

# PAST TIMES

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## Dip into the History of Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc.

This issue's  
highlights  
include...

### GET THE SCOOP ON THIS FAMILY BUSINESS

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#### CABARRUS COUNTY VETERANS MUSEUM

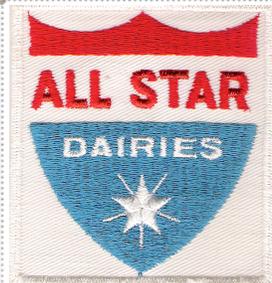
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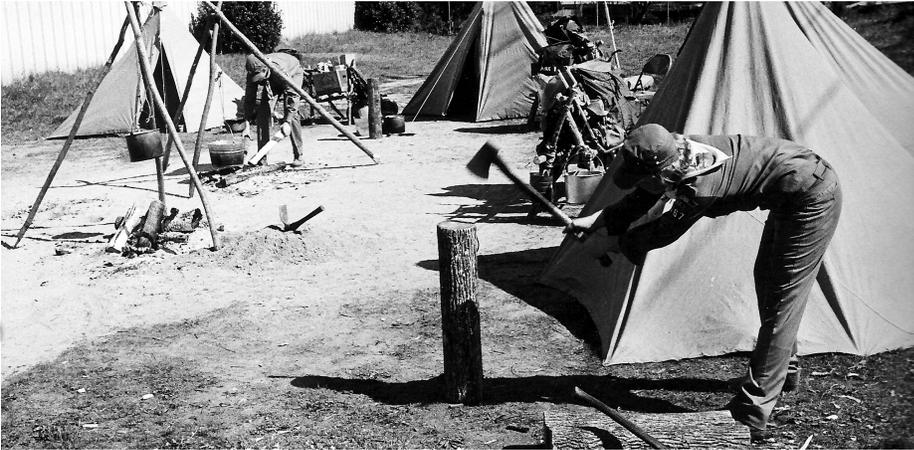
The Creamery's North Church Street location in 1957.



Hopalong Cassidy endorses All Star Dairy products.



Remember this logo?



Boy Scout jamboree in Cabarrus County, circa 1974. Photo by Frankie Furr.



Michael Eury, editor.

Yum yum, have we got a tasty issue for you!

Many Concordians pay regular visits--even during winter months!--to the Cabarrus Creamery in downtown Concord (right next door to Union Street Square, home of the Concord Museum). If you're new to town or are of a relatively recent vintage, however, you might not be aware that the Creamery is much more than the home of the delicious scoops and milkshakes you've grown to love.

The Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc. got its start in the early 20th century as a local dairy processor, and through the ingenuity of Robert L. Burrage, Sr. soon grew into a beloved institution. You'll read about that genesis in this issue's in-depth article penned by Robert E. Burrage, grandson of the Creamery's founder. Robert authored such a captivating history of the Creamery that we've dedicated this entire issue to it.

We've also devoted a special exhibit in the Concord Museum to the Creamery's delectable past. Currently on display is a special exhibit featuring rare and memorable milk bottles, milk and ice cream cartons, ice cream parlor supplies, advertisements, photographs, and other artifacts.

We're also holding a **Cabarrus Creamery History Day** event at the Museum on **Saturday, October 16, 2010** from **1 to 3 PM**, with special guest Robert E. Burrage. All members--and former Creamery employees--are invited to attend.

Cabarrus Creamery History is one of two special exhibits on view this fall at the Concord Museum. The other celebrates

many of Cabarrus County's most trustworthy and valuable citizens: the Boy Scouts.

The Boy Scouts of America began 100 years ago once William D. Boyce incorporated the organization's name. During the past century scouting has helped shape countless American boys. Did you know that former US President Gerald Ford, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, *Steve Canyon* cartoonist Milton Caniff, and jazz trumpeter Winton Marsalis were all Eagle Scouts?

Our Boy Scouts special exhibit gathers uniforms, camping equipment, handbooks, merit badges, and other items from past decades from the collections of Cabarrus County former Scouts and Scout leaders.

Both the Cabarrus Creamery and Boy Scouts special exhibits run through Wednesday, November 24, 2010.

Print editions of *Past Times* are produced as a membership benefit for Historic Cabarrus Association members. You can read or download each issue of *Past Times* in color by visiting our website, [www.historiccabarrus.org](http://www.historiccabarrus.org). Thank you, members, for your loyal support!

Michael Eury, Editor

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# The History of Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc.

BY ROBERT E. BURRAGE, SR.

