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The organic dairy movement started long before a mainstream market for such products existed. As early as the 1960s, conventional dairy farmers in different regions of the United States adopted organic methods although there were no financial rewards for doing so. They made changes to their production practices because of specific problems they encountered with the conventional system. In the 1980s several pioneering farmers turned to on-farm processing and sold their dairy products in alternative retail outlets. They were also instrumental in the development of organic certification standards. By sharing the stories of the organic dairy farmers at the forefront of the movement, this article documents how organic dairy developed from an “invisible” part of the production process to a niche product of food coops in the 1980s.

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When James Maroney left his job in New York City and moved to Vermont in 1986, he had a vision to produce and market organic milk. This decision did not come out of nowhere: for years, Maroney had subscribed to Rodale Press’s *Organic Gardening* and tended a garden at his home in Westchester County. Once settled near Middlebury, Maroney and his wife Suki founded what would become one of the nation’s largest certified organic dairy farms. They produced and sold over two million pounds of milk every year until 1996, when a fire destroyed their barn, and they ceased dairying. Maroney firmly believed that to have an impact he had to be large scale, so he started with an organic herd of 125 cows. Despite his best efforts, however, he was never able to sell his milk as organic. Until the mid-1990s there simply were no large-scale organic milk processors in Vermont, and organic dairy was still a fledgling industry disconnected from mainstream demand. Rather than give up farming, Maroney sold his milk at a loss to Agri-Mark, a Northeast dairy cooperative.1

In neighboring New York State, Kevin Engelbert stopped using chemical pesticides and fertilizers on his feed crops in 1981. Unlike Maroney, the Engelberts had been dairy farming since the 1800s. Engelbert’s father attended Cornell and was one of the first farmers in the area to adopt chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the 1950s. As the costs of synthetic inputs and veterinary treatments rose while health problems persisted in his herd, Engelbert decided to stop “pushing the cows” and instead turned to organic production methods. In 1984 his farm became the first dairy farm to be certified organic by the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), and yet he struggled to stay financially afloat for twenty years while he sold to conventional processors.2

As early as the 1960s milk producers in the Northeast and Midwest made the decision to apply organic methods on their dairy farms because the conventional system no longer made sense to them. Led by their own convictions of what sustainable or healthful production entailed, they moved toward an organic system that affected their animals, crops, and pasture. Many of these farmers had grown up on dairy farms and embraced conventional production before becoming increasingly disillusioned. Until markets for organic milk opened up in the 1990s, however, they usually had no choice but to continue to sell their milk through conventional channels.
While these conventional farmers defied their industry’s recommendations to invest in more inputs to produce more milk, back-to-the-landers in these same milk-producing regions settled on homesteads and started milking cows. These were men and women who left urban areas and moved to the country, seeking a “simpler” and more self-sufficient lifestyle. Though scholars have linked the rise of organic farming to the anti-establishment activism of the 1960s, when antiwar and environmental activists joined forces in their opposition to petrochemical manufacturers, dairying and livestock farming have often been overlooked.3

Commercial organic dairy production began in the mid to late 1980s and achieved mainstream recognition when rbST, the injectable bovine growth hormone that increases a cow’s milk production, became available in 1994. Still, the history of organic dairying has been subject to differing accounts. Some scholars have suggested that organic dairying was not part of the original organic food movement or that organic dairy products did not really exist until corporations created them in the 1990s. In fact, while the organic dairy industry did not truly gain traction until the mid-1990s, a movement of dairy farmers applying organic methods started decades earlier in different regions of the United States. Some were conventional producers who decided on their own to move away from the milk industry’s prevailing production methods, and others were back-to-the-landers who were organic from day one. Today’s organic dairy sector is rooted in both the conventional US milk-production system and the counterculture of the 1970s.4

The emergence of organic dairying is rooted in the transformation of the conventional dairy industry in the United States following World War II. In the first half of the twentieth century, technological advancements that had begun to alter the landscape of dairy production were not available to most farmers. That changed in the plentiful postwar period, when widespread electrification and other innovations such as on-farm refrigeration, pipeline milkers, bulk tanks, automated gutter cleaners, and artificial insemination eased the drudgery of dairy farm work.5

The mechanization of feeding cows, milking, manure handling, and milk transport brought enormous gains in production efficiency. At the same time, the federal milk marketing system helped to achieve milk-pricing stability while requiring that producers maintain certain building, equipment, and cleanliness standards. Farmers came to rely on the
professionals who introduced them to the latest advances that maximized output. Dairy farmers who could not afford to invest in the new technologies, and farming operations where dairying was only a sideline activity, exited the business, accelerating the trend toward more specialized dairy farms.6

