



Hand carved Pennsylvania Dutch butter mold.
Earl and Ada Robacker Collection.
Photos by Karas

COME, BUTTER, COME!

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The study of regional foods and cooking traditions is an important part of folklife research. A large number of these traditions in regions of the United States relate to dairy products of European origin, which go back to prehistoric times, when men first domesticated milk-producing animals. One of the problems posed by a perishable product like milk is its preservation in forms that can remain edible. Early in man's development, three processes capable of dealing with this problem were discovered: the souring of milk, the production of butter, and the chemical reconstruction of the solid ingredients in milk into cheese, a durable product that lasts for months.

The soured foods produced in the cultures of Europe and Asia are very ancient. Adopted by our primitive ancestors from necessity, they became staples and some have remained so to the present. Sour cream is a popular food in America today. It comes to us from European peasant cultures via the Jewish emigration from eastern Europe.

A more widespread food in early America was curdled sour milk, which in various forms is also an "in" food at the present time. It was known by a fascinating variety of names. The principal authority on America dialects, Hans Kurath, says that there is no national or literary term for curdled sour milk. Instead, he notes, we use a number of regional and local terms. These include *clabber* in the South, *clabbered milk* in the Ohio valley, *bonny-clabber* in the Philadelphia area and central Pennsylvania down into the upland south, *bonny-clapper* in eastern New England, *lobbered milk* or *loppered milk* in western New England and parts of New York, *cruddled milk* (a Scotch-Irish term) in western Pennsylvania, and *thick milk* in eastern Pennsylvania (from Pennsylvania German *dicke Millich*). The words *clabber*, *clapper*, and *lobbered*, *loppered* are anglicized forms of Gaelic *hlaber*, meaning "thick" or "mud"; *bonny* is from the Gaelic word for milk.

Yogurt is a similar dish that arose in the pastoral cultures of Central Asia. In the nineteenth century it entered the urban culinary culture of western Europe via Paris, and is now a stylish health food in the United States—another example of a primitive or folk food of lowly origins which has been graduated into general use on another level of culture.

Butter Technology

Butter technology is a fast-disappearing art of the American farmwife. Butter, of course, is made from cream. In the days before the invention of the DeLaval separator, the cream was skimmed from the top of cooled milk with a skimming spoon and placed in a cream crock until there was enough for a churning. Until it was ready to skim, the milk was stored either in the dairy rooms of the farmhouse, in ground cellars, in springhouses, or in crocks in the kitchen during the winter, usually near the stove in a milk cupboard. Churns were of two main traditional patterns. One was the vertical upright model, with a dasher which one thrust up and down until the butter began to "come". The other was the barrel-type churn, with a crank attached to a reel with four paddles inside that churned the cream into butter. The process of churning took from half an hour to two hours, depending on the stubbornness of the cream in assuming the desired consistency.

In older times when the butter was stubborn and refused to come, our forefathers sometimes attributed the recalcitrance to a witch's spell. There were supposed to be "butter witches" who specialized in such operations. To make counter-witchcraft, one sure-fire method was to plunge a red-hot poker into the churn. It was believed that this released the butter from the spell, and damaged the witch at the same time. Based on European prototypes, such stories are common among the folk tales of every American region.

A simpler, less occult method of "helping" the butter to come was to recite a butter charm. These

were sung or chanted and, in addition to their original purpose, provided a pleasant accompaniment to the laborious task of churning. One example, from Georgia, is:

Come, butter, come!
Peter's waiting at the gate,
Waiting for his butter cake.
Come, butter, come!

Butter was a basic item in the farm economy, one of the principal offerings of the farmer or farmer's wife to the network of farmers' markets in the nearby cities. In earlier days farmers in outlying areas salted down their butter in crocks or tubs and wagoned it to the market town once a year, or traded it to the local storekeeper. Others who lived nearer town "tended" market week after week with fresh butter. In the nineteenth century "Philadelphia butter" produced in the springhouses of the Quaker and Pennsylvania German dairy areas near Philadelphia had an extremely high reputation. The Philadelphia market system produced several advancements in butter technology, such as butter tubs and other gear which were pictured in the farm



*Pennsylvania churn and crock from the Earl and Ada Robacker Collection.
Photo by Karas.*

periodicals and adopted in other areas. In New York state, which was also renowned for dairying, Orange County had the reputation of producing the finest butter.

