

The Dairy Cooperative Association Site

Many small cooperative enterprises, operating independently, do not fit in with conditions and trends in modern business. Rapid and radical changes have occurred in recent years. Mass distribution quickly followed production. Mergers, amalgamations, and federations are constantly bringing business enterprises into fewer and stronger hands. . . . Organizations that cannot “stand the gaff,” that cannot operate on margins and by methods brought about by large-scale enterprises must themselves become large-scale enterprises or get out of the way.

—Economist George O. Gatlin, Oregon State Agricultural College, Extension Service, 1929

After the devastating collapse of the old Dairymen’s League, dairy producers found it increasingly difficult to market their milk and make a profit. Finally, in 1929, six dairy groups came together as the Dairy Cooperative Association (DCA) to protect their interests in the Portland and Salem markets. Within a year, 1,300 dairy farmers had become members.

The cooperative’s attempts to secure a contract with distributors led to a three-day milk war in August 1931. The stand-off was tense, leaving one man dead, property damaged, and much milk dumped. The DCA prevailed, however, and won a three-year contract that set a base price below which distributors could not purchase milk.

The new cooperative flourished. By 1936, the DCA collected five- and ten-gallon milk cans on twenty different milk runs with a fleet of ten trucks; it had fifty-five employees and produced more cheese under one roof than any other group in the United States. In 1938, the DCA moved its Feed Department to a newly built mill and warehouse on the lot between SE 6th and 8th streets in Portland. They later built a garage, powdered milk plant, manufacturing plant, and office on the same site.

Over the next decades, numerous dairies merged into the DCA, notably, in 1941, Vancouver’s Mayflower Farms. The DCA used the Mayflower label for its retail brand and changed the cooperative’s name to Mayflower Farms in 1961.

Finally, in 1981, Mayflower Farms, by then the largest dairy cooperative in the Oregon market, was itself merged into Washington State’s Northwest Dairymen’s Association, the producers of Darigold products. DeLane Fry, a president of the Mayflower Farms cooperative, said: “At one time we had more than 4,000 members. When we merged into Darigold we had about 400 members and they were producing much more milk than we did with the 4,000.”

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By the 1990s, larger herds had made on-farm feed production economical, causing a drop in feed prices. Darigold eventually sold its feed operation to Land O'Lakes, a Minnesota-based cooperative. This split the DCA lot, with Darigold owning the western, milk-production half, and Land O'Lakes the eastern, feed-mill half.

The Darigold/DCA lot sits one block south of where TriMet's new Portland-Milwaukie MAX line will pass. The inner, southeast Portland neighborhoods located along this line have experienced much real-estate activity in the past few years in anticipation of the commuters expected to pass through these light industrial areas.

In September 2011, what had become Land O'Lakes/Purina, sold its side of the Darigold/DCA lot to a Portland developer. Soon after, the 1979 silos and mill were demolished.