Other advances influenced crop and milk production. Inexpensive nitrogen fertilizer that evolved from explosives production during World War II became available for crop production. Innovations in farm equipment and plant genetics increased crop yields, lowering grain prices and making feeding grain to dairy cows economically attractive. Farmers with larger herds began to abandon grazing and adopt confinement feeding with freestall housing. Artificial insemination became the norm as farmers bred their cows for maximum milk production. More veterinary drugs, such as penicillin, were used to combat mastitis, a bacterial infection of the udders. As a result of these sweeping changes, between 1950 and 1990, total milk production grew by 26 percent, while the number of dairy cows dropped by more than half.7

From a financial perspective, dairy farming became more challenging. As milk production increased, milk prices rose but did not increase proportionally with production costs. Therefore many farmers had to expand their herds to maintain economic viability. The growth of retail chain stores favored uniform quality milk and large-volume suppliers. The beneficiaries of these changes were consumers, who spent less of their disposable income for relatively cheaper dairy products.8

The conventional system, though advantageous in many ways, had unintended consequences as well as a growing number of detractors. The advances in technology and animal management led to external costs, and on many farms, herd health problems became more numerous and complex. As early as the 1960s the negative effects of confinement and intensive production drove conventional farmers in different states—including Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Kansas, and New York—to seek alternative ways to produce milk. Based on their individual experiences, these “early converters” to organic milk production believed strongly that chemical inputs were degrading their land and adversely affecting their health and the health of their herds. Some viewed routine antibiotic use to be ineffective, while others were opposed to how much they had to “push the cows” for production.

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They renounced modern fertilizers and pest control methods—sometimes overnight—and they experimented with homeopathic medicines. While some considered the possibility of on-farm processing, most had no choice but to continue to sell conventionally due to the lack of organic markets.9

Unlike the conventional farmers who were using chemical inputs and then transitioned, back-to-the-landers usually started with small organic herds or with just one family cow. These farming couples had not grown up on dairy farms and had never used chemical inputs. In the words of Jack Lazor, the pioneering founder of Butterworks Farm in Vermont, “We got into organic farming for our own peace of mind and because we wanted to do something in a holistic way. We didn’t know there was a movement afoot.”10

From the beginning, there were many institutional barriers in the way of the burgeoning organic dairy movement. First, milk production and labeling was, and still is, heavily regulated. Second, most certifiers did not start certifying dairy as “organic” until the mid-1980s, partly because those working in the organic and natural foods sectors paid “little attention” to livestock and dairy standards and partly because the certification process was a grassroots effort that was still very much in its infancy. Finally, there was no alternative infrastructure within the milk supply chain to haul, process, and distribute organic milk. The options for organic dairy producers were limited until the early 1990s; they could either process their milk themselves or sell it through conventional channels.11

During the 1960s, as political and social unrest spread across many parts of the world, the general public became more sensitized to environmental pollution and its links with industrial agriculture. This awareness led to a “strong determination” among some members of the public to take action. By the 1970s organic farming was attracting the attention of the wider worlds of agriculture, society, and politics, but mainstream agricultural institutions mostly ignored it.12

As demand for organic products grew, there developed a need for standards to prevent fraud and unfair competition. Before the advent of certification programs, however, organic farming was not defined exclusively as one thing; it was only understood to be “a more natural form of farming characterized mainly by the non-use of chemicals and other
synthetic inputs.” There were some efforts to define organic standards in Europe in the 1930s, but it was not until the resurgence of the movement as part of the sixties and seventies counterculture that certification standards became truly necessary. In the 1970s organic producers began to take marketing seriously, and private—mostly non-profit—organizations set about developing standards with the goal of defining organic production in concrete terms. Groups such as NOFA oversaw specific states or regions of the country, and rules were shared, borrowed, and debated in farmer-led discussions. The objective was to create practical guidelines based on what “made sense ecologically” in each region.\textsuperscript{13}

The now-defunct Minnesota-based Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA) certified farms in Minnesota and other Midwest states and held annual conferences beginning in 1971. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) certified twenty-seven farms in 1972. Both organizations, like other newly formed organic advocacy groups around the country, based their standards on those of the Rodale Institute. These were usually in the form of strong recommendations, rather than strict requirements. NOFA started certifying farms in 1977, though consumers were not involved in the process, and in the early years participation remained low. By 1980 some states had developed formal definitions of organic agriculture, but many people involved in the organic food production and distribution system objected to aspects of these.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1980 the USDA acknowledged that there was no universally accepted definition of organic agriculture, yet for the purposes of its landmark report on the movement, the agency defined organic farming as follows:

A production system which avoids or largely excludes the use of synthetically compounded fertilizers, pesticides, growth regulators, and livestock feed additives. To the maximum extent feasible, organic farming systems rely upon crop rotations, crop residues, animal manures, legumes, green manures, off-farm organic wastes, mechanical cultivation, mineral-bearing rocks, and aspects of biological pest control to maintain soil productivity and tilth, to supply plant nutrients, and to control insects, weeds, and other pests.

