

## The men took over

### The cheese dairy workforce 1840-1930

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#### OBJECTIVE

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For many hundreds of years the production of cheese was done by women. This pattern shifted when the production of milk products became industrialized. When the production units became larger in the middle of the 1800's, men came into the business. In the first years they helped with heavy and mechanical jobs. After a few decades they took over most of the central jobs as well. In the 1930's men dominated the central jobs while women were pushed to work in packing or in similar secondary and low paid functions. It was a shift in total cultural dimensions, technology, and changes in job function.

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#### Women took care of the milk

Since the first written evidence from Icelandic sagas, we know that handling milk in the Nordic countries was in the hands of women; it was tightly connected with the preparation of food. A natural division of labour in the dominating rural communities developed, where men took care of the daily hard work outdoors and women worked indoors. The division of work was sharp. You never saw a man milk a cow, which was one of the many cultural rules in a rather static society based on tradition.

This division of labour was essential. The farm was a unit with specific roles. If a peasant woman died, her husband immediately found a new wife. Only a very short time could pass before there needed to be a woman to handle the children, manage the maids, and prepare the food for the husband and servants.

#### Dairymaid became a profession

Dairymaids became a profession quite slowly. Large estates with rich noblemen wanted high quality butter and cheese. They employed a dairymaid to handle the job on full time. "Mælkedej", and later "mejerske", became the Danish word for this title. In 1495 the Aagaard farm had a dairymaid who took care of the milk from 52 cows. She apparently supervised several milkers and maids to help her.

The government turned its attention to the delivery of butter and cheese to the court and officials in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. In 1521, 184 peasants from the Netherlands were called upon to make an exemplary peasant community in Amager, near the capital.

These were not the last people to come from the Netherlands (or Holland, as it is called in Danish) to help raise the quality of Danish products. These people created a new organization of the work called "hollænderi" ("made by Dutchmen"). Only a few very big estates had a hollænderi like this. Often, only the dairymaid handled the dairy and a local cowherd handled the cows. But still, the word hollænderi was used and became synonymous for 'dairy'.

#### The heydays of the dairymaids

During the first part of the 1800s the dairymaids increased in importance. The best dairymaids were coveted and all farms – big or small – wanted to have a dairymaid.

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*Handling milk has always been a female job. Here is an illustration from the church in Thingsted, circa 1480. When problems with the production of butter arose the devil had a finger in the game, according to superstition.*

The export of butter to the British market became the most important product. Thanks to the work of the dairymaids, Danish butter became high quality and was reasonably priced. Therefore, the Danish export took over and outperformed other countries.

The economic system made a specific management method convenient for many estates. The dairymaid became responsible for her own department at an estate. If she was clever and handled her job she could acquire a large income. From some estates she had a salary, including a bonus that was higher than everybody else in the estate system. It was a special situation for a woman to have a higher income than important men like the cowherd and the manager.

Dairymaids were often very high status in the otherwise very strict hierarchy of an estate. She had her own chamber and it often had a stove. She often ate with the noble family at meals.

### **Dairymaid education**

No official education existed for the trade. It was organized as many similar tasks in the peasant society according to tradition. She learned the job through a kind of apprenticeship with a practical education. Like other jobs, such as the cook maid, she had one or two years at different farms before she became a young girl helping the dairymaid. She often shifted places after a half or full year to learn the trade at another farm. Most apprentices were daughters of farmers from relatively large farms. They learned to handle the milk from their mother, and as explained in a later chapter, the goal was not to be a dairymaid for life but to learn the handicraft before they married and became responsible for the milk at their own farm.

We have financial accountings from the aforementioned dairymaid, Hanne Nielsen, that show the market value of being a good teacher. She received support for traveling to countries with fine traditions of making cheese, and her own cheeses very often won awards at dairy exhibitions; she was well known in Denmark. Around 1870 she earned 300 DKR annually to take on a two-year apprentice, as much as married farmhand earned for a half year! Mrs. Nielsen had a large crew of apprentices working for free, and she sold the cheese from her own shop in Copenhagen, earning 10,000 DKR a

year in the best years.