James Monroe Burrage came to Concord dragging logs from Pooletown, Rowan County, to Winecoff Lumber Company. The year was about 1870 and the thirty some mile trip was long and hard. Most trips required spending the night at the Winecoff home on North Union Street at Barrow Lane. Nature took its course and he married the Winecoff's daughter Lucy in 1874 and moved to Concord.

James started a farm on Meadow Street which was outside of town on the east side of Concord. The home they built there is still standing today (122 Meadow Avenue NW). He had a few cows and chickens and sold milk and eggs to his neighbors.

The James M. Burrages raised six boys and two girls. In 1899 the family moved to a new farm on what is now Burrage Road at Brookwood Avenue.

Robert Luther Burrage, Sr., the second son of James and Lucy, bought the old home place on Meadow Street. At that time, he was working in the sash shop at Sills' Lumber Co. Robert Luther farmed a little on the side and sold milk and eggs to the neighbors.

By 1908 he was selling enough milk to buy bottles with his name on them: "Burrage Dairy, R. L. Burrage, Proprietor." About 1912, with 12-year-old son Charles Edward to help, he was able to quit working at the lumber yard and dairy full time.

In 1917 Robert L., along with several other small farmers, formed Co-Operative Dairy. They set up a bottling plant in the "back lots" (about where the current Cabarrus County Courthouse is now). Robert L. was the general manager of the plant. For the first time in Cabarrus County, farmers carried their milk to a central area to

be bottled. This cut down on the expense of buying, maintaining, and operating their own equipment. The dairy also handled delivery to homes and stores.

Soon, Co-Operative Dairy moved into a building on South Union Street, where they could pasteurize milk to kill any germs and extend the shelf life of the milk. This building was at 95 South Union between Bell and Harris Funeral Home and Furniture Store on the south and Concord-Kannapolis Gas Co. on the north side. There was an alley between the dairy and the funeral home. The farmers would pull their wagons loaded with 10-gallon milk cans into the alley and push the cans thru a hole in the wall. If the ambulance had to make a run, the farmers had to hustle around and get out of the way.

Co-Operative Dairy was successful and growing in 1924, when a



Roy Burrage makes Co-Operative Dairy delivery, late 1910s.



Robert L. Burrage, Sr. in his Co-Operative Dairy office in 1923.

new opportunity arose. Dr. T. N. Spencer [a veterinarian and community leader after whom Camp Spencer was named] and other investors approached R. L. Burrage with a merger proposal. Dr. Spencer and the other investors had bought stock in a proposed new butter plant, Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc. Mr. H. E. Baker had come to Concord, sold stock, and left town. The investors were left with a few pieces of dairy equipment, and a corporate name, but nothing else.

Dr. Spencer asked Robert L. to help them salvage what they could. The result was a merger using the corporate name, the milk plant from Co-Operative Dairy and the management of Robert L. Burrage.

During the teens they bottled only sweet milk, buttermilk, and chocolate milk in glass quarts, pints, and ½ pints.

Standardizing milk is done by separating some of the cream out of the milk with a separator. This machine spins at a very high rate of speed. The heavier milk solids go to the outside of the bowl and the cream stays in the center and rises out the top of the bowl. Removing some cream made sure that the milk sold every day at 3.25% butterfat. If you didn't do that, the milk could have as much as 5% butterfat in the winter months. You could sell some of the extra cream as whipping cream, but usually not all of it. To use the rest of the cream, they started making ice cream and selling it in the front of the plant.

In about 1927, Robert Luther was asked by a couple of local druggists to make their formula of ice cream for them. They said he had the equipment and the ingredients and they could put

their time to better use. They also said he was welcome to use their formulas if he wanted. This got the Creamery into the wholesale side of the business and those formulas were the basis of our formulas from then on. All through the 1920s the milk and ice cream business increased. More and more small farmers chose to milk more cows and sell their milk to the Creamery instead of bottling, selling, and delivering it themselves.

The Great Depression that started in 1929 was never mentioned in the minute book of Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc. One story my father (Robert L. Burrage, Jr.) told me about the Depression was that no matter how tough times were, people would get milk for the baby, and ice cream was a great treat that was affordable. To illustrate that the Creamery did okay through the Depression, he told me about a trip they took when Daddy was 13. Pop Burrage took Daddy, Dr. G. L. Lang [a Concord optometrist], Mrs. Lang, and Leon Lang, Jr. in their 1933 Plymouth to the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. Daddy also told me that he made a wisecrack about Dr. Lang driving too close to the middle of the road. Dr. Lang told him if he could do better, he could drive. Daddy drove all the way to Illinois, where he was pulled over and told he would have to have a license to drive in that state. (Author's note: Leon Lang, Jr. verified this story for me in 2008.)