While early certification concentrated on soils, land, and crops, animals were considered to be an essential part of the farming enterprise.\textsuperscript{15}
One of the earliest certification groups was the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA). Wisconsin farmer and certification director Dave Engel explained why OCIA was the certifier of choice: “They had chapters, and you could run a certification more or less yourself. There’s a process that you had to set up. OCIA helped with that and checked up on it. They had chapter licensing, which was a type of early accreditation.” Many different certifiers, including NOFA and OGBA, were OCIA chapters for a time. These certification efforts were a critical stepping-stone in the development of the organics industry. According to Enid Wonnacott, the executive director of NOFA-Vermont, the late 1980s were a “kind of primordial soup of organic agriculture, with farmer-gatherings to discuss food access, state organic certification standards, and what practices were consistent with our ideals.”

A 1977 OGBA office memorandum from Minneapolis illustrates this burgeoning development and the struggles it entailed:

> There is more demand for organic goods than supply. However, the channels have not been established. Growers have been asking about fertilizers constantly. To meet this need we are working on a list of acceptable fertilizers. It is difficult to research all the name brands. Some companies refuse to give out the list of ingredients. We will do our best, but if you have information (good or bad) about some material, please, forward it to us.¹⁶

Long before anyone else, OGBA developed organic dairy and livestock standards and certified farms in southeastern Minnesota in 1975. These called for well-ventilated housing for animals and free access to the outdoors, as well as the use of preventive health measures and natural remedies, although antibiotics were permitted in emergency situations. It was recommended that all animal feed be completely organic, but 10 percent of daily rations could come from conventional sources as long as they did not include prohibited additives.¹⁷

When Engelbert contacted NOFA-New York in 1984 and asked to become certified organic, the organization responded that it did not have any organic dairy standards. In an interesting reversal of roles, he was asked to record his production practices, which then became the organization’s dairy guidelines. Engelbert recalls: “They said, ‘Well, just write
down everything you do.’ So we did. I wrote down everything we did for all our crops, everything we did with our animals, and stuff like that, and then they came down and looked at the farm and said, ‘Okay, you’re certified.’” Five years later, in 1989, Wisconsin OCIA Chapter Number One presented draft organic dairy standards to the OCIA International Administrative Council. According to Dave Engel, the Wisconsin chapter had used these standards to certify dairy farms in that state since the previous year, influenced by the OGBA standards from neighboring Minnesota. OCIA International formally adopted the Wisconsin guidelines, and regional organizations across the United States subsequently used these as core principles.18

Just as “organic farming” had no standard meaning in the 1970s (even researchers used the term differently, relying at times on farmer self-definitions), dairy farmers who rejected the conventional dairy model formulated farming practices based on what ecological and sustainable production meant to them. Even when organic dairy products began appearing in the late 1970s and early 1980s in specialty outlets such as health food stores, the word “organic” was not necessarily featured on product labels. When the time came to devise standards, organic dairy farmers—not regulators—were the ones who created, shared, and revised region-specific guidelines in a bottom-up process, just as farmers, gardeners, and homesteaders had done for organic produce.19

As Louise Hemsted explains in a short chapter on the history of organic dairying, “organic dairy in the United States has its roots and history steeped in conventional dairy production.” Former conventional producers typically transitioned on an informal basis, very much on their own, and not in response to any change in consumer demand. For some of the conventional farmers, there was an “aha” moment when they experienced the potential hazards of conventional practices. David and Florence Minar of Cedar Summit Farm in New Prague, Minnesota, discontinued pesticides on their dairy farm in 1974. Minar was born and raised on the farm, and his father had been one of the first to use sprays in their area after World War II. For him, “the straw that broke the camel’s back” happened in the spring of 1974 when he had a severe nervous reaction to an herbicide he was mixing. “From that moment, pesticides were history on our farm,” he remembers. “We learned to farm without them just like my grandfathers did.”20

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The turning point for David and Marcia McCoy of Wotokahan Farm in Fredericktown, Ohio, occurred when David looked at a bag of chemical ingredients and said “no way.” They transitioned “cold turkey” in 1979 or 1980 and sold conventionally for years until an opportunity to sell their milk to make organic cheese opened up. Similarly, Dan Patenaude of Highland, Wisconsin, started to worry about the health of his soil when he saw the “skull and bones on the Furadan container” in the mid-1970s.21

