

HIGHTSTOWN
NEW



EAST WINDSOR
JERSEY

Historical Society News

SEPTEMBER 2013

Walker-Gordon The Emergence of Elsie, the Borden Cow

by Leo W. Fenity, Cranbury, NJ, Member of HEWHS

Leo's father, Wyatt, spent most of his working years at Walker-Gordon in Plainsboro, N.J. During 1939-1940, he was on loan to The Borden Company as one of three rotating shift foremen for the mini Rotolactor at the New York World's Fair. Leo has documented histories on the five dairies in Hightstown and Plainsboro and gathered data on Elsie, The Borden Cow, and wrote this paper on its history.

The Birth of the "Dairy World of Tomorrow": In 1933, Henry W. Jeffers, President of Walker-Gordon Laboratory Company in Plainsboro, N.J., visited the Chicago World's Fair. While there, he toured the dairy exhibit and found it to be unimpressive. During 1938, Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia was promoting the upcoming World's Fair at Flushing Meadows in New York City. It was during this time frame that Mr. Jeffers came up with the idea of building a mini Rotolactor (10 stanchions) for a national dairy exhibit and getting the five major breed associations (Ayreshire, Brown Swiss, Guernsey, Holstein, and Jersey) to each contribute 35 purebred dairy cattle—30 would be housed at the Fair and five "back-up" cows of each breed would be housed at Walker-Gordon in Plainsboro.

Mr. Jeffers presented his ideas, along with professional sketches, to his superiors in the Borden Company. They liked his proposal and decided to proceed with a Borden exhibit based on his plans. Mr. Jeffers and his son, Henry, Jr., were delegated to work with Borden's representatives to build and stock the exhibit. They were successful in getting the dairy suppliers to provide the equipment and the major breed associations to provide the dairy cattle. To assure the breed associations and the owners of the cows that their animals would be properly cared for, the Borden Company agreed to employ college students, who were majoring in dairying and who had the proper dairy background,

to take care of the cattle while they were at the exhibit. *Note:* The 61 hand-picked students came from 44 agricultural colleges in 38 states and two provinces of Canada. In addition, four employees from Walker-Gordon in Plainsboro were recruited to provide supervision (Roy Patton was the Rotolactor Superintendent while Eugene "Shorty" Etzel, Wyatt Fenity, and Dave Young were the Rotolactor Foremen on rotating shifts). **Success Story:** One of the 61 "Gotham Herdsmen" was Chester A. Steen, a 1939 graduate of the State College of Washington. After being a "World's Fair Borden Boy" for two years, he went onto manage two different dairy farms. In November of 1947, Chet accepted the job of Farm Production Manager for Walker-Gordon at Plainsboro. He later became Vice President, Manager in Charge of Production.

When the Fair opened in April of 1939, it was immediately apparent that Borden's "Diary World of Tomorrow" was one of the five best exhibits at the Fair. The combination of carefully selected, beautiful, high-producing cows, representing the various breeds, milked on the Rotolactor in such a way that the entire operation was visible to all observers, proved to be one of the outstanding exhibits at the Fair. The latest in scientific and practical stabling, feeding, and management practices were carried out. The cows produced at an exceptionally high rate and were true specimens of well-bred and well-cared-for cows of the five breeds. *Note:* The milk produced at the exhibit was processed and bottled on-site and then sold in the exhibit's milk bar and restaurant to help defray operating costs.

The Birth of Elsie: Going back in time, to the early 1930's the dairy industry had its share of public relations and consumer problems. Well-publicized "milk wars", that were raging between farmers and dairy processors, caused the big dairies in particular to be pictured frequently as evil money-makers off both the farmers and the public. This kind of public opinion is difficult to change even with high pressure advertising or denials, however logical, and Borden concluded the best approach was a friendly one and hopefully, one that would cause people to laugh, or at least, smile a little.

Thus, in 1936, Borden launched a medical advertising series that was to result in the eventual creation of Elsie, The Borden Cow. There were by no means "Elsie ads"; they were ads featuring a variety of cartoon cows with a variety of names,



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

OCTOBER

1 Executive Board meeting, 7:00

NOVEMBER

5 Executive Board meeting, 7:00

DECEMBER 2013

3 Executive Board meeting, 7:00

15 Christmas Tea, 1:30-3:30

Christmas Boutique, 1:30-3:30

Candlelight House Tour,

3:00-6:00

HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hightstown, New Jersey
Founded 1971

**To educate, while preserving for
future generations, our people
and our community's history.**

Shirley Olsen, Editor



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Hightstown High School Celebrates 100 Years

On Sunday, September 29, at from 3-5 p.m. the Society will be sponsoring a program on the schools of Hightstown and East Windsor in the freight station. The program will begin with a short talk on the area's early schools, including the Stockton Street School, which opened 100 years ago. A round table of teachers and administrators will share their memories of school life. Photographs, drawings, and memorabilia from local schools will be on display at the Hickory Corner Library and Ely House.