The importance of a good dairymaid was her knowledge of new methods for the preparation of milk, butter, and cheese.

### **The men entered the women's world**

The female monopoly of handling milk began to be threatened in the early 1800's. The lords at some estates met and discussed how dairy products could be improved. Many discussions were held in the Danish Royal Agricultural Society.

The growing economic national interest in the important export goods received focus in budding agricultural research. The focus was on the very large number of small farms; education and consultant services were the means to increase knowledge.

Soon men dominated in the dairy business. The first consultant started his visits to farms in 1869. He gave practical counselling in the process of handling milk, as well as in the handling and care of the cattle, which was an important issue to get a healthy and large yield of milk.

Men were, for many years, the only people employed at research institutes; not until 1891 did the first female candidate graduate from the college.

Milking cows became a very important issue when the number of cows increased along with the higher productivity of each cow. It was a complicated interaction between the quality of the fodder and the milk. Therefore, 14 day courses on how to milk were established in 1900. Of the 77 courses taught in the following years, 1,670 people joined, of which 975 were men.

### **The cream separator revolution**

A very important step in dairy technology happened in 1878, when the modern cream separator was invented. In a few years the technology was installed at many large estate dairies. This machine made a new kind of dairy possible. A lot of new dairies were established in which enterprising men bought a separator and installed a little steam engine or horse-run.

This was a revolution in several ways. The women in the countryside lost tedious work that was moved to the dairies. The housewives no longer handled the work of making butter

*Dairymaids were proud of their work and liked to be photographed with their work tools, as Karen Nielsen in 1881 with her cheese grip (Aalborg Stadsarkiv).*



and cheese. However, they were still responsible for the milking and their work was increased thanks to the still expanding production of milk.

The dairymaid institution was seriously hit. It was no longer necessary for young women to learn how to handle milk for making butter and cheese before they married and became responsible for the household on a farm.

### The men took over - dairies as a patriarchal system

Dairies led by female dairymaids almost disappeared. Even though they had the best qualifications for how to handle the milk and make butter, they did not fit into an agrarian society based on the patriarchal system. Only a few women took over the management of dairies; those exceptions of this pattern at the new institutions are mentioned later.

Dairies became copies of farm dairies. A leader – a man – managed the business. He worked as a dairyman with his servants. He handled the servants as a farmer. He decided everything about the work. The employees had no fixed working hours and almost no protection against excessive exploitation.

The wages were low but the employees received food and lodging. The contracts were often similar to those on the farms. You got the position for a half or whole year, though some continued for several years.

The dairies took over the apprentice system from the farms, too. There was no official regulation of the system and the dairies decided when an apprentice graduated. Normally an apprentice could be employed as a dairyman when he had worked 2-3 years at 2-3 dairies. When dairy schools were established a course was demanded for dairymen to get jobs at the largest and best dairies.

Could dairymaids still take over a dairy? Yes, and some few did. The number was not much higher than 15. If a woman at that time was 25 years old and unmarried she was of age. When she married she lost her empowerment to the man.