In 1976 organic consultant and historian Roger Blobaum profiled the Bauman brothers of Sabetha, Kansas, for the magazine of an organic supplier. While Alvin and Bud Bauman had experimented with organic methods for several years, a decisive moment for them occurred when six of their milk cows were poisoned and died after drinking insecticide-laced water from a creek. The brothers switched to a totally organic operation and reported “dramatic improvements to livestock health.” They were also able to reduce their veterinary bills to “almost nothing.”22

In New York, Engelbert considered organic methods after a conversation he had with his grandmother soon after he graduated from college and took over the family farm in 1979. He had gone to the Federal Land Bank and applied for a loan to buy bred heifers. He recounts:

‘Course, given our farm’s history and my dad’s good name, that was no problem. They said, “you know, you need any more money, let us know.” Well, I thought that was a pretty big deal for a twenty-two-year-old. We were at a family reunion that August, and I was telling my grandmother this. She looked at me kind of disgustedly, and went, “Huh, well, all I know is that when your grandfather and I were running the farm we had good heifers to sell every year. It sure helped our bottom line.” Well, I stuck my tail between my legs and kind of walked off.

Engelbert was forced to reflect on why it was that he was borrowing money to maintain his herd while a generation before his grandparents had extra animals to sell. He went on to say:

You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to realize that we were spending twenty-five thousand dollars a year on fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides and one thousand dollars a month on vet bills, drugs, and hormones, and, you know, trying to keep our cows alive. And we weren’t successful at either.23
Francis Thicke of Radiance Dairy in Fairfield, Iowa, names several reasons for making the transition in 1976 while at his first farm in Minnesota. He thought that all the synthetic materials being used were not that good for the land or for the people eating the food. He did not think they were necessary, and he was intrigued by the challenge of farming without those chemicals.24

Joe Scrimger of Marlette, in the Thumb region of Michigan, recalls how his in-laws, Nelson and Ann Davis of nearby Mayville, transitioned to organic methods in the 1960s. “Nelson had some health issues when he came out of the military. Ann was looking for some answers and farming ‘organically’ was part of what they decided to do.” Their farm, which was certified by the Organic Growers of Michigan (OGM), was active into the late 1980s. According to their son-in-law, “their milk had always gone conventional. They looked at doing on-farm processing, but could not see the investment, at that time.”25

In the northeastern part of Michigan, Don Cordes had been farming conventionally for years on land that had been in his family for generations. After headaches and throat problems led him to repeated doctor’s visits, he stopped using all chemical inputs one day in 1984. “I got sick of them,” he says. “It was the cause of my illness. It really forced me into going to organic. The Dyfonate, for one thing, was a poison to my system, and it just wasn’t healthy.” He treated cows using homeopathic remedies that he researched himself, as there were no organic farmers in his area to whom he could turn for advice. He was not able to sell his milk organically until twenty-two years later in 2006. Cordes says, “We continued with the organic system even though we were selling conventional milk, because it was healthier for us, for myself, and the family. And for the land.”26

The experience of these long-time dairymen challenges the stereotypical view of the “hippy” organic farmer. These men and women objected to aspects of the conventional system, and they responded by adopting organic practices. That does not mean that they also embraced an alternative lifestyle or severed all ties with the conventional system. Two early surveys of midwestern organic grain producers found similar attitudes. In one study carried out in the mid-1970s, farmers pointed to specific problems with conventional production as their main reason for transitioning. Tellingly, several farmers reported, “The soil was dead.”
Only about one-third of grain farmers reported a wholesale dislike of chemicals, a generalized concern about the environment, or religious principles. Most had farmed conventionally before transitioning and, while many became involved in organic networks, they kept strong ties to conventional farming circles and institutions. Like these grain farmers, the previously conventional dairy producers showed personal independence in choosing to resist some, but not all, of the interlocking system of dairy production. They were not simply “becoming hippies,” but making individual choices based on individual experiences.27

The fact that dairy farmers in the Upper Midwest usually produced their own feed helps to explain why so many of the early converters were concentrated in that region. These changes were not solely related to cow health: producers were also disturbed by the effects of chemical inputs on their feed crops and the land itself. They faced problems at different levels of their dairy operation, and they responded with holistic changes. It made less sense for farmers who were not producing their own grain to buy organic feed, only to sell their milk conventionally.28