A byproduct in churning was the very rural drink called buttermilk. In pasteurized form this has now become a popular food for diet-conscious city and suburban dwellers. It was not always a favorite drink. One seventeenth century New Englander, complaining at having to drink water, left us this testimony to the low status of buttermilk: "I dare not preferre it [water] before good Beere as some have done, but any man would choose it before Bad Beere, Wheay or Buttermilk." Buttermilk was not wasted in those times, however. It was fed to the pigs or used in cooking. Housewives used it instead of milk as an ingredient in pies, biscuits, cookies, cakes, pancakes (buckwheat cakes and flannel cakes), and other everyday American foods.

Cheese Production

Cheese production in rural America was more complicated than butter production, because it

involved a variety of products with varying techniques and equipment. The cheese products of America were inherited from the highly developed dairy cultures of Europe and the British Isles.

Technically, cheese is manufactured by isolating the solids in milk (casein, fats, and ash) into a product that can be preserved and is easy to transport. A catalyst known as "rennet" renders the casein insoluble, thus freeing the watery portions of the milk. As the nursery rhyme about Little Miss Muffet explains, two elements are involved, curds and whey. The curds are the basis of cheese, which ranges from the hard cheeses which are grated for use in soups and hot dishes, through moderately hard cheeses like cheddar, to the soft or white cheeses, of which cottage cheese is the best example.

Cottage cheese is the simplest of all American cheeses to produce. The traditional procedure, once known by heart by most American housewives, was given in an 1856 cookbook:

Take one or more quarts of sour milk, put it in a warm place and let it remain until the whey separates from the curd; then pour it into a three-cornered bag, hang it up, and let it drain until every particle of whey has dripped from it; then turn it out, and mash with a spoon until very fine, after which add a little milk or cream, with salt to taste; before sending it to table (if liked) dredge a little black pepper over the top.

In the summer, the curd bag was hung up out of doors, often under the grape arbor which adjoined the kitchen porch.

"Cottage cheese" is the commercial name. It reflects British origins where the term *cottage* means a small farmhouse and *cotter* a farm laborer with a small holding. Another regional term for it is *Dutch cheese*, found in western New England and referring to the Hudson Valley Dutch culture. This term was carried westward with the New England migrations into New York state, the Western Reserve area of Ohio, and northern Pennsylvania. Below the Dutch cheese area, from southeastern Pennsylvania to the Midwest, is an area where the commonest name for cottage cheese is the Pennsylvania German loanword *smearcase* (German *Schmierkäse*). However, in the original Holland Dutch area, the Hudson Valley and adjoining parts of New Jersey, cottage cheese is called *pot cheese*, based on the Dutch *pot kees*. In eastern New England the most common term is *sour milk cheese*, and on the New Hampshire coast and in Maine one says simply *curd* or *curd cheese*. In the Carolinas the term *clabber cheese* is used.

Related to cottage cheese are the fancier soft cream cheeses. The principal American variety is now known commercially as Philadelphia cream cheese. This was once a country product and is related to the soft *petit suisse* and *neufchatel* cheeses of Alpine Europe.

Of the traditional cheese-producing areas of the eastern seaboard, those in New England, New York and New Jersey had the highest reputations. Rhode

Island cheese was particularly celebrated, and was exported to England and Barbados in great quantities. Cheshire, Massachusetts, produced a cheese of record size in America, the famous "mammoth cheese" weighing 1,450 pounds, which was sent as a gift to President Jefferson on New Year's Day in 1802. He graciously returned a portion of it to New England to let its Yankee donors see how good their cheese was.

The cheese culture of the Pennsylvania Germans is complex. The center of the cheese-producing area is the eighteenth century settlement of the Swiss Mennonites in Lancaster and Lebanon counties, where at least half a dozen traditional cheeses are known. Among them is one called *Tsieherkees*, which some scholars connect with European *Ziegenkäse* (goat cheese) because of its yellow color. In English it is called *egg cheese*. The ingredients include boiling milk, curdled milk, eggs, salt, and saffron. This cheese is associated with the Pentecost season in the spring, and is also found in the Pennsylvania German settlements of Ontario.