The 1930s brought the beginning of never-ending technological and regulatory changes in the dairy industry. Some were fortunate for the Creamery, but most were costly and challenging.

Pasteurization of milk to kill pathogenic bacteria was developed in the teens and was adopted by Co-Operative Dairy at that time. In 1939 the State of North Carolina adopted the Pasteurized Milk Ordinance, which required milk to be pasteurized before it could be sold to the public. This ordinance had tremendous impact on the infant dairy industry in North Carolina. Hundreds of dairy farmers/bottlers had to stop bottling milk or spent a huge amount of money to build a pasteurizing plant. To pasteurize milk you had to have a boiler to heat the milk, vats to process it in, mechanical cooling systems to cool the milk, and sanitary bottling equipment. This was a boon to the Creamery, because they had been pasteurizing for years. Milk came pouring in as farmers decided to keep milking cows (the "utter" side of the industry) and let the Creamery deal with the regulations.

The growth that came caused 1939–1940 to be pivotal years for the Creamery. The volume of business was outgrowing the small plant on South Union Street. Plans were made to build a new plant. Self-contained refrigerators and freezers were changing the way milk, and especially ice cream, would be sold. A new method of pasteurizing had been invented. High Temperature Short Time (HTST) pasteurization allowed milk to be processed continuously instead of in small batches. This equipment took more space, and with homogenization added even more space requirements. Homogenizers pumped milk at very high pressure (1500 psi) through a small opening. This caused a vacuum to be formed and the large butterfat globules exploded into many tiny globules that

would stay in suspension in the milk without rising to the top. Hopefully the expense of a new plant could be justified.

Daddy—Robert Luther Burrage, Jr.—was attending North Carolina State College in Raleigh, studying Dairy Manufacturing. Uncle Charles Edward Burrage was operating the plant on South Union Street. Pop Burrage (R. L., Sr.) was managing the business side and making plans to build. Pop Burrage also had “hardening of the arteries” and his health was failing. He told Daddy, “If the doctors could just rod out my pipes, I would be okay.” Daddy was finishing his junior year at State in the spring of 1940 and had been dating a Raleigh girl (Jacquelyn Branch) for a couple of years. Pop Burrage told Daddy that he hoped he had gotten enough education because he needed him in Concord.

On May 4, 1940, land was bought on North Church Street for the new plant. Construction was started right away.

Daddy was working at the

Creamery six days a week. Every chance he got he drove his 1932 B-Model Ford to Raleigh to see Jackie. Pop Burrage told Daddy that it would be better for everyone if he would “just marry that girl and bring her to Concord.” So he did. Jacquelyn Branch and Robert Luther Burrage, Jr. were married at Forest Hill Methodist Church on Buffalo Street on July 5, 1940.

The pre-war years were good, with steady growth and a new smooth operating plant. World War II brought challenges and opportunities. Rationing of tires and gasoline made delivery difficult. Ultimately they moved some chicken houses from Uncle Charles’ farm to the plant and turned them into horse stables. During the rest of the war they delivered milk to the homes with horses and wagons, saving the gas and tires for the wholesale routes.

After the war, the stables were made into a warehouse for sugar, bottles, cartons, and ingredients. These buildings were used until 1998. One of

the best opportunities of the war was the need for cream and sweetened condensed milk for the Navy. We made product for the Charleston Navy Yard into the 1950s. I remember going with Daddy early on Sunday mornings to meet the Winecoff Transfer Co. truck. He would roll the 10-gallon cans of condensed milk from the cooler to the truck and stack them up at the front of the truck. Then we would shovel snow (shaved ice) out of the ice maker (a 4' x 10' x 8'-tall room) onto the dock, and then throw it up on the cans. When we had the cans covered in snow, the driver threw a heavy canvas over the pile and took off for Charleston.

Most of the history of the Creamery was noted by reaction to changes in the industry rather than our actions changing the industry. Changes in processes, development of new packaging, and broad-ranging regulatory changes directed our path. We were never on the “cutting edge” of anything! The costs of any new changes or regulations were far out of our reach.



The Cabarrus Creamery in 1931. Its location was just below Corban on South Union Street, on the north side of where the *Concord Tribune* office would be.