The group of supply side–only organic dairymen also included back-to-the-landers with a more comprehensive critique of the conventional system, as evidenced by Maroney’s experience in Vermont. In the Midwest, Maynard Kaufman of Michigan and Engel of Wisconsin were in similar situations. A farmer, academic, and founder of OGM, Kaufman describes himself as “part of the back-to-the-land movement in the late sixties and early seventies.” He took a leave of absence from Western Michigan University to found a school of homesteading in Bangor in 1973. OGM certified the one-hundred-acre farm that same year, though the dairy was not certified specifically. Kaufman produced Grade B milk starting in 1975 and Grade A milk after 1980. “I [fed] my cattle the feed I raised, all organic, and of course I did not confine them at all,” he recalls. “The only non-organic thing I did was to treat mastitis with antibiotics. That was not often. And the big milk coop I sold to did not have markets for organic milk, so I did not claim it was organic.”29

At Rising Sun Jersey Farm in Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin, Dave and Marta Engel started milking cows in 1981. The couple had met in Minneapolis in the mid-seventies, and according to Engel, “it wasn’t an unusual idea for people to want to farm. That was the back-to-the-land
movement. A lot of us ended up in the country. I ended up in the country just doing carpentry, and that wasn’t very financially stable, and [Marta] had always wanted animals, so we decided to milk cows.” Before Engel became a founding member of the Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool (CROPP) in 1988, Rising Sun Jersey Farm sold milk to a local cheese factory. “We were not using, for the most part, any conventional inputs,” he says. “A couple times we used antibiotics, and I know of one time we tried a breeding hormone.”

The first organic dairy certification guidelines did not ban antibiotics outright as they do today. As previously stated, farmers were permitted to use them in “emergency” or “last resort” situations, but routine use was prohibited. Though some continued to use antibiotics in severe cases, there was also a growing trend of farmers turning to homeopathic medicine (a practice that treats conditions that constitute disease with remedies that have produced similar conditions in healthy subjects) aided by veterinarians like Edgar Sheaffer of the Clark Veterinary Clinic in Palmyra, Pennsylvania. Sheaffer became disillusioned with conventional veterinary medicine soon after veterinary school when he realized that he was seeing the same animals with the same ailments year after year. In the early 1980s he attended lectures by the Scottish homeopathic veterinarian George McLeod, and from then on he encouraged his farmer-clients to consider organic farming once they became comfortable administering homeopathic treatments.

When Scrimger took over milking at his in-laws’ farm in Michigan for a few days, he was surprised to find no antibiotics on the premises:

After milking their cows the first weekend I realized we had not treated any cows, so I checked the cabinet at the end of the barn, [but] there weren’t any treatments in the cabinet. When I checked into the process my mother-in-law was a “lay” practitioner of homeopathy, which she used on the cows, if needed. Their vet bills averaged under one hundred twenty dollars a year, with over one hundred animals on the farm.

When Engelbert’s father was still managing the farm conventionally in the 1970s, they found that it was not enough to call the veterinarian only as needed. Their herd health problems were so persistent that the veterinarian started visiting every week. Engelbert recalls that “every
Thursday for years, the vet would come and he’d be treating cows for mastitis, giving them hormone shots, trying to make them come into heat, and cyst shots to break up cysts on their ovaries.” This story is in stark contrast to his operation in 2012: “As of right now, I don’t know of the last time we had the vet on the farm to treat a sick animal.” Organic Certification Director Jim Riddle of the University of Minnesota inspected midwestern organic dairies in the late 1980s and says that a “majority of those producers reported significant improvements in herd health after they converted to organic management, including less mastitis, better breeding success, fewer cases of lameness and hoof problems, more lactations per cow, and much lower vet bills.”

Notably, those who had previously farmed conventionally did not incur higher costs once they transitioned to the new production methods. Cordes and Engelbert both stated that what they lost in crop yield and milk volume, they made up by saving on expenses for inputs. “I can’t honestly say that we saved money,” Engelbert maintains. “We didn’t spend as much on inputs, but our yields weren’t as high. We didn’t make as much milk. We didn’t push our cows as much.” Cordes says he did not look at the matter in terms of dollars lost or gained. “You don’t lose money unless you know [an organic market] is available,” he says.

We looked at what you’ve got to spend and that’s what you work with. But as far as costing more to go organic—no. It was actually a little bit less because I didn’t use all the chemicals, and I didn’t use all the fertilizers. And when I sat down and penciled that out, I was using ten-thousand-dollars worth of fertilizers and chemicals, which, what was I doing with it? You know? What was I gaining?

As for Engel, he does not believe farming with organic methods made much of a difference financially. “It was nip and tuck through the eighties,” he explains. “I can’t say that it was necessarily because of the way we farmed. The dairy industry, still, is a roller coaster. I don’t think farming organically helped or hindered that either way.” Similarly, Vermont dairyman Adam Parke—who experimented with feeding seaweed and root crops to his cows as part of his goal of having a healthy herd—says his operation did not have higher costs relative to farmers who stuck to the conventional model completely. “We farmed this way
for our own moral reasons and thought perhaps there was an economic
gain from our better herd health and lower inputs.” After ten years of
selling his milk to conventional outlets such as Cabot Creamery, Parke
stopped dairy farming. “It was getting to be the time when there was
even more pressure to become large—get big or get out,” he says. “There
was just no profit margin at all, and a lot of years of struggling to get by.
I was burned out by the economics of it. Just plain discouraged and
burned out.”