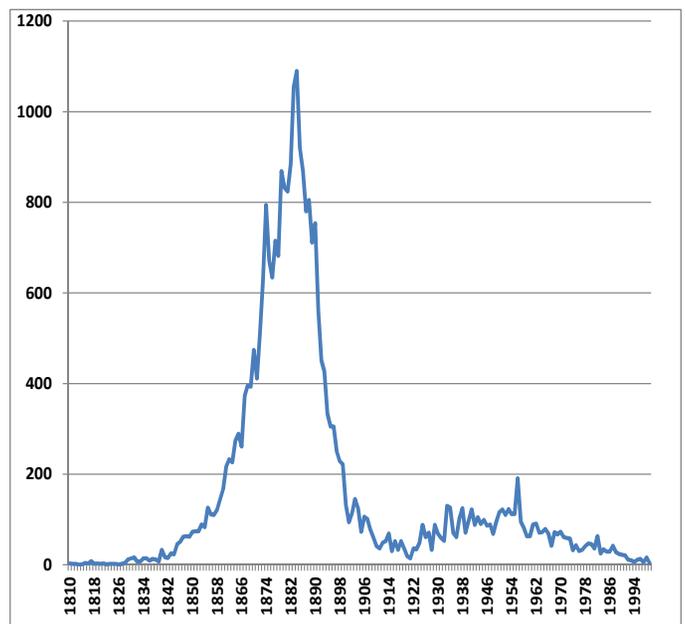
This pattern is seen in the new organization established for workers at dairies, "Mejeristforeningen af 1907". It later developed to become a genuine trade union, but for the first years it was for both the managers and for the employees. It took a decade or more for it to become a trade union.

The work at an industrial-driven dairy was hard. In 1910 the work of weighing milk was four ton milk an hour for four hours. Later, the skimmed milk was weighed again four ton milk an hour. In the cheese store, 300-400 cheeses had to be flipped and dried an hour and a cheese vessel with two ton had to be stirred.

*Number of mentions a year of "dairymaid" in Danish newspapers.*

*For the first many years it is primary estates and large farms requesting new employees. Some are dairymaids offering their competences. Since the 1930s some of the mentions are from editorial texts at birthdays or deaths.*

A new invention was installed at dairies that combined the processes of butter production: churning and kneading. The kneading was an especially important job for the dairymaids, but with the machine combining the two processes the most important work disappeared.





*Large industrial dairies needed men to handle the hard work, as here at the largest dairy, Trifolium, around 1915 (ABA).*

### Dairymaids took over the butter – and the managers

In general, the dairy managers were men, as were most dairy workers. A job with a lot of mechanical tools, accounting, and some scientific knowledge was thought to be a matter for men. One job was for women: butter production. In the butter chamber a woman's knowledge and skill, learned from the dairies at large farms, was still important. Scientifically-based measuring and weighing were introduced, but this scientific approach had not yet surpassed the use of senses.

Another job the dairymaids took over was that of housewife. Many of the dairy managers at the new dairies were young, unmarried men. They were responsible for delivering food to the employees, cleaning their rooms, and washing their clothes.

In reality, this combination of a dairyman and dairymaid was superb. Many dairy managers married the dairymaid and this solved many problems. They had a later advantage when he applied for better jobs as manager. In 1918 650 of the almost 1,500 dairies had dairymaids, and 190 were married to the manager.

### Dairymaid numbers

If we look at mentions of "dairymaid" in newspapers we can create an interesting graph. The first mentions were in the 1790s, and from the middle of the 1800s the numbers rose sharply.

Most mentions were announcements from dairies wanting to employ a dairymaid, or, on fewer occasions, dairymaids wanting to get in contact with dairies. Since the 1930s the mentions were often in connection with mentions at birthdays and deaths.

An analysis of the Danish census of the mention of dairymaids can give a better understanding of the institution:

- 1) A typical dairymaid was unmarried and between 22 and 25 years.
- 2) Most married dairymaids were married to the owner of a farm.
- 3) Only a few unmarried dairymaids continued in their job 10 years and more.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the census shows that the 'dairymaid' institution was an educational job for young women for one or two years before they went on with their life. They generally married a farmer and, as the housewife, then handled the milk processing on the farm.

When industrialized dairies were established after the primary installation of a cream separator, the job of milk handling lost its importance. In a few years the educational job of a dairymaid lost its function.

The new dairies were managed as institutions. The male dominated business and societal rules gave men priority for the job of manager.

The new theoretically-based education for dairy work was arranged according to the future dairy managers – the best and longest education was, for quite a while, only for men.