Robert L. Burrage, Jr., 1956, with Charles L. and Kathryn Burrage.

In 1950 we leased our first paper carton form-fill machine. The Pure-Pak machine was of the wax, wire, and glue style. The flat, folded cartons were unfolded, slid on to a mandrel, ends tucked and glued, and then the entire carton was submerged in melted wax. After the carton came out of the wax and cooled, the carton was filled; the top was stapled shut and it was sent to be crated.

Miss Mary Propst, the principal of Clara Harris School [now defunct], had my sister Jackie and me go to the front at a school assembly. She thanked us for our father getting milk cartons for school milk so she didn't have to deal with those old glass bottles.

Nineteen fifty-four was a busy year. The Creamery joined a new buying group called All Star Dairy Association. The main purpose was to group together a large number of small independent dairies to be able to buy cartons and supplies at prices competitive with big dairies. All Star opened with star endorsement—Hopalong Cassidy! “Hoppy” (William Boyd), the star of a popular Western television series, toured the country promoting All Star Dairies (“Hoppy’s Favorite Dairy Products”). When Hoppy came to Concord on November 26, 1956) he was escorted into town by Police Chief “Inky” Murr and greeted thousands at the Boys Club. It was the talk of the town for years!

Most everything that I have mentioned so far has been positive and upbeat. There were many challenges and disappointments along the way. In the mid-1930s a new dairy inspector came to the plant and told Pop Burrage that he was downgrading the plant. He told Pop Burrage to order Grade C

bottle caps. Uncle Charles told us years later that he saw Pop Burrage sitting on the curb across Union Street from the Creamery in front of the Post Office. He was crying and told Uncle Charles that the Grade C could be the end of the Creamery. Uncle Charles said that he told Papa, “No, we will fight back and overcome this.” He called M. G. Newell Co., where they bought their bottle caps, and ordered Grade C caps. Then he told the salesman, “But you better not ship them!” They got busy and prepared the plant for another inspection. In a couple of weeks the regular inspector came and said, “If this plant was Grade A last month, I don’t see any reason for it not to be Grade A this month.”

In the late 1950s the Creamery was selling ice cream and some milk products to Stanly Dairies, Inc. Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc. and Stanly Dairies, Inc. had been working together for years. Stanly Dairies was slipping into financial trouble and was behind in paying the Creamery. In October 1959 Stanly was in danger of having to close. My father, Robert L. Burrage, Jr., felt that the two businesses were a good match, and the only way for us to recoup our losses was for Stanly to keep operating. On October 21, 1959 Robert L. Burrage, Jr, Jackie Burrage, Charles E. Burrage, and Daisy Burrage bought the stock of Stanly Dairies. Daddy jumped in with both feet, contacting producers and creditors to agree on repayment terms. He spent many long weeks working in Albemarle fixing up the plant, remodeling their dairy bar and adding a “party room” for customers to use as a gathering place. (Stanly Dairies, Inc. was on East Main Street in Albemarle beside Good O’s, where Jay’s Seafood

is now.) He was trying to gain acceptance into the tight-knit community of Albemarle. On August 11, 1961 they were notified that the desperately needed school milk contract for Albemarle would not be renewed for the 1961–1962 school year. At the same time, four key route men quit to go work for a competitor. There was no more money to carry on after two years of trying to breathe life into the business. They had to close. In spite of everything Daddy did, Stanly Dairies could not be saved.

The 1960s brought more competitive changes. More and more families had two incomes; that helped the economy but changed lifestyles. Both parents would leave early in the morning for work, so there was no one at home to receive “home delivery” milk or to cook three meals a day. Coupled with the difficulty of finding delivery people willing to work from 2:00 AM until 4:00 PM delivering milk to fewer and fewer people, home delivery faded. Being a small local dairy was no longer an advantage. Large supermarket chains wanted service from dairies that could contract with them for better prices over a large area. We were losing small grocers monthly as they couldn’t compete with the supermarkets.

Ice cream, thankfully, was gaining. Supermarkets were getting the cheapest ice cream they could find to bring in the shoppers. No one seemed to be paying attention to the quality ice cream market. Ice cream parlors wanted good product and the remaining private grocers wanted good ice cream that families couldn’t find in the supermarkets.

We extended our routes into Charlotte. Other regional dairies were

closing or selling out to the big boys. In 1972 we bought the ice cream routes of Superior Dairy in Statesville and grew into Iredell and Alexander Counties. Then in 1974 we bought the ice cream routes from Sunrise Dairy in Gastonia. That let us grow into Cleveland, Gaston, and Rutherford Counties in North Carolina and York and Union Counties in South Carolina.