There is some evidence in the social science literature that “earlier”
organic producers (before the early 1990s) were more strongly motivated
by ideological and environmental issues, whereas financial and business
considerations were more significant to more recent adopters of organic
practices. The early converters to organic dairying sold through conven-
tional channels because there were no markets providing a financial
incentive to transition. It is therefore unlikely that they would have con-
sidered financial gain as a motivating factor. While eliminating expensive
inputs and veterinary visits reduced costs, the lower output that could
result meant that net savings were not guaranteed. Indeed, the primary
motivation of the early converters was to farm in a way that was better
for their health, the health of their herd, and the health of their land.

Unlike the producers who kept costs down by adopting organic
methods, Maroney certainly saved no money by producing organically.
This may have been because his start-up organic dairy farm put him in a
completely different financial situation from long-time conventional
dairymen and because he purchased organic grain—even while he was
selling conventionally—in order to maintain his organic certification.
Over the years, he never abandoned hope that he would one day process
his own milk. Maroney explored different business opportunities, includ-
ing the possibility of producing milk, cheese, and butter for Vermont-
based Ben & Jerry’s, but he could never find processors willing to pay
what the milk actually cost to produce.

In the late 1970s organic milk, yogurt, and cheese started appearing
at farmers’ markets, farm stores, and coop markets after a half-dozen
organic dairy pioneers across the country began processing milk on their
farms or in nearby plants. Organic dairy would perhaps have remained
an invisible behind-the-scenes endeavor if not for them. These farmers
chose not to ship their milk anywhere. Instead, they processed it
themselves—often in a small room on their farm—and sold their products in local, in-state markets. As Nancy Everhart of Hill Farm in Vermont explains, “We never shipped to a conventional market, ever. We bottled on the farm. In the beginning, because we wanted to sell organic milk, there was no other way to sell organic milk, because there was no other market.” To overcome the lack of an alternative infrastructure for organic milk, farmers set about creating their own.38

Some of the very first organic dairy farmer-processors were located in southern Minnesota. In 1976 a group of twelve producers started pasteurizing and bottling their certified organic milk at the Little Dutch Mill Dairy in Rochester, Minnesota. They sold their products on a delivery route and at a small retail store on the southeastern edge of the city. The dairy was only in operation for a few years, but a miniature blue and white windmill still stands in that location. Farmer-owner Ed Hauck explained that he and other farmers wanted to control the entire process from the farmer to the consumer. “That way we can guarantee the buyer that it’s organic production,” he said in 1976. Prior to founding the dairy, Hauck and others had sold through conventional channels.39

In eastern New York, Hawthorne Valley Farm began processing milk into Alpine cheeses in 1976. The farm was started by a group of anthroposophists (a New Age philosophical movement founded by Rudolf Steiner) four years earlier. Their goal was to create a place outside of New York City where students from Waldorf schools (affiliated with the anthroposophical movement) could visit. For the first ten years, Hawthorne Valley was first and foremost a dairy farm with a herd of forty cows, but it also served as an educational site for Waldorf students. According to current director, Steffen Schneider, the farm has applied only organic and biodynamic principles from the very beginning. Because of Hawthorne Valley’s strong connection to the Rudolph Steiner School in Manhattan, the farm’s Alpine cheeses were sold at the Union Square Greenmarket. “We had a small cheese room where we made the cheese,” Schneider recalls. “We also sold raw milk that people would buy using reusable containers. Around 1987 we opened a new creamery and our core product was yogurt, but we continued to make cheese, and we bottled the raw milk.”40

In Bernville, Pennsylvania, Shalom Farm has also used only organic methods from its inception in 1977. Like the other pioneers, Jacob Meyer
and his family were motivated by their ideals, for them more religious in nature. Current manager Solomon Meyer tells of his father’s motivations to farm without synthetic inputs: “My dad saw his father’s farm transformed under chemical management, and he wanted no part of it. My parents were convinced that organic was the only way to farm. They were religious and wanted to be good stewards of the land.”

The Meyers started producing beef and later milk. By 1982 they were selling raw milk to customers in their region and then in 1984 began producing cheese in a local processing plant. The cheeses were immediately popular. “In the eighties, we were in a wide-open marketplace,” remembers Meyer. “We caught our first big break when we landed a distributor relationship. From there things grew.” They continued to expand and bought the local processing plant in 1989. According to Meyer, “there were no realistic standards or certification in the early days. A lot of folks back then, like us, had their own individual ideas of what organic meant. We resisted certification until it became necessary to stay in the marketplace in 1999.”

