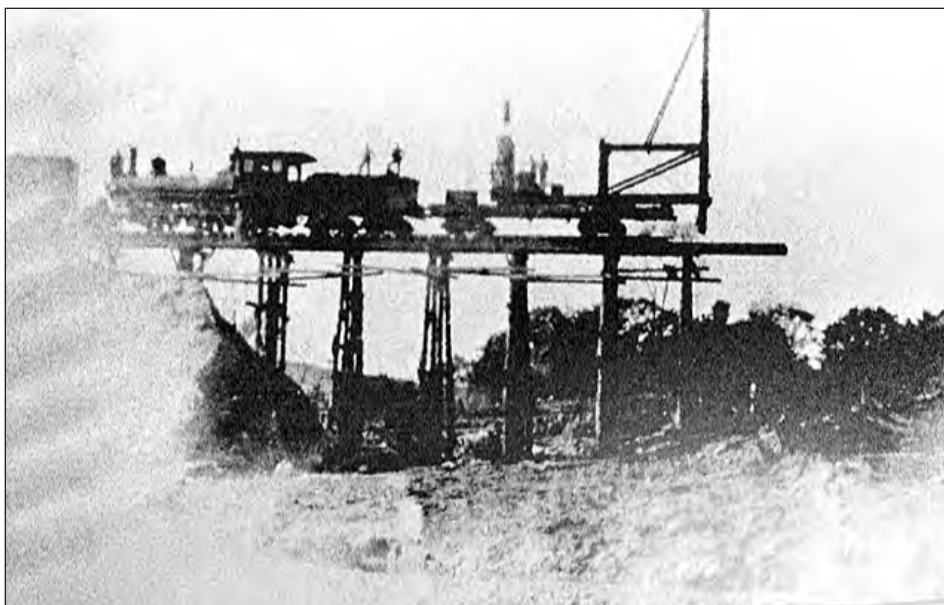
Lester's revolutionary milk jar has yet to yield any solid ties to Orange County, but the same cannot be said for these next two innovative bottles. At the same time Lester patented his milk jar, Alex Campbell of Brooklyn was leading a prospering milk delivery business that sprouted from a single milk route in 1862. Owner of creameries across Long Island, New Jersey and Orange County, Campbell was said to have introduced an experimental milk bottle on Jan. 11, 1878.

Campbell appears to have never patented this bottle. While no verified examples have surfaced, one bottle from my collection might very well be a match. The bottle, which surfaced on eBay a few years ago, is shaped like a pickle jar but features the initials "A.C.M. Co." embossed in script. Extensive research has led me to conclude that the Alex Campbell Milk Co. was the only business to use this abbreviation and while one may never know the truth behind this bottle, it certainly seems plausible.

Following his experimental milk bottle, Alex Campbell's next business venture connects one of the most important

milk bottles directly to Orange County. According to former historian and milk bottle collector Toni Knipp, Campbell joined with Dr. Reuben R. Stone between 1878 and 1881 with the intention of bottling fresh Orange County milk. The result was the New York Dairy Co. Limited, which had offices in Brooklyn and a state-of-the-art creamery in the village of Monroe. The bottle of choice used by Campbell and Stone was the 1880 Warren Milk Jar — the first patented milk bottle that uses the standard milk bottle shape.

Dairies that use the Warren Jar are regarded as being some of the first to enter the milk bottle trade. Given that the jar was most likely patented after the New York Dairy Co. Limited was created, it is very possible that Campbell and Stone were among the first to use this ancestor to the modern milk bottle. The New York Dairy Co. Ltd. did not last long as a partnership and by 1881, Dr. Stone's New York Milk & Cream Co. was shipping bottled milk in its own bottles manufactured by A.V. Whiteman. Alex Campbell continued his own business



TOP: The construction method used along the New York and Erie railroad in Chester. The trestles, once driven deep into the ground, would be back-filled with gravel and dirt (*Warwick Valley Historical Society*).

BOTTOM: A postcard of the original railroad station in Chester where Thaddeus Selleck worked as an agent starting in 1841 (*author's collection*).

for decades, using the New York Dairy Co. name on occasion.

The three revolutionary milk bottles discussed began the rise of the milk bottle craze across the United States. While most family farms would not adopt milk bottles until after 1900, bottles made between 1880 and 1900 were popular among the dealers who sold milk in their city stores. The majority of these bottles are known as “tin-tops,” named for the tin closure that kept the milk safe over long journeys. These bottles are among the most desirable by collectors not only for their closures but, in rare cases, their advertising. That’s right, many of these early bottles, especially from Orange County, featured embossing stating “pure Orange County milk” or “Orange County milk and cream” to promote their exceptional product.

In an era where modern communications were still conceptual, it is fascinating to see how farmers and dealers alike advertised their goods. Not all tin-top milk bottles featured such advertising, but that certainly does not detract from their desirability for collectors. Such examples include bottles from the Orange County Milk Association, formed in 1844 through the acquisition of Thaddeus Selleck’s pioneering milk shipping business. The new company built a positive reputation among New York City’s elite, which only grew due to more efficient shipment by rail.

With prosperity came the use of milk bottles featuring numerous variations of embossings. What they all share in common, however, is the prominent keystone which, when accompanied with the lettering “Orange County Milk Association,” would have made a powerful impact among consumers looking to buy the region’s purest milk.