The fourth Robert Burrage (Robert Ernest Burrage, Jr., known today as “Little Robert”) was born in 1972. He went to work at the Creamery like all the rest of us. I carried him with me to Statesville while I scouted out new ice cream accounts. I met two of our teenage employees (I think they were Kenneth Swan and Albert Klimas) trying to get an 8-foot ice cream cabinet through the door of a country store. It was a tight fit, so I tried to help push. I couldn’t push enough with Little Robert in my arms, so I laid him on top of the box so I could use both hands. His mama had a fit when she heard about that. I was afraid she was going to turn me in to the child labor people.

Even as ice cream picked up at the end of the 1960s, everything else was shaky. I had married Cathy Austin in 1964, graduated from NC State in 1965, and was drafted in 1966. I came back home at the end of 1969. My brother, Charles Luther, graduated in 1970. After National Guard training in early 1971, he was also back at the Creamery.

In the 1970s our prayer was to be able to survive as a family business, doing SOMETHING! We tried many things—most didn’t work. We stopped bottling milk in 1976 and had Hunter Dairy in Charlotte bottle for us. That didn’t work. On October 13, 1978, when the trucks came in off the routes, we ended over 60 years of delivering milk to homes and stores ... a scary time.

In 1974 we bought a Sealtest milk distributorship in Albemarle. Then in 1976 we added a Sealtest ice cream route from Monroe to Hamlet. In 1978 we were struggling to exist. We were making a little profit on the Sealtest routes and operating six 15–20

year old trucks. One day we sat down and figured that if we kept up this pace for another five years we could afford to buy one new truck. We sold the distributorship.

Earlier I said we tried a lot of things that didn’t work. When we looked back on those years, we said that what saved us was not that anything worked well, it was just the fact we wouldn’t give up and kept trying! Several times our accountant told us we were bankrupt and should close. Daddy said only the sheriff could close us down, and he wouldn’t do it as long as we kept paying our bills.

In 1974 the Coca-Cola plant stopped bottling in Concord and moved to a new building on Florence Avenue that was set up for distribution—not production. Norman Bisnar, the president of Coca-Cola Concord, asked Daddy if he wanted to buy their plant on Church Street that joined ours. Daddy said we couldn’t afford it and didn’t know what we would do with it if we had it. In about six months Coke sold a two-year option on the property to two businessmen who



Fans of all ages crowded the Cabarrus County Boys Club in November 1956 to meet TV cowboy Hopalong Cassidy.



Pete Brown works the popsicle machine, late 1970s.

wanted to make and sell soy bean milk (Dairene). They asked us to bottle it for them until they could get their plant going. They brought us a sample. It tasted like milk of magnesia. As badly as we needed business, we were scared of these two and couldn't stand the product. Another reason not to: At that time the State of North Carolina would not allow a dairy to bottle any milk except pure cow's milk. Dairene caused us a great deal of concern. One day one of the two Dairene businessmen came into the dairy store, looked into the office, and then just walked around in the dairy store. Dot Bowers, who ran the dairy store day shift for about 30 years, asked him if she could help him. He said, "Well, we can't decide whether to buy them out or run them out." Dot told him where he could go. (She was a good judge of character.) After two years of trying to figure out what Dairene was up to, Mr. Bisnar came to see Daddy again. It seems that Dairene had never paid a dime to Coke for the option, much less gone through with the purchase.

Mr. Bisnar told Daddy that we needed his building if we were ever going to grow. He said they would sell the whole property for \$120,000 and they would finance it. Brother Charles Luther and I told Daddy to buy it and we would find something to do to pay for it! Coke and Mr. Bisnar were always great neighbors and good friends, and he was certainly looking out for us now. We told him we would take it, but would like for them to clean out the basement and get rid of all of those old Coke signs and coolers (sometimes we weren't too smart). We got busy and started renting space out. Specialty Dyers stored cloth and the Cabarrus

County Recreation Department had its first office there. We stored everything from household items to boats, cars and campers. We made enough to make the payments and interest until 1978, when we found a use for the building.