The Pennsylvania Germans also produce some examples of the "riper" type of cheese whose principal commercial type is *limburger*. One of them is a soft cheese familiarly known in the Dutch country as *Schtink-kees*, or in English "stink cheese." Another of the Pennsylvania cheeses is rumored to have acquired one aspect of its flavor from the fact that it was "aged" in a pile of horse manure. Neither of these, unfortunately for the world, has been graduated into a commercial variety.

The nineteenth century Swiss settlements in Ohio, Wisconsin, and other parts of the Midwest have transplanted Swiss cheese technology and Swiss varieties of cheese into our diet. Among these is the common "Swiss" or *Emmentaler* cheese. Cheese factories were established early in these settlements.

Today, the home production of dairy products has been largely replaced by the dairy industry with its creamery and cheese factory complex. One agricultural historian reports that between 1840 and 1900, the dairy industry was transformed from a simple home enterprise, conducted mostly by farm women, into a highly organized commercial industry conducted almost wholly by men.

The Dairy Cow

The cow and its care and feeding provide another important chapter in American rural life. This topic includes such areas of study as barn and stable architecture, the milk house, the meadow and grazing systems, haymaking with its wagons and hayforks and other tools, fencing, veterinary folk medicine, and the lore of the cow.

Of interest to linguists is the wide variety of names used for cows. Among my own favorites are the names given to his cows by an imaginative Missouri cousin of mine: "Dessie" for a cow born in December, and "Phoebe" for a cow born in February. Cow calls are also fascinating, since they vary from region to region. When one calls cows in the pasture, the most common New England call is *Boss!* or *Bossie!* sometimes preceded by *so* or

come. In the Middle Atlantic states down through Appalachia, one calls *sook!* or *sookie!* or *sook cow!* In the south, the call used is *co-wench!* or *co-inch!* or *co-ee!* More localized variations are seen in the New Jersey *kush!* or *kushie!* and the Pennsylvania German *woo!* or *whoogie!* and in the German calls *komm da!* and *seh!* (Pennsylvania German cows understand Pennsylvania German). Equally varied are the calls to cows during the milking process, to calm them, or to urge them to stand still. These include *so!* *saw!* *sto!* *stehn!* and *hoist!* (with the vowel sound in "high"). According to Hans Kurath, the call is often accompanied by the pet name of the cow, or an affectionate word for "cow" (*bossie*, *wench*, *sookie*, etc.). Calls to calves involve the terms *bossie*, *sookie*, *cossie*, *cussie*, *co-alfie*, *cubbie*, *co-dubbie*, *hommie*, *hommilie*, *tye*, *kees* and *kish*.

Calling the cows home from pasture at the end of the day was once a pleasant chore for older farm children. They tracked the animals in upper pastures or nearby woods by listening for the bell which was worn by the lead cow. Cowbells also had regional



*Pennsylvania milk pitchers from the Earl and Ada Robacker Collection.
Photo by Karas.*

patterns. As late as the early years of this century, some farmers also marked or branded their young cattle and left them to range in the mountain pastures for the summer. This system, transhumance or seasonal nomadism, is an ancient pattern in Alpine Europe and was also found in some areas of the British Isles, especially Ireland.

The material culture of dairy technology, including the tools and vessels used in connection with milking, is another field of folklife research.

Milking was done by hand until the invention of the milking machine, which one agricultural historian described as a wedding of cow and pump. There is a curious division of labor insofar as milking is concerned. Among New Englanders it was the men who normally did the milking, but among Pennsylvania Germans it was the women. This may reflect the earlier division of Swiss rural culture into two main branches, the farmers and the herdsman, each of which disliked the other.

Milking was a basic chore, no matter whether it was done by women or men. In the early twentieth century, when many farmers still milked their own

herds, city children visiting country uncles were always instructed on the etiquette of approaching the cow on the proper side, on the use of the milking stool, on the reassuring calls to give to make the cow stand still, and on the various methods of keeping the switching tail out of the milker's face. If they were lucky, they could witness a demonstration of how to feed the patiently waiting barn cats with a jet of milk, direct from cow to cat.

Milking stools varied in form. Some had four legs and were called "milk benches." Others had three legs and a round seat—the true "milk stool." Others, for the daring and the sober, were made by attaching a square board to one leg or peg in the middle. Milking on these one-leggers was a balancing feat that took some skill. Other milkers simply squatted by the cow.

