

Warren “Short” Dietrich’s Milk Route

by

Mark Wehr

This is my recollection of my uncle, Warren “Short” Dietrich’s milk route when I was a 10-year-old boy. I only went with Uncle Short a few times. The parts I remember are vivid but there are many gaps in the mornings’ events. These early memories must have had a lasting impression because 50 years later I work for one of the few companies that manufactures and sells milk cooling and storage equipment for dairy farm use. The old saying, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” is really true.

Uncle Short wasn’t actually short. My mother tells me as a kid he was the youngest and shortest of the kids he ran around with and he acquired the nickname “Short”. The nickname stuck and he was always known to me as Uncle Short. I remember him as a robust man fully capable of handling the 100 lb milk cans that he dealt with on a daily basis.

Uncle Short was married to my aunt, Mary Wehr. They lived in Cowan on the corner of Glover and Diefenderfer Roads. Aunt Mary did not enjoy good health, had no children and died at the age of 32 in February of 1961. Uncle Short farmed two farms with his brother G. Earl Dietrich and their mother who was still living and helping on the home farm. My memories may be from the late summer of 1961 because I believe Uncle Short stayed with his mother as much as he did at his home after Aunt Mary passed away earlier that year. Uncle Short and his mother milked the cows on the home farm while G. Earl and his family milked at the other farm. These farms are still in the Dietrich family. Roy Dietrich, Earl’s son, lives on the home farm today (he is our neighbor.) The home farm is on Buffalo Creek Road less than a mile from

Cowan and the other farm adjoins the home farm and is along Snake Hill Road. Both farms are in Buffalo Township.

The day started for me around 6:00 am at the home farm. Milk had to be delivered to the receiving station before a certain time in the morning to maintain as much freshness as possible, so milk hauling was a job for people who got up early. Uncle Short and his mother had already finished milking their cows and were headed to the house for breakfast when I arrived. I remember Uncle Short stirring a can of milk to mix in the cream before taking a pitcher of milk to the house for his cereal. Uncle Short did not haul his own milk. I believe his brother Earl hauled the milk from their two farms to Milton because they were Dairymen's League shippers.

Uncle Short's milk route and truck were owned by Harvey Wetzel. Harvey and his wife Jenny owned and operated Wetzel's country store in Cowan. I don't know the financial end of their arrangement but Uncle Short had to keep an eye on the oil level in the truck and daily additions of oil came from Harvey's supply. The truck was kept in a shed behind the store in Cowan. We started the route from there.

The truck seemed very old to me so I suppose it was made in the 40's. It had a single rear axle with dual wheels and an open flat bed with about 30" sides that hinged down on both sides and the tailgate section hinged down as well. The truck bed held 6 or 7 cans across and about twice that many long. Milk cans hold 10 gallons and milk weighs 8.6 pounds to the gallon. With the weight of the can included each can of milk weighed right around 100 pounds. I recall the average dairyman/producer had about 6 or 8 cans of milk.

The logistics of cooling, storing and hauling milk in cans was partly learned on these early runs and partly from my own experience as a can shipper on my own dairy in the early 70's. Just like milking cows twice a day, 365 days a year, milk was hauled every day as well. The evening milk was cooled by

mechanical refrigeration to a safe storage temperature below 40°F in one of two types of can coolers (in earlier times milk was cooled in the coldest spring water available on the farm.) One type was an insulated top-loading tank of ice water with a cold plate in the water. The other type was a front-loading insulated box with trays for the cans. The reservoir of ice water and cooling coil was in a tank beside the trays for the cans. This type can cooler had a circulation pump that sprayed chilled water over the cans to cool the milk. I remember the can coolers holding 3 or 4 cans of milk each (I had one of each type on my dairy.) The morning milk was not refrigerated until it got to the receiving station.

Can milk hauling was a morning only, part-time job that was done mostly by certain farmers for some extra outside income. The two can haulers that hauled my milk (before I put in a refrigerated bulk tank) were Ben Chambers and Myron Eberhart. Their trucks and routines were much the same as Uncle Short's.

Dairymen owned twice as many cans as the amount of milk they produced in a day, plus a few extras. Extra cans were needed for the variations in production and if a can got a rusty spot in it the milk inspector would require it to be sent away to be re-tinned. Half of the cans were used on the farm and the other half were on the hauler's truck. The producer's number was painted on both sides of the neck of the can and on the lid. Each producer's cans were located together on the truck depending on the loading facilities at each farm. Some stops required dropping one side or the other before pulling along side a loading platform; other stops required lifting the cans from the ground to the truck bed. The cold evening milk was all loaded in the center of the truck to help reduce heat gain and the warm morning milk was loaded on the outside rows of the truck, still keeping each producer's cans together in a group to facilitate unloading at the plant.

Uncle Short's truck was an open truck. As time passed, regulations changed and can receiving stations closed. For a time open trucks had to have a tarp to cover the cans. Then trucks had to be insulated, enclosed vans to travel greater distances to fewer receiving stations (by then both morning and evening milk had to be refrigerated.) Today all milk is cooled on the farm in bulk milk tanks and hauled in insulated bulk tanker trucks that may take the milk distances of several states away.