Another time that Mr. Bisnar was a good neighbor was during WWII, when our boiler failed. We fired the boiler with coal at that time, and one day the boiler ran out of water. With the terrific heat of a coal fire under the boiler it is crucial that water be in the boiler or the fire would melt the bottom of the boiler. They called that bagging. That was a bad day. With the war on you couldn't just order a boiler. The only thing to do was to rebuild it. Working with a perishable product like milk and being obligated to take all the milk your farmers produced means you can't stop! The Coke men and our men ran a temporary steam line over the fence to their boiler. For several weeks, Coke would bottle for a while and then holler across the fence for us to start up. We would run for a couple of hours and stop for them to start back. Their boiler was barely big enough for them, but they shared until ours was rebuilt.

Retail ice cream was always a big part of our lives. We had a dairy store in the front of our building starting in the teens. We were always grateful for the following we had for our products. Most people thought that ice cream was all we made, probably due to the visibility of the store. Untold numbers of teenagers worked in the dairy store as their first job. They were all great workers and made us proud years later when they thanked us for the opportunity. Many said they

formed their good, hard work ethic working at the Creamery. A lot of strong friendships were formed there, and several marriages. I even got a wonderful daughter-in-law, Michelle Spears, from the dairy store kids.

Another thing we tried in the 1960s was to expand on the dairy store idea. We tried it for about ten years and had dairy stores in Midway, Kannapolis, Landis, Enochville, Albemarle, Rockwell, and Norwood. Most met with some success, but it was tough managing them from Concord. By the late 1970s, we were back down to the one store at the plant.

Thank Heaven for the late 1970s and the 1980s! In 1977 Daddy was riding to Raleigh with Everette Flora (Sealtest Dairy Charlotte) for a NC Milk Commission meeting. Everette was talking about the difficulty he was having in getting condensed milk for Breyers Ice Cream. Daddy mentioned that we had a small condensing pan that we used to make our ice cream mix. Sealtest had extra milk, but no way to condense it and the nearest place to buy condensed milk was Pennsylvania. Before they got back home, they had agreed for us to try to make a batch for them. What was he thinking?! Our pan held 300 gallons of milk and could cook down the milk from 12% solids to 40% solids at a rate of about 200 gallons per hour. At that time, we had three 2000-gallon raw milk tanks and two 1000-gallon finished product tanks. It took us three days to work up the 5500-gallon tanker of milk they sent. They liked the product and wanted to do it on a regular basis.

We got busy and found a 300 gallon-per-hour pan at United Dairy in

Greensboro for \$500 (scrap price). Thus began a 10-year growth spurt and the best 20 years in the history of the company.

We put the 300-gallon-per-hour Majoinner pan in the alley between our plant and the Coke building to be close to the steam line and the cooling tower line for our condensing pan. Condensing pans use a tremendous amount of steam, and obviously we didn't have enough. At that time we had a 125 hp 1923 James Leffel Scotch Marine boiler (yes, built for a ship). Bob's Laundry had closed on Cabarrus Avenue West and we bought their 1938 James Leffel, just like ours. Before the expansion was over we had added boilers from Locke Mill, Kerr Bleachery, and a hosiery mill in Monroe for a total of 2500 hp. We rattled windows three blocks away when the big ones started up.

When word got out that we were processing surplus milk for Sealtest, Ben Kilgore at Pine State Creamery in Raleigh asked if we could do anything with their surplus cream. We found a 1300-gallon General Dairy roll vane churn at Alcam Creamery in Richland Center, Wisconsin. We moved a few storage tenants around and installed the churn in the Coke bottling room. The largest churn we had before was a 50-gallon wooden barrel churn. The 1300-gallon vane churn could make 4500 pounds of butter per batch. We wound up with three 1300s and one 1100-gallon churn. We could churn 40,000 pounds of butter per day.

The next challenge was what to do with the buttermilk (the skim milk left over from making butter). The answer was to dry it. We found a 750-pound-per-hour Blaw-Knox v-bottom box dryer in Pennsylvania. It wouldn't fit in the building, so we took off part of the Coke warehouse roof, put in the dryer, and then raised the walls and put on a new roof. None of us had ever seen a milk dryer in operation. As the dryer project was coming together, dairy people in the state kept asking me who we were going to hire to teach us. I told them that we were going to turn on all the switches, light the fire, pump in the milk and see what happened. People asked Daddy if we were crazy because those things were known to blow up from time to time. When asked what he was going to do he said, "When they light it, I am going to stand on top of it and wave the flag"—and he did! We added two more 300-pound-per-hour dryers later and could produce a trailer load of powdered milk in three days.