While the tin-top dominated the milk bottle scene in the late 19th century, the innovation of the cardboard milk cap coincided with a drastic increase in milk

bottle use by farmers after 1900. Replacing the cumbersome tin closure with a disposable cardboard cap allowed these bottles to fit more comfortably within households, and with farmers suffering at the hands of greedy and corrupt milk dealers, selling milk in their own bottles became an appealing alternative.



Rare pyroglazed bottles used by Albert W. Smith of Highland Mills, N.Y., and Henry L. Nielsen of Warwick, N.Y.

It is important to recognize the vast number of farms in Orange County during this point, with more than 4,000 farms estimated to be in operation during the turn of the 20th century. While this is the total number of all farms, local dairymen estimate that at least half of these produced milk and a large majority owned personalized milk bottles. On average, each town in Orange County had fifteen to twenty dairies that used milk bottles, and larger cities such as Middletown or Newburgh exceeded fifty. Due to the similarities in milk bottles, it is often the intimate stories that give them an extra level of interest and character.

One such example from my collection is a bottle from Pavek Farms, which once operated in the village of Highland Falls, N.Y. The bottle resembles most other average milk bottles, but the story behind it is far more captivating for me. Six years ago, one of my teachers in public school was Ms. Anne Pavek. She is the granddaughter of the farm’s owner, Frank Pavek, and mentioned to me that although she once had a bottle from the farm, it had been damaged. I immediately reached out to the National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors and a few weeks later, I received a package from my good friend Roger Cook Thomas. Inside was a pint-size Pavek Farms bottle that I was able to give to Anne later that school year. I had the honor to find my own bottle a year later, but having that intimate and personal connection to local history through those who helped to shape it continues to bring me great pleasure. The personal stories that these bottles tell are rare, unique, and priceless.

Most milk bottles shared a consistent shape from 1900 to 1960, with a few variations. One exception was the cream-top style, where an extra bulge was added at the neck of the bottle where the rich cream would collect above the milk. This addition gave Frank Pecora of Hazelton, Pennsylvania, an idea whereby adding the rendition of a baby’s face onto the bulged portion, the bottle would grab the attention of young parents who served milk to their children. In 1936, Pecora patented the “baby-face” milk bottle and the design soon gained much popularity.

Pecora sent salesmen across the country to advertise this new bottle, with one traveling to the Orange County city of Newburgh. Here, the CFS dairy company, organized by dairymen Harry B. Cooley, Charles A. Flynn, and John J. Schwer ten years earlier, filed for an order of these unique bottles and became only one of two dairies in Orange County to use them. Even Mr. Herman Crowley, of the large Crowley’s milk company in Bing-

In Orange County, the Middletown Milk and Cream company of Slate Hill was one of a few dairies in Orange County to use these “war bottles,” with one from my collection emphasizing the need to preserve vitamins when cooking food since “food fights too” in a war. These artifacts might just be the most unique form of war propaganda and exemplify the versatility of pyroglazed milk bottles in an era where advertising was rapidly evolving.

For years, glass milk bottles were the mainstay of milk transportation and storage for families across the world. Today, glass milk bottles and the future of dairy farming in general is grim. Orange County has less than 40 dairy farms left, a steep decline from its highest recorded total of approximately 2,900. Those that remain are concentrated in the heartland, with the southeastern and western regions now practically devoid of any milk production. Glass milk bottles are long gone, as is home delivery. Even the larger corporations are feeling the strain of

this transition, with the once strong milk giant Borden's having recently declared bankruptcy in 2020. With more and more farms closing each year, dairy production continues to dwindle, both in Orange County and the surrounding region.

While milk's growing unpopularity has only become largely noticeable in recent years, the decline of dairy farming has been slow and steady. As early as 1962, the milk producers Borden's and Sheffield abandoned local deliveries, citing “controversies over the effects of certain organic molecules in milk on the human body such as cholesterol and strontium 90.” According to present-day data from the USDA, Americans drink nearly 37 percent less milk today than they did 50 years ago. Among many factors, the primary reason for this plummet is the replacement of milk with other beverages. Vitamin D and calcium, two important components of milk that benefit the human body, can be found today in various forms from pills to nutritional bars. In addition, a global

shift away from fat-based liquids and the development of products suitable for individuals who are lactose intolerant hurt the sale of milk.

Orange County's remaining dairy farms face insurmountable difficulties, but their legacy is far from forgotten. The hobby of collecting these milk bottles preserves how this dying art was once a major facet of Orange County's economy. Like other genres of bottles, milk bottles have developed a great following that has led to the creation of societies such as the National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors. However, I think one of the most important aspects of these artifacts is the history they share.

This often overlooked group of bottles shows us, on a local level, the importance of Orange County in the dairy industry and, on a larger field, its effective use as a tool of advertising. Ultimately, bottles are not artifacts, but rather evidence of the hands, hearts and hard work of those who preceded us.

FOR SALE!

- **Set of Three Figural Skull Poison Bottles + Extremely rare Trade Card**
- **Selling the set only - no individual pieces (one example with rare, 'plain base')**
- **Bids starting at \$10,000. To discuss, or for additional information, please contact:**
 - **Dave at drlambert@dialez.net, or: 920.863.3306**