Butter molds are among the most attractive reminders of the world of the farm dairy in nineteenth century America. Carved in traditional or Victorian designs ranging from the wheat sheaf to the cow, they "printed" the farmer's butter for sale at the market house, or simply were used to decorate the roll of butter for table use. In some cases families had their own distinctive designs by which customers could tell their product, but in most cases the designs were just designs. Today, the neatly carved molds are highly sought-after American rural antiques. The hand-carved ones were often produced by the farmers themselves as winter work. Later on, they were factory-made with victorianized designs, but were still attractive.

The butter and cream crocks made by the old rural potteries have also become collector's items, as have articles of old gray stoneware with blue designs. The woodenware associated with the farm dairy is interesting too. Butter tubs and churns have fallen into disuse, but those preserved in museums are important examples of the rural cooper's art.

The lore of the dairy has left us a heritage of many proverbs and sayings. Examples are "don't cry over spilt milk" and "butter wouldn't melt in her mouth." Our folksong repertoire includes the "pretty milkmaid" category and its parallel, the "broken-hearted milkman" songs. A few examples still current in Virginia include "Butter and Cheese and All," "The Milkman, or Pretty Polly Perkins" (which begins "I'm a broken-hearted milkman"), and "Mother, Buy Me a Milking Pail."

Other examples could be cited "till the cows come home," but these should be sufficient to show the permanent impression farm dairying has made in American folk traditions.

Readers may wish to learn more about the traditions of farm dairying by consulting some of the following references used in preparation of this article.

For a discussion of the souring method of preserving foodstuffs in Swedish peasant culture and its great antiquity, see "Kost" by Brita Egardt in *Schwedische Volkskunde* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1961), pp. 376-378.

The basic butter technology is described historically in *The English Dairy Farmer, 1500-1900*, by G. E. Fussell (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1966). Chapter V, "Butter and Cheese Making"; see also Paul V. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), Chapter XI, "Dairy Farming."

For the European folk beliefs and customs associated with butter and butter making, see the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aber-*

glaubens, I, 1723-1763. Examples from America can be found in *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*, II (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1964), pp. 439-446, Nos. 7531 ff., *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, VII.

Butter charms were collected by interviewing rural informants and through a query published in the *Atlanta Constitution*. For the butter chants of the Pennsylvania Germans, see *Songs Along the Mahantongo*, Walter E. Boyer, Albert F. Buffington, and Don Yoder, editors (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964), p. 120.

One of the most complete European works on cheesemaking is Von Klenze's *Handbuch der Käseerei-Technik* (Bremen, 1884). It lists 156 different varieties of cheese from Europe and America. Also see *Milk and Its Products: A Treatise Upon the Nature and Qualities of Dairy Milk and the Manufacture of Butter and Cheese*, by Henry H. Wing (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911). Wing's classification (pp. 199-200) includes (1) hard or soft cheeses, from the amount of water retained in the cheese; (2) skimmed or cream cheeses, from the amount of fat removed or added, and (3) fermented cheeses.

The procedure for making cottage cheese is from *Widdifield's New Cook Book*, by Hannah Widdifield (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, T. B. Peterson and Bros., 1856), pp. 357-358.

For a recipe for "Old-Fashioned Stink Cheese," see *The Mennonite Community Cookbook: Favorite Family Recipes*, by Mary Emma Showalter (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania; The Mennonite Community Association, 1950), p. 113. The recipe comes from Oregon, but the finished product smells just like the Pennsylvania variety.

A magnificently researched monograph on animal bells is "Herdengeläute und seine Bestandteile," by Konrad Hörmann in *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde*, Volumes XII-XV (1913-1916).

For information on the Irish practice of "booleying," see *Irish Heritage*, by E. Estyn Evans (Dundalk: W. Tempest, Dundalgan Press, 1942), Chapter VI, "Village and Booley." Transhumance is also referred to as seasonal nomadism; as parallels to "booley" in other European cultures, compare the terms, *alp*, *saeter*, and *summer shielings*.

For the elaborate variety of Pennsylvania German designs in butter molds, see "Butter Molds," by Earl R. Robacker in *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, VI: 1 (June 1954) pp. 6-8, also "Philadelphia Butter," in an issue of the same publication, VIII:2 (Fall-Winter 1956-1957), pp. 8-13.

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