Our entire infrastructure had to be beefed up to keep

up with the demand and the equipment. The 8000-gallon tank capacity grew to 277,000 gallons (more than any dairy in the state). Ammonia refrigeration to cool everything and to freeze ice cream grew from 75 tons to over 1000 tons.

Reading over these pages I realize how grossly oversimplified I have made this expansion sound. We were blessed with wonderful employees and local tradesmen who were willing to accept change as a way of life and to be willing to try most anything.

None of this was done with a blueprint, an architect, an engineer (other than Bill Cochran), or a city or county planning committee.

Bill Widenhouse and Larry Templeton did rigging and welding, and Guy and Tracy Cress had a crew of plumbers

assigned to us for years. Arnold Hatley and Eddie Furr did all the wiring and controls. Bill Cochran poured concrete and Earl Ballard laid brick.

Charles L. Burrage has a wonderful mechanical mind. He went all over the country removing equipment and marking the pieces so they could be put back together. Daddy juggled the money between buying equipment, installing it, paying for raw materials and collecting for sales. I just tried to choreograph the dance between what product was available, what equipment was up and running, what construction was in the way, and what had to be done before anything spoiled.

Our employees were amazing in their willingness to accept change and their stamina in doing difficult jobs. For example, John Carter (sales manager for bottled milk and ice cream) and Bill Carson (wholesale milk route man) became experts at the art of making butter. Plant employees might unload milk tankers and condense milk today, and go to Asheville tomorrow and disassemble an ice cream storage room. They all adapted willingly and we actually had fun! Life was never boring!



Float in the 1963 Concord Christmas Parade.

We tried to involve family in our daily lives even though we worked long and strange hours. This included extended family (employees) as well. I remember when we made the first churn of butter with the big churn; we were all waiting and watching for it to get ready. Just as it was ready to dump, my wife, Cathy, came in with a big pan of hot biscuits she made for the occasion. Everyone stopped what they were doing and came to the butter room to marvel at the butter and eat hot biscuits and butter!

Christmas was our biggest season for surplus milk. Cows don't know it is a holiday and that schools are out for two weeks. Milk from several states came in during that time to be made into butter and powder. Between Christmas and New Year's we just "chose up sides" and worked 12-hour shifts, 7 to 7 and 7 to 7. Robert E., Jr, Michelle Spears (future daughter-in-law), and Amy-Lyn and Greg Lafferty (sister Jackie's children) always drew the night shift. Running powder is a hard and dusty job. They had to wear ear plugs and dust masks while filling and lifting 50-pound bags of powder all night. Everyone wants to celebrate the New Year, so Jackie, Cathy, and I carried hats, noise makers, and refreshments up to the powder room. We couldn't stop the machines, but they celebrated at midnight—including firecrackers.

The large dairies that put us out of the bottled milk business were now our customers. We tried to be the place they all could call on to handle their surplus or problem products. If the refrigeration failed on a transport trailer and the milk got warm, the milk might be good for only three days

instead of 15 days stamped on the carton. We would unload their trailer, pull our ice cream crew and other plant and office people out, and open and pour up every carton. Then we would re-process the milk into a less-perishable product. Every now and then someone would rinse out a tanker or tank too well and get some water in the milk. The bottling plant couldn't bottle that milk for Grade A. There was nothing wrong with the milk. Condensing removes water from milk and concentrates the total solids. We could use that milk in ice cream or powder and butter.

Another way we learned to help other plants was with disposal of antibiotic contaminated milk. In the late 1970s the FDA decided that if a cow was treated for mastitis (a common mammary gland infection), traces of that antibiotic could be found in her milk seven to ten days later. Out of concern that these antibiotics could harm humans either by allergic reaction or by building up immunity to the antibiotic, they outlawed feeding that milk to humans. There were no standards set as to what concentration was allowable. Detectable presence was all it took to reject the milk. Legal disposal of the milk was almost impossible. Dumping the milk in the sewer would upset the sewer authorities; dumping on fields or near streams would upset the EPA. We took it in and made medicated animal feed powder and butter for the cosmetic industry. This was like most things we did—feast or famine. We could get 50,000 gallons in a day or go two months with none. Thank goodness we had buyers who would take whatever we made whenever we made it. We

provided this service for dairy farmers and plants from New York to Florida.

Even to this date, September 2010, there has never been a case of any human being harmed in any way by antibiotic contaminated milk. No study has ever shown any ill effect of antibiotic presence in milk. No study has ever been able to detect the presence of antibiotics in a human that came from drinking milk. In 1991, the FDA added two words to the milk ordinance that instantly removed a profitable line of work from our plant. The new wording read—"Every effort will be made to keep antibiotics out of the human AND ANIMAL food supply."

