



*Spoooner's original herd of 50 Holstein cows.
Each cow was hand milked twice a day by herdsman using buckets and milkin*

Source: Spooner Ranch House archives.

The Dairy Industry Brings Vitality to the Central Coast

*This is the first in a two-part series on the Dairy Industry of the Central Coast.
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A devastating drought of the early 1860s simultaneously changed the landscape and transformed the ranching industry of San Luis Obispo County. Huge tracts of land known as ranchos had dominated agriculture along the Central Coast. The sprawling ranchos were self-reliant communities, applying Spanish ranching traditions to produce food and provide transportation. Cattle trade was sparked by the soaring demand for beef in the east where rapid industrialization was taking place.

Then the three-year drought from 1862 to 1864 decimated cattle herds on the ranchos. Without their cattle, owners were forced to sell off their lands at a loss.

When the drought ended and rainfall returned, local residents saw opportunity in the reorganization of land ownership. Smaller tracts opened up the land for independent farmers and enabled the growth of a new industry, dairy farming. The climate allowed herds to remain outside year-round and the soil produced grass for grazing. These conditions made raising milk-producing breeds possible, and local dairies soon became known for their superior quality of cheese and butter.

With new owners came new methods. Alden Spooner devised a water wheel to power butter churning. Patrick O'Connor pioneered grazing practices that produced a superior quality of cheese. The present town of Harmony is the former site of Excelsior Cheese Factory, the original cheese-making factory operation in the state.

Franklin Riley founded the town of Morro Bay in 1870 as a trading port to transfer these dairy farm and ranch products.

Further dairy expansion attracted immigrants. The area's population of 600 could not supply the labor needed to raise and milk the herds. Young men from the Azores left the hardships caused by earthquakes and failing economies. Thousands of Italian Swiss and Portuguese with suitable occupational skills learned in their homelands came to the central California coast, having a similar climate and offering economic opportunity in the dairy industry.

These skilled pioneers became prominent in the dairy industry—men whose names still identify landmarks, businesses and areas of importance. Joseph Fiscalini arrived from Switzerland with the skills he needed to thrive. George Tognazzini and John Filipponi formed a profitable partnership. E.W. Steele, a well-known dairyman found his farm to be in what he called "cow heaven."

By 1883, San Luis Obispo County was the second largest producer of butter in the state and first in production of cheese. It had transformed from its rancho roots to become a thriving area for dairy farms.