In 1978 Samuel and Louise Kaymen moved to Stonyfield Farm in Wilton, New Hampshire. One year later they founded the Rural Education School to teach homesteading skills to visiting students. They milked their seven organically raised Jersey cows, and they experimented making plain yogurt, which they sold to local health food stores. This remained a sideline activity until funds were needed to finance the school in 1983. The Kaymens and new business partner Gary Hirshberg saw the yogurt operation as a means to generate revenue. As New England supermarkets became interested in the product, Kaymen and Hirshberg sold the farm’s small herd and started buying milk from conventional dairy farmers in Vermont and New Hampshire. Stonyfield later moved back into organic dairy processing in the 1990s.

Perhaps no farm has been more influential in small-scale organic dairying than Butterworks Farm in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. In 1976 Ann and Jack Lazor fulfilled their dream of buying a homestead. Their primary motivation was to farm and be totally self-sufficient, “not to manufacture dairy products.” At first, they made cottage cheese, farmer’s cheese, butter, and yogurt for themselves from their family cow. By 1979 they had four cows and a surplus of milk, which they processed into a variety of products on their kitchen stove. Lazor started knocking
on neighbors’ doors and soon they were selling to twenty-five families on a weekly route and at a local farmers’ market. By 1984 they had completed a processing room required by law and began selling at a coop in Burlington. Soon after, they decided to focus on making only yogurt from the milk of their six cows.44

According to Lazor, early organic farmers were not transitioning with the goal of creating a more expensive product. “Between 1975 and 1980, you had individual farmers making management decisions that were out of the norm. It was the infancy of organic dairy farming. Farmers were trying different things, stepping out. We were homesteaders, back-to-the-landers. We were looking for a different way of doing things.” In the early years, the Lazors did not market their product as organic. Lazor explains, “We didn’t use the word, but we were always doing things differently. It was ‘organic’ without the label.”45

Lazor’s farming education came from exchanging stories and information with old-timers. “In college I became an alternative lifestyle person,” he recalls. “We wanted to pave our own way. At that time, there weren’t too many go-to people for information. I got my farming knowledge from a lot of retired older farmers in 1970, 1972. There was a movement of idealistic, utopian young people.” Like other organic dairy pioneers, the Lazors were motivated by their ideals. “For me, organic farming is about making this world a better place, taking as much CO₂ out of the sky and locking it up in the soil,” he says. There was never any question that they would farm any way but organically.46

Ninety minutes south of the Lazors, in Plainfield, Vermont, Peter Young bought Hill Farm in 1982 and was later joined by his partner Nancy Everhart. Their dairy farm was certified by NOFA-Vermont in 1986, and they started selling non-homogenized “cream-top” milk in plastic bottles that same year. The organic seal was clearly visible on their unusual-looking labels. Every week, Peter Young delivered milk to coops and other small outlets in central Vermont and Burlington. Young and Everhart were heavily influenced by André Voisin’s work on rotational grazing. “Neither one of us grew up on farms; we were definitely in that category of back-to-the-land, had this vision of a whole lifestyle and a way of producing healthy food but did not come with a lot of experience,” remembers Everhart. Their operation was very small-scale, and they bottled milk by hand. “At our biggest, we were milking
twelve cows,” she explains. “Our vision was always to have a small and diversified operation.”

Until 1994 organic dairy farmers in the Northeast had only two options: they could either process and sell their dairy products locally—with or without certification—or they could sell conventionally in which case their milk would be mixed with milk from other farms. Except for CROPP, the organic cooperative founded in Wisconsin in 1988, there were simply no processors buying significant amounts of organic milk from small farms. The pioneers who turned to on-farm processing to sell their organic dairy products were much more than just farmers. They were processors, marketers, salespeople, and distributors who had to create new markets and set their own price for their products. As Everhart explains, “We tried to figure out what was the right price point so that we could make a little bit of money, and pay ourselves for the work that we were doing at least, and that people would buy it.”

In the late eighties and early nineties, Everhart, Young, and the Lazors were instrumental in building a network of organic dairy farmers in Vermont. These support networks, which started as informal gatherings in farmhouse kitchens, and later moved into offices where official handbooks were published, developed in all the milk-producing regions as dairy farmers became more interested in farming organically. Established farmers like the Lazors provided guidance and mentoring to new farmers, in this way laying the groundwork for the organic dairy industry to grow.