During the heydays we were the place you could call and the answer was always, "Yes, we will take it." I told everyone at the plant that we had one chance and one chance only with any given load of milk. If a bottling plant or producer had a problem load, they had to get rid of it fast to free up the tanker and get a replacement load. If we said no or maybe, they would push another button and call another surplus plant. We wanted to be their one and only call. We never used answering machines at the Creamery. A real person answered on the first or second ring. We were on call 24 hours per day, seven days a week.

A great ride, which I often referred to as "operating on the edge of out of control," was coming to an end.

The milk surplus of the 1980s was under control and leaning toward shortage. Government regulations were becoming harder and harder to meet. Healthcare, workman's compensation insurance, taxes, and "fees" were exerting tremendous pressure.

Every 20 years or so, the Creamery had to reinvent itself to stay in business. We were never able to afford new equipment and as time went on, the gap between modern automated equipment and our energy-inefficient and labor-intensive equipment took away any competitive edge we may have had.

As a family, we thought long and hard about the legacy that had been left to us. The ones that went before us struggled to keep the Creamery going for future generations. Over the years we often discussed the desire to keep it going no matter what. That stubbornness got us through—should we apply it now? My son, Robert E. Burrage, Jr. (Little Robert), graduated from Pfeiffer in 1995 and came back to the Creamery. Like all the previous Roberts, he expected the Creamery to be his life's work. We wrestled with the possibilities of continuing. Would it be fair to him and other family members? We had always overcome the obstacles in the past, but had the day of the family business in America passed?

We tried to take stock of where we were.

Our wonderful 50-year employees were gone. Our 40–30-year employees had mostly retired. We didn't have many 20–10-year employees. What would be left to work with were the younger, less-than-10-year employees that didn't seem to feel the loyalty or dedication to the job that the family did. The huge plant we had assembled was becoming an overhead nightmare as sales dropped off. Old equipment needed routine maintenance to be ready if and when business came back.

Competition in the wholesale ice cream business was stronger than we had ever seen. Repair costs to our aging fleet of 1100 ice cream cabinets were unbearable. Freon R-12 and R-502 were being phased out by the government because of carcinogen concerns. Existing supplies had reached \$300 per pound.

Lastly, Daddy was in his 80s and showing signs of Alzheimer's disease. We didn't want to do anything that would cause him undue stress. We felt that selling would be less stressful

than agonizing over another reinvention. (Daddy was a professional and designated worrier.) We didn't want to let any of the loyal employees go—which would be a sure thing as we downsized and started over.

We finally decided the time had come to sell and hope a new owner with an influx of money and ideas would save the employees and the business. Cabarrus Creamery was sold on July 8, 1999, to Clarke Ice Cream Co., owned by Mr. Henry D. Clarke, Jr.

A tough day was made okay when I went straight from the sale closing to the hospital to see our first grandson born, "RJ," Robert James Burrage.

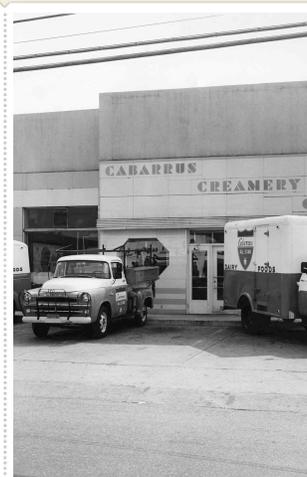
A condition of the sale of the Creamery was that I stay as the president of the Creamery for at least one year. My last day was September 14, 2000—the day Austin Wayne Burrage, our second grandson, was born.

Cabarrus Creamery Co., Inc. closed on January 29, 2001.

**ROBERT E. BURRAGE, SR. is a member of Historic Cabarrus Association, Inc.**



The Burrages bought the Furr Photo Studio and house in the mid-1950s for parking lot expansion.



Delivery trucks, 1958.

# Cabarrus Flashback



**HISTORY MYSTERY:** We recently discovered this wonderful 1930s photograph by legendary Concord photographer (and former Concord mayor) Zack L. Roberts—but we can't identify its location or subjects. If you have any information, please call us at 704-782-3688.

Historic Cabarrus Association, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of the heritage of the City of Concord and of Cabarrus County, North Carolina, and to the education of its citizens, students, and visitors.

## PAST TIMES

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