Acquisitions

Bob Patten, President of the Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society, announces the acquisition of two very important items relative to our town's history. During the Society's annual luncheon Richard "Hutch" Hutchinson donated a handwritten letter with addressed envelope dated 8th Sept 1780 from William Tilton of Philadelphia to Mr. William Smith of "Hides Town" (Hightstown). Tilton was a Captain in the 9th Pennsylvania Regiment of the Continental Army during and after the Revolutionary War. He was also a Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (21 Nov 1787 to 1789).

William Smith (1721-1791) was a resident and merchant of Hightstown and a Captain in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

Another item donated was a framed certificate with official seal from William Paterson, Governor, State of New Jersey, signed on 27 Feb 1792, granting a John Hight as "Administor all Goods, Chattels and Credits of the late John Hight of the County of Middlesex, deceased." The Society thanks Hutch for his continued support and valuable contributions to the research and preservation of our town's history. These items will be proudly displayed in the Sara Hutchinson Educational Center.

Annual Membership Application (January-December)

JOIN TODAY ~ BECOME A MEMBER!

- Individual Membership—\$20.00
- Family Membership—\$25.00
- Booster/Patron Membership— \$40.00
- Sustaining Membership—\$50.00
- Life (Individual) Membership—\$200.00
- Life (Married) Membership—\$275.00

Name _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Please mail the completed application, along with a check made payable to

**2014 DUES
ARE DUE
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Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society
Membership Committee
Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society
164 North Main Street
Hightstown, NJ 08520

Elsie, the Borden Cow

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including Mrs. Blossom, Bessie, Clara—and, of course, Elsie. Doctors loved the ads and swamped the Company with requests for reprints to hang in their office waiting rooms.

In 1938, Borden started to sponsor Mr. Hughes D. Rudd, network news commentator. A radio copywriter, intrigued by one of the medical journal ads, prepared a commercial that so delighted Mr. Rudd that he read it himself. That commercial so amused Mr. Rudd's listeners that fan mail began coming in addressed not to him but to Elsie. Elsie became the "spokescow" for Borden ever after.

The Birth of the Live Elsie: By 1939, Elsie had made her debut in national consumer magazines and had been quickly adopted by all the Company's milk plants as a feature of local community promotional programs. She had even made an appearance on a bottle cap. It was at about this time that Borden was preparing to open a unique, scientifically-important exhibit at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, and it seemed only natural to include a few cartoons of Elsie at the exhibit. However, she was not to be the focal point. That was a mini Rotolactor, a kind of merry-go-round where ten cows at one time were automatically milked on a revolving platform. It was all very agricultural and very futuristic.

Two important factors were instrumental in the coming out of the first live Elsie at the Fair:

1. Although the Rotolactor was run very slowly (ten cows at a time in 12 minute cycles with 150 cows being milked three times daily), there was still a lapse of several hours each afternoon and evening when there were no cows to milk and the revolving milking system was idle. When this occurred, there were no crowds; the people just passed by.

2. Eight young hostesses had been trained to answer every scientific question about the exhibit and were instructed to keep logs of the questions most often asked. At the first month's end, the tally was: 20% about the Rotolactor, 20% about the location of the restrooms, 60% about which of the 150 cows was Elsie.

Elsie's popularity was confirmed, and it was obvious that Borden was going to disappoint a lot of people if it couldn't produce a real Elsie and fast. The advertising people at Borden came up with the suggestion to go through the cow buildings at the exhibit and select the most beautiful, photogenic, and good-natured cow out of the 150 in the milking herd. And so it was that a seven year old "pop-eyed" brown Jersey from the Elm Hill Farm located in Brookfield, Ma. (whose registered name was "You'll Do Lobelia") became Borden's first live Elsie. For the rest of 1939, this particular Elsie, with a chain of daisies around her neck and a blanket with "Elsie" embroidered on it over her back, rode the Rotolactor alone twice a day for millions of Fair-goers. As a result, the crowds gathered around just as they did when the cows were being milked. Note: Most cows are natural hams if given the opportunity, and the first Elsie was among the hammiest. She didn't just smile at the crowds, she gave every impression of counting the house. The public took her to their hearts. Everyone—Borden and the crowd—were happy.

Following the close of the Fair's first season, Elsie "gave" an appreciation dinner for all of the press who had been so kind to her. That sparked more press coverage and invitations to more events including a "Bovine Ball" sponsored by New York's

socially elite Seventh Regiment. She also dined at the Stork Club and at "21" in New York City. The majority of her appearances tied into charity causes. When Elsie was not on display at the Fair or making appearances, she was housed and cared for at the Walker-Gordon Dairy Farms in Plainsboro.

The Birth of the Boudoir: There had been no time to design a special setting for Elsie in the Fair's first season, but for 1940 Borden decided to make Elsie the focal point of the entire exhibit with a specially designed "Barn Colonial Boudoir". The room featured many whimsical props: Churns used as tables, milk bottles for lamps, a wheelbarrow for a chaise lounge, and oil paintings of Elsie and her ancestors (among them her Uncle Bosworth, a naval hero who died when the battleship Maine blew up in Havana Harbor; and Great Aunt Bess, who was left at the altar and died an old maid). The first boudoir set the decorating scheme for most of them to follow, not only on the road but in the magazine ads which began portraying Elsie against a similar Barn Colonial home environment.