From Cowan we traveled around Buffalo, Kelly and East Buffalo townships picking up milk from the dairies on Uncle Short's route. We worked our way towards Lewisburg where the Sheffield Farms receiving station was located behind the former Bechtel's Restaurant, just off of the intersection of Routes 15 and 192 (now known as the Creamery Building.)

Our first two stops were at the Weaver brothers' farms on both sides of Beaver Run Road just south of Buffalo Creek. Sam Weaver's farm on the west side of Beaver Run Road is now owned by Eugene Oberholtzer and John Weaver's on the east side by Jim Brubaker. These two farms were the first stops because aside from being close to the starting point in Cowan, the Weavers were reliable early risers and were done milking by the time Uncle Short arrived. I remember Uncle Short's amusement at my confusion the first time I went along on the milk route. The Weaver brothers were identical twins (I am told their wives were twins as well) and I couldn't understand how the same man was at both farms.

Uncle Short's route was set up based on two factors; shortest distance traveled and timeliness of the dairymen's milking. Somewhere along the route Uncle Short would grumble a bit about having to back track to pick up at a dairy that was not too speedy in the morning (remember, Short and his mother were done with their milking by 6:00 am.)

I can remember only a few of the names of the dairymen on Uncle Short's route. I know we picked up milk around Mazeppa and stopped at a dairy along Black Run. I think the Paul Jarrett farm, west of Kelly Point, was on the route.

The most I could help with was getting out of the truck first to drop a side, unloading yesterday's empty cans and maybe rolling full cans of milk if the concrete in the milk house was level with no cracks. Milk cans could be rolled quite handily by tipping them to their balance point, gripping the edge of the lid and using a hand over hand technique.

If the can cooler was a top loader Uncle Short could step up on a cement block, pull the can out with a sweeping motion and set it on the floor without getting wet from the water dripping off of the can. A few dairies had a rolling track with block and tackle above the cooler to load and unload the top loaders but Uncle Short didn't need to use it. Partial cans of milk in a top loader were a little tricky. They had to be taken out first because if left for last they would tip over in the cold water and the milk inside would become contaminated with the cold water. Front loaders were easier to load and unload.

The returned, empty cans were opened and turned upside down on a rack for the next day's use. Milk can lids were a tapered press fit. They were closed by thumping down on the top of the lid with the palm of your hand and opened with a sharp rap on the edge of the lid with a rubber mallet (at the plant) or more commonly on the dairy with the palm of your hand, if you could stand it.

Our last stop was about 9:30 or 10:00 am at Albert Slear's farm along route 45 in East Buffalo Township. His was the closest dairy farm to Lewisburg that Uncle Short had on his route. The farm is presently owned by Allan Burkholder. Albert was the father of Gary Slear, prominent member of the Union County Historical Society. The story goes that Albert said when the can

deck closed at the Lewisburg receiving station he would not modernize by putting in a bulk tank but would sell his cows. That's exactly what he did. When the plant closed he retired and built the brick house along route 45 where Aden Weaver now lives.

At the Sheffield Creamery we got in line and waited our turn at the unloading deck on the west side of the building. Running your route early helped preserve freshness of the milk and it also meant less waiting at the plant. The right hand side of the truck was dropped and we pulled along side the conveyor rack that went into the creamery. Each producer's cans were kept together as they entered the creamery. The warm and cold milk from each producer was dumped into a tank that was mounted on scales. Each producer's milk was weighed (dairyman were paid on weight not volume), then the commingled milk was cooled instantly as it was pumped through a heat exchanger press pack that was connected to a big brine chiller in the creamery. A similar instant cooling process is used on some of today's large commercial dairy farms.

Once, while helping by rolling full cans over to Uncle Short at the edge of the truck I lost the balance of a can and it tipped over. The lid came off and more than half the can was spilled before Uncle Short could snatch it up. I was mortified and disgusted with myself for spilling the milk. Uncle Short said "Don't worry about it," he would talk to the dairyman. I don't know whose milk it was and when asked about it later, Uncle Short said the dairyman said it was okay. I never found out if it was really okay or whether Uncle Short reimbursed the dairyman somehow. A can of milk was a good share of a dairyman's daily production back then.

After unloading we drove around to the north side of the building where the steam cleaned cans rattled down a conveyor with rollers underneath. The cans were really hot! Each producer's cans were loaded in the same spot

where they came off. Milk production varied greatly from dairy to dairy and by time of year so Uncle Short had to always make adjustments to the can placements. Sometimes an empty can was laid on its side (a can was about twice as high as it was wide) to take up an empty space to keep the cans from shifting. Once we were loaded with empties we went back to Cowan and parked the truck in the shed for tomorrow's run. It was around 11:00 am by then and Uncle Short would take me into Wetzel's store. We both had an ice cream bar from their freezer case before he took me home.

At the time, I was just going along with Uncle Short on his milk route. I did not realize I was participating in the endless process of change from a bygone era. Today, most people still know the painted eagle umbrella holder in the front hall is a milk can but they don't know much about how it was used. In the future, even fewer people will know what it is, let alone anything about its daily use.

✧ ACCOUNTS ✧

Editor's Note: Readers can learn more about Union County's dairymen in, Hertha Wehr et al., "Cows on the Landscape and a Milkman at your Door; Dairy in Union County, 1900-2005." *Heritage*, Vol. 22. Lewisburg, Union County Historical Society.