The dairy could, in theory, be a new workplace for women. For the first few decades only unmarried women fit into the patriarchal system, where they lived full time at the dairy. In general the job was physically hard, used a lot of new mechanical machinery, and was based on accounting and scientific measuring, with which men had priority.

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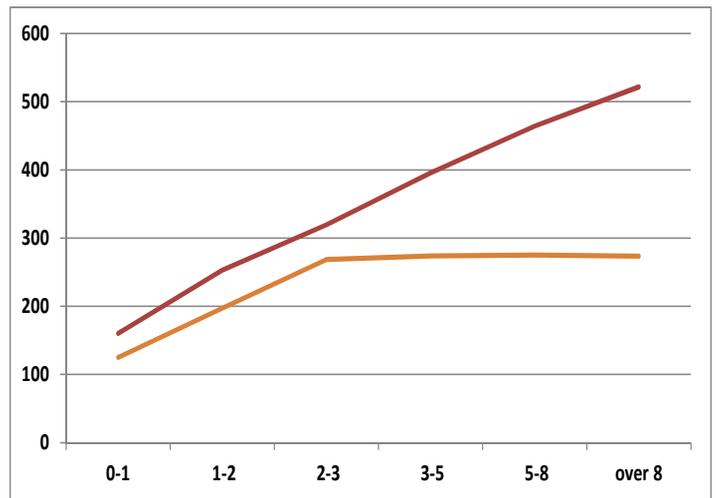
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Even though women composed around 20% of the employees at dairies they were not engaged in the trade unions. Only a single woman joined the annual meeting in Mejeriforeningen af 1907 in 1917 (ABA).



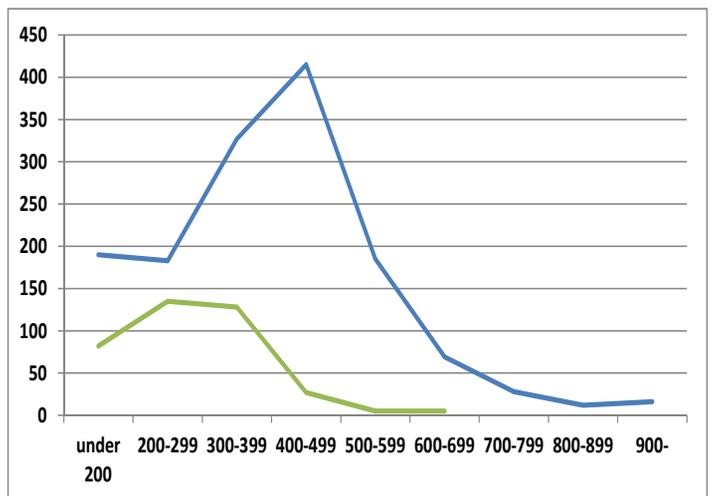
Wage after seniority 1910.

The development of the wages for women (orange) and men (red) follows the same pattern for the first three years. Thereafter the dairies would not pay the women a higher salary since the men were considered more experienced and therefore of a higher value.



Wage DKR for a year at Danish dairies 1914.

The official statistic shows a class distinction between women (green) and men (blue) working at dairies. Twenty-one percent of the workforce were women; only a very few had an annual income over 500 DKR and none over 700 DKR.



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## Notes

1 Drejer p. 25.

2 Drejer p. 29-36.

3 Hansen p. 109-110.

4 Appel p. 274.

5 Den Kongelige Veterinær og Landbo Højskole p. 205.

6 Klitmøller 106.

7 Hansen p. 260.

8 Mælkeindustriarbejdernes Forbund p. 37.

9 Nielsen p. 34.

10 Appel p. 372.

11 Mediestream, search on two different spellings of the Danish word of dairymaid: "mejerske" and "meierske" 2020-02-22.

12 Search in the database of The Royal Library on "mejerske" and "meierske" 2020-02-11.

13 Mælkeindustriarbejdernes Forbund p. 41.

14 Nielsen p. 39.