On-farm processors were successful in part because they started small, and they had local distribution networks available to them. Maroney’s effort may have failed because of his desire to “change the face of dairy farming”; his herd was just too big. “If I could go back to that time in 1986, I would certainly have done it on Jack [Lazor] and Peter’s [Young] scale,” he says, “with a little room in the back.”

Locally produced organic milk and yogurt were available in health food stores and coops, but remained virtually nonexistent in supermarket chains. Just as they did for organic produce, food coops played a crucial role in providing a stable market and distribution outlet for organic dairy products. According to Everhart, “the fact that Vermont has a strong system of food coops is a huge benefit and can’t be understated. In terms of providing an early market for products, coops were
always so welcoming of local food; it was easy to get a product in to them. It’s almost impossible to deal with a big supermarket.”

Producers in central Vermont may have had receptive sales outlets and consumers in close proximity, but this was not the case everywhere. Some early converters like Cordes, Engel, and Engelbert considered on-farm processing but their plans never materialized. In northeastern Michigan, there was just no feasible sales outlet for Cordes. “We’re about two hundred miles away from the population area where the product would sell,” he says. “And that was the inconvenience. To have to process it on the farm here, haul it two hundred miles every other day, or three times a week, or whatever it would take. It would have been too costly for us.”

After visiting Stonyfield Farm in New Hampshire, Engel was inspired to build a small plant on his farm to process yogurt. He built a processing room in 1986, but he was never able to afford the necessary equipment. As for Engelbert in New York, it was his dream to open a small processing plant to bottle milk, and that effort actually prompted his request for certification in 1984, but his financial situation prevented him from borrowing the $250,000 needed to build it. Today, Engelbert sells to CROPP–Organic Valley and a small cheese-maker. As more marketing channels opened up in the 1990s, longtime organic dairymen like him were finally able to obtain a price premium for their product. These premiums also encouraged many more farmers to transition.

Growth in the organic sector as a whole became “demand led” as the consumer base for organic products expanded beyond the original “die-hard consumers.” The rbST controversy made mainstream shoppers wary of conventional milk and boosted sales of organic dairy products. In just a few years, a supply chain for organic dairy arose with established price premiums, widespread certifications standards, and clear incentives to transition. In the 1990s organic dairy was the fastest-growing segment of the organic foods industry. These more recent events were not the starting point for organic dairying. Rather, they followed decades of risk-taking, trial and error, and network building on the part of the country’s first organic dairymen and women. The organic dairy movement started on conventional farms in the Midwest and New York, where producers of dairy and grain rejected the pressures of industrial farming and sought alternative ways to produce milk. Market forces did not direct their
choices; the milk they produced was mixed with milk from other farms, and their efforts went unrecognized. They were ahead of their time, and it took many years before some of them could sell their milk through organic channels. While for them economic survival was a necessity, economic reward was not a motivating factor. Concurrently, city folk and back-to-the-landers moved to dairy regions and integrated milk production into their homesteading ideal. Because on-farm processing was the only viable way to bring organic dairy products to market, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a handful of pioneering farmer-processors built a customer base with the help of alternative retail outlets. Organic dairying was born out of the efforts of farmers with different backgrounds and experiences; what they shared was a desire to challenge the dominance of chemical agriculture and develop what they believed were more sustainable and healthful ways of producing milk.54

NOTES

1. The authors wish to thank Lisa McCroery, Jim Riddle, Roger Blobaum, and Dona Brown for helpful comments and feedback. Maroney had 125 milking and dry cows and 125 replacement heifers and calves. Oliver Hill Farm was certified organic by NOFA-Vermont in 1989. According to Maroney, his costs were $22.50 per hundred-weight, and Agri-Mark paid between $13 and $15. Maroney, telephone interview with author, Feb. 16, 2012.


We interviewed nearly thirty farmers, certifiers, and organic advocates in the Northeast and Midwest. We located many of the farmers via profiles published in organic dairy handbooks and through snowball sampling, meaning interviewees were asked to refer others. A critical resource was *The North American Organic Dairy Directory & Farm Case Studies* (Montpelier, Vt.: Organic Dairy Project, 1992). Though its main focus is on technical aspects of farming, it also addresses the motives of farmers and the challenges they faced in remaining organic when there was no large-scale market for organic milk.


Papers from the Fourth International Conference, ed. William Lockeretz (New York: Praeger, 1983), 17. Many interviewees reported growing herd health problems. The term “early converters” was originally used in Ola Flaten et al., “Do the New Organic Producers Differ from the ‘Old Guard’? Empirical Results from Norwegian Dairy Farming,” Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems 21 (Aug. 2006): 176. This Norwegian study uses the term for those who were farming organically before 1995.


15. USDA, Report and Recommendations, xii