Birth of Elmer and Beulah: Elsie's husband and their first daughter, Beulah, were born only weeks apart in the summer of 1940. The wide national attention given to Elsie had sufficiently intrigued RKO. Pictures offered her a co-starring role with Jack Oakie and Kay Francis in "Little Men". Elsie was to play the role of a cow named Buttercup. Borden wired back to RKO that the idea sounded great but Elsie was in an "interesting condition" just then and what was Borden to do about the World's Fair exhibit? RKO promised the best of pre-calf and post-calf care and Borden agreed to let Elsie go west in a private railroad car. However, the fabulously successful World's Fair exhibit was left without its star. Again the ad people at Borden came to the rescue and suggested Elmer, Elsie's husband, be created. A very meek bull, previously named Sybil's Dreaming Royalist, was selected. The boudoir was disarranged overnight and with red underwear hung on the bedpost, lamps askew, and many props to suggest a series of nightly poker parties.

Everyone had smiled at Elsie in the boudoir; they guffawed at Elmer in his summer bachelor role. Note: Elmer eventually became spokesman for the chemical division of Borden and his image, to this day, is found on the label of every bottle of Elmer's Glue.

Upon her return to the Fair that September, Elsie was accompanied by her daughter, Beulah. In the now-spotless boudoir there awaited a calvie coop, hand-knitted four-legged sweater in baby pink, a clothesline full of diapers, and booties in sets of four. Elsie, with baby Beulah, became an even bigger hit of the Fair. During the 1940 season, Elsie outdrew in attendance every other World's Fair exhibit including the multi-million dollar General Motors Futurama, which had been in first place the year before.

The Birth of the Traveling Boudoir: Following the Fair's closing in November of 1940, Elsie (usually accompanied by Beulah but never by Elmer) took up traveling in a serious way, and a monstrous boudoir was designed to accompany her. The two cows and the boudoir required an entire railway freight car. One day in 1941, while Elsie was being transported to an appearance in Chicago, her special tractor trailer was involved in an accident on US Route 1 in North Jersey. Elsie received a serious neck injury—a spinal displacement—from which she died shortly after. She was buried beneath a tree just beyond the entrance to the Walker-Gordon Dairy Farm in Plainsboro. A headstone still marks the final resting place of the pride of the Borden Company.

ates to Elsie: A new Elsie, a Jersey named Noble Aim Standard, became the world's second much-publicized bovine. In the ultimate tribute, American servicemen took Elsie to war with them. She was a popular pin-up girl in many a Navy locker, and a B-25 dubbed "The Milk Run" was decorated with a painting of Elsie delivering the milk. Elsie also appeared monthly in about every major magazine in the early 1940's: *Colliers*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Liberty*, *Life*, *Look*, *McCalls*, *Post*, and *Women's Home Journal*. Also during this time frame, she took credit for selling \$10,000,000, in US War Bonds on her personal appearance tours. She received the keys to scores of cities and at least a dozen states. She was also named as the greatest all-time sales representative for the produce of the dairy farmer.

The End of an Era: In 1944, the Jeffers family, plus a few friends and associates, purchased the Walker-Gordon Laboratory Company in Plainsboro from the Borden Company. If not the road making personal appearances, Elsie, Elmer, and Beulah were housed at the Plainsboro dairy farms until this change in ownership. While the story of Elsie and her family continued, there was no longer an association with Walker-Gordon after 1944.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The Emergence of Elsie, The Borden Cow was obtained from several sources, e.g., three books (*Gotham Herdsmen I, II, and III; 1939 New York World's Fair*), a Borden's Company booklet ("The Story of Elsie The Borden

Cow"), and local newspapers clippings. Also, Mr. Chester A. Steen provided information about the Borden's exhibit at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. In addition, Mr. Henry W. Jeffers III provided data and reviewed the article for accuracy.

Annual Christmas Tea, Christmas Candlelight House Tour & Boutique Sunday, December 15, at Ely House

- ☼ *Christmas Tea:* 1:30-3:30 p.m.
- ☼ *Holiday Boutique* to include Evergreen Holiday Arrangements 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
- ☼ *Cathy Anzuni* will be bringing a choral group from Hightstown High School at 2 p.m.
- ☼ *Christmas Candlelight House Tour*, 3-6 p.m., presented by The Hightstown Woman's Club, featuring seven private homes in Hightstown and East Windsor. Advanced Sale tickets \$10 at Perennial Home; Day of Event \$15 to be sold at Ely House. Many of our members are participating and having their homes open. Do try to attend.
- ☼ *The Bell Choir* at the First United Methodist Church will perform at 6 p.m. following the tour.

The *Society House Tour* is planned for October, 2014. Please call Shirley Olsen if you would like to be a part of the committee. 609-448-8388.

Regular Society Meetings

The Society holds their Executive Board meeting the first Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. in the Sara Hutchinson Educational Center (freight station). All members are invited and encouraged to attend.



Mrs. & Mrs. Robert Craig
4002 Nottingham Way
Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

Visit our website at
www.hewhs.com

Hightstown-East Windsor
Historical Society
164 North Main Street
Hightstown, NJ 08520

