

CHRIS NIELSEN & SONS A FAMILY HISTORY

At the turn of the century a young man, Christian Nielsen, arrived in Connecticut from Copenhagen, Denmark. In a new place and with no connections he discovered that there were few jobs except those that one created oneself. His first employment was delivering beer for a local brewery. He met Karen Marie Swendsen, a young lady from his native land, at a Danish club in Hartford. After the usual courtship on bicycles and by horse and buggy, they married on August 22, 1903. Wanting to be a responsible provider, Mr. Nielsen decided to rent the Maselli Farm on Filley Street in the township of Wintonbury, now known as Bloomfield. Their first four children, Thorwald, Clyde, Emma and Carl were born there.

The family had only a few cows. Christian and Karen worked very hard to survive. Despite sickness and other hardships they made progress. It became more difficult to provide the basic needs for a growing family in that location, and the decision was made to move to the Larsen Farm on Hall Boulevard. Earl was born there. After two years at the second farm, they heard of a farm that was for sale farther down the road. In 1912, after much deliberation, they took a big step in their lives and bought the fifty-acre Barber Farm at the corner of Hall Boulevard and Simsbury Road. Over the years this became known as Barbour's Comer. Sons Emil and Leslie were born there. The last child, a daughter Anna, was the only child born in a hospital.

The farmhouse was large. Downstairs Ma and Pa lived with their 8 children. Mr. and Mrs. Miller and their four children Charles, John, Margaret and Fred resided upstairs. Margaret Miller Segar Mueller was born in this house and lived there until 4 years of age. The Millers later moved to the corner of Hall Blvd. and Cottage Grove Road across from the Wells Farm, There are delightful memories of Margaret's mother and Mother Nielsen washing daily uniforms every Tuesday in great kettles over the wood stove in the kitchen. They kept a wringer washing machine in constant motion then hung everything outside to dry on lines that zigzagged across the lawn on both sides of the house.

The children attended school at the schoolhouse on Cottage Grove Road and the Jerome Avenue school. As time went on the oldest boys became of an age at which they could be of help. Having the boys interested in farming started an extremely important phase in Mr. Nielsen's life. To provide the extra income needed to support his family, Mr. Nielsen bought 20 milk cows and then purchased a small milk route from a neighbor by the name of Edward Pinney on Mountain Road. With the help of a good horse and wagon and the strong ambition to provide for his family, Christian Nielsen began to peddle milk on Albany Ave. in Hartford. He was launched on a business that was to grow, prosper, and provide for the six boys and two girls that made up the entire Nielsen family. As with many enterprising men there were setbacks and often very serious illnesses. With the grace of God, his devoted wife, and the aid of the children—some of who were taken from school to help—they overcame the obstacles.

The homestead became an Electrical Demonstration Farm. As the business grew, the buildings had to be enlarged and remodeled many times. Seemingly there was no end to it. Carl was bottling milk by hand, and Thole peddled it. The milk route grew, and soon their first open-end truck was purchased. In 1930 Clyde bought another route and joined in. It was about this time that the business name was changed to Chris Nielsen & Sons. In 1936 Chris Nielsen & Sons was running four trucks and putting out more milk with fewer miles per truck. By 1940 six trucks were operating and in 1942 another route was purchased so that when the war broke out in full force, there were nine routes operating. With all this increase in business, it isn't hard to see that there were growing pains. The wartime restrictions brought about many changes and the business emerged from the war with a total of ten trucks,, each taking care of two, routes on an every-other-day schedule.

Mr. Nielsen continued to run the farm through his later years with five sons looking after the dairy end of the business. In December of 1947 Christian Nielsen died and left the entire operation for his sons to carry on. The brothers continued to work together and look to the future. Each took charge of an area of operation: Thole performed the pasteurization and was joined by Clyde in the dairy who in later years made the ice cream. Carl was the mechanic; Earl ran the farm; and Leslie managed the milk routes.

They decided it would be to their advantage to expand the farming operations. In the spring of 1948 they rented a large farm in Avon, Connecticut and jumped in with both feet by buying a herd of Guernsey cattle from Bert Guilderdale. All were not purebred Guernsey's, but there were some good cows in the group and it gave them a start in the purebred line. By joining the Dairy Herd Improvement Association test program, the brothers learned that it would be profitable to raise their own calves. As time went on more and more high quality calves were added to the herd. The resulting lack of space put the damper on raising all of the heifers that became available.

After nearly three years in Avon, a misfortune befell them. In the fall of 1950 the barn in Avon burned to the ground. Only two calves were lost in the inferno. The seventy-seven surviving cows were temporarily housed at Pharos Farm in Simsbury. A winter of hardship and confusion followed. Determined not to let the incident overcome them, they built a new barn adjoining the old one adding fifty tie-ups to the home farm in Bloomfield. They were then in one permanent location with an average of sixty-five milkers and a total of approximately one hundred head in all. These fine facilities imparted the effect of renewed vigor for improving the herd and the Guernsey products. The old army barracks from the Avon Farm Old Farms School was moved to the Bloomfield site to garage milk trucks and other equipment.

The herd still grew, The Nielsen brothers bought David Eddy's farm on Cottage Grove Road (where The 600 is now) and farming operations were extended to this location. Again, fire befell the business. In 1959 this property burned to the ground at the hands of

an arsonist. From this point on,, hay was stored in the Guilmartin Barn on Still and Mountain Roads,, and in Shaw's Barn on Bloomfield Ave.

In the years following, the business expanded to include 22 milk routes that encompassed the surrounding towns. Our green milk trucks with the Golden Guernsey emblem could be seen everywhere. Additional milk was purchased from the Ed Pinney Farm on Mountain Road, Fred Miller's Wildwood Farm on the Carpenter property on Bloomfield Ave., Adolph Petersen's Farm on Brown Street, Harold Humphrey's Farm on Maple Ave, and Nick Maselli's Farm on Filley St. For many years the milk was picked up each morning from these suppliers in 40 quart cans and brought to the dairy. As the dairy modernized, the old barn was replaced with a new dairy addition providing a large walk-in refrigerator, a refrigerated holding tank, and adequate storage space for bottles and needed paper goods. Silkey's of Granby was retained to make the milk run, hauling the milk from the various farmers to the dairy in a large tank truck.

Besides residential milk deliveries the Nielsen products reached many other consumers. The so-called Wholesale Route included the following business establishments: Burnham's Store,, Hall's Market, Hartford Insurance Group, Connecticut Mutual, Oak Hill School, LaPenta's, Madsen Drug, Hartford Steel Ball, Johnson Gage, Squires, Bloomfield Schools, Veeder Root, Tumblebrook Country Club, Wampanaug Country Club and Connecticut General Life Insurance Company. The quality of the milk and cream were well known in the greater Hartford area. The sweet corn and ice cream were very popular and were sold only at the dairy store.

Each of the Nielsen siblings married, and the family was close knit. Bea and Jean staffed the office with Arnold Katt, accountant. Esther, Elsa and Dot helped with the billing and helped out in the office when needed. Three generations including 23 family members lived at the farm. Their homes line Hall Blvd; a sidewalk connected the back door of each house. Third generation cousins had a happy life there and hold that experience dear. It was in that pastoral setting that they learned the fundamentals of business, the love of the land,, the benefits of hard work, and skills in driving! Many of the cousins were young women that helped by raking hay, driving hay trucks, working in the dairy store, peddling milk when needed, and helping in the office. Ultimately two of the young men went into agriculture: Howard moved to his own farm in upstate New York and David works for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Not all the family activity was down on the farm. They were active members in their community. Chris Nielsen served as a Tax Assessor. Earl Nielsen was on the Town Council. Both Earl and Carl served as auxiliary police. In the early days the Nielsen boys had their own baseball team and also played in the Twilight League with Marvin Kelley as manager. Later the dairy was a Little League sponsor—remember those green and white uniforms? Both Chris and son Earl were active in the Bloomfield Farmer's Exchange and all of the brothers were Masons. Each family was a member of the Congregational Church with Donna and Leslie serving in the Mountain View Cemetery Association.

Gayle was in the Bloomfield 4-H Club. She had her own cow, Wild Beauty, and to this day probably has a better garden than any of us. The Halloween Parade was a big event in Bloomfield. Nielsen Dairy helped with the construction of several floats—some for the 4-H, some representing their business. Leslie served the country during World War 11 as co-pilot of a Flying Fortress and was based in England.

Reaching out into the community was something the brothers did willingly. They remember fondly the support and friendship of their neighbors: John Charook and family on Simsbury Road along with Walter Sinnott and Tom O'Brien. The Larensens, Mr. and Mrs. William Hall, and the Dellerts flanked them on Hall Blvd. There was also Scott's Greenhouses on Cottage Grove Road and the Lagan Farm on Maple Ave. These were the people that surrounded them. Just as important to them were the children of the surrounding school systems. As far back as the 1950's students came to visit the farm. Leslie describes how this all began saying that a class of school children asked Frank Atwood of radio station W.T.I.C. in Hartford if he could suggest a place where they might visit a farm so that they might learn about cows and the workings of a farm, Atwood contacted Chris Nielsen & Sons and the children were invited to the farm. They were given a tour of the barns and dairy and everything the brothers thought would be of interest was explained to them. At the end of the tour the children asked questions and then were served 1/2 pint bottles of chocolate milk (with a straw) and given Golden Guernsey remembrances. As a result, the dairy was host to many other groups from schools, scout organizations, and colleges. One particularly interesting group was a foreign study group composed of many nationalities from the University of Connecticut. It gave them a great deal of pleasure to have so many people want to come to visit, and they were proud to show them their fine herd of Guernsey cattle. It was some of the best advertising they had.

The Nielsen family looks to the past with pride. Ultimately the business met its demise. A highway interchange was in the wings—its stakes planted in the fields. Milk was being sold in high volumes at low cost in grocery stores, as home delivery became a thing of the past. The cows were sold in 1971. This was heart breaking. The dairy was sold to Connecticut General in 1973 and became a day care center. The farmhouse, which had stood since the late 1700's, was demolished with a few blows of a steel ball on a crane. The story ends there ... but the memories linger.

This document was prepared by Linda Nielsen Kindig for presentation to the Wintonbury Historical Society on September 13, 2000. It is based on the article "A Family Success Story" by Leslie Nielsen written for the Golden Guernsey Magazine. Donna Nielsen, Dorothy Nielsen, Leslie Nielsen, and Gayle Nielsen Peterson provided other data following a family gathering in August of 2000.