# The Neil Family

## Master Cheese Makers of Upstate New York

**by Nicole L. Neil**

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The Neil family is well known in Upstate New York for their wonderful cheese products. Fathers, sons, and nephew were all engaged in the craft. Their story begins in Gouverneur, New York, when Chester A. Neil (1888-1959) married Jennie Overacker on June 15, 1912. Chester Neil went to work with his father-in-law Albert W. Overacker, who owned The Cream of the Valley Cheese Factory in Gouverneur. Chester soon became the manager. The factory burned down in May, 1914, but Chester rebuilt it and continued for two years, when he sold it. In 1921, he purchased the Belleville Cheese and Butter Factory, in Halls Corners, near Edwards, New York, which he and his sons Edwin (1916-1997) and Irwin (1920-1999) operated until he closed the factory in 1954.

Chester was of the opinion that :Cheese-makers are like baseball players: they are born not made". Chester had more than forty years in the cheese-making business and had strong opinions abut how to do things right. He didn't think that many cheese factories were worthy of the name. He used to say, "You can't hurry cheese, and you have to have a feel for it." Cheese-making is not for the lazy man, he would say; it involves many steps. Water quality, too, plays an important role in the cheese making operation. At the Belleville Cheese and Butter Factory (the Neil factory), the water came from a spring on a hill across the road from the building. A limitless supply was piped by gravity from an aluminum springhouse to the building.

Hand-written on this photograph is "Pop and Ryman Moore"

At the Belleville Cheese and Butter Factory cheese was made as follows: Once the milk was weighed, it was strained through very fine steel mesh and piped into the vats. These containers, stainless steel inside, held about 3500 pounds of milk apiece. A lactic acid bacteria culture was added; without it, the cheese would not develop. Then the rennet, made from extracts taken from the stomach of newborn calves is added in the proportion of about 3 ounces to 1000 pounds. The rennet was mixed into the cold milk at the rate of about 18 ounces to 11 quarts before being put into the vats. Very gradually, the heat was increased in the milk mixture from about 86 degrees to 98 degrees. aa During this stage the ingredients were mixed thoroughly with wooden rakes.

The milk thickens in about thirty-five minutes. Then, working swiftly, the cheese makers cut the mass horizontally and vertically with curd knifes, forming cubes. The curd particles are pushed to one end of the vat and become matted together. This process, called cheddaring, is the procedure from which the cheese gets its name.

With long, sharp knifes, the cheese-makers cut a trench through the heavy curd by turning the center masses of the curd over that on the sides, creating a long drainage trough for the whey to escape.

The curd, now in large chunks, was repeatedly turned to allow more whey to drain away. After standing for about an hour and a quarter, the slabs were than fed into the curd mill above the vats, and the shredded curd fell back into the vats. The shreds were then worked over by a four-armed stainless steel agitator, which moved on a track above the vat. This machinery saved many hours of arduous hand labor once performed by the cheese-maker with rakes and forks. The curd was tested to determine its acid content, but Chester and his sons seemed to know the exact time to act merely by the feel of the curd. The curd was thoroughly agitated and drained for three or four minutes and stirred again. Salting the curd came next, which drew out more whey that must drain off. Once the last of the whey was gone, the agitator once more turned the mixture.

Finally, the young cheese was than ready to be pressed by hand into the metal cheese hoops. While in these forms, it remained on a long table under pressure overnight. The next day the hoops were removed from the press and the cheese carried to the curing room.

In the curing room the cheese rounds were arranged on wooden shelves and turned every night and morning for 60 days. Cheese made from un-pasteurized milk must be kept for 60 days before being sold to the consumer. By the end of that period, the lactic acid had killed all harmful bacteria. The ideal temperature for curing cheese is 60 degrees F., but unless a plant is air conditioned, this temperature cannot be maintained in summer. In the winter, on the other hand, heat was let into the curing room to achieve the ideal temperature. During the curing step the rind forms. On Friday and Saturdays, the cheese made during the week was waxed.

While the curing process has been going on, two other procedures have been underway. The whey draining from the vats has been piped into an adjoining room and run through a cream separator. A surprising amount of cream is released and is kept to be made into butter. The skimmed whey is conveyed again by pipe into a wooden vat located downhill from the factory. This product was made available to area residents to feed to their pigs.

During the flush season (usually spring and early summer), the Neil factory produced about five tons of cheese a week. As the milk supply lagged, production dropped to about 2500 pounds. A large amount of the factory's output was sent abroad. Also, much of their cheese was sold to big companies boxed at the Neil plant. The most popular were the 'picnic twins', weighing 12 pounds each and packaged two in a box. In addition there were the singles, called Daisies, weighing 21 pounds; the larger singles, weighing 40 pounds; and the cheddar hoops, weighing 75 pounds.

Chester's two sons both continued in the cheese business after he retired. Erwin "Ike" Neil worked 14 years with his father at the Belleville Cheese and Butter Factory, and another 14 years at the Sunnyside Milk Plant. Edwin Neil worked not only with his father at the Belleville Factory but in the mid-1950s began work with his cousin Clarence J. Neil in Palymra, New York at the Palmyra Creamery.

Clarence J. Neil, the son of Robert and Minnie Neil was born in Macomb, New York, in 1911. He graduated from Cornell University in 1936 and married Mary Esther Engelsen that same year. They lived in Palmyra, New York where Clarence co-owned (with his cousin Richard Hyman) and operated the Palmyra Creamery. Clarence owned 11 state licenses to test milk and butter in multiple states as well as being a master cheese-maker. The Palmyra Creamery made and sold butter and ice cream --- as many as 15 flavors --- to a large part of Northern New York. Clarence sold his share of the creamery in 1962.

In 1954, when he was 10 years old, Clarence's son Larry began helping his dad make butter and ice cream. He spent many days after school and working weekends learning the craft from his father. Although Larry did not become a master cheese-maker like his dad and uncles, he appreciated the fact that he had the opportunity to learn about the trade.

All of Neil master cheese-makers have passed away but, they're memory will stay with us for many years to come.

The author married Larry Neil in 1966. She worked for 16 years as a medical billing supervisor and is now a Barden Homes sales representative in Watertown, New York.

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The following appeared in the Gouverneur newspaper on May 30, 1914 ...

## Cheese Factory Loss $ 10,000
## Cream of the Valley destroyed by fire - Insurance about $ 7,000
## About 300 boxes of cheese destroyed-Owner to rebuild at once.

GOUVERNEUR- The Cream of theValley Cheese Factory, located about 8 miles from this village, near Overacker Corners, was totally destroyed by fire shortly after 1 PM Saturday, as was also the house nearby, causing a loss of about $10,000 on which there was an insurance on buildings and contents of about $7,000.

The factory was being operated by Chester Neil, Mr. Overacker's son-in-law. While cleaning up after the cheese had been put in the presses, flames were discovered in the boiler room. Within a few minutes that end of the structure was a roaring furnace, burning very quickly. The house nearby, which was occupied by Mr. Neil, caught fire. A portion of the furniture was saved. There were about 10 days made of the cheese in the factory aggregating upwards of 300 boxes. During the progress of the fire sparks ignited a building on the Ross Babcock farm, nearby, but a bucket brigade soon extinguished it. The factory was built over 25 years ago. It is probable that the work of the building will be commenced at once and be completed within 2 weeks at the latest . The boiler can be utilized again, but otherwise new equipment will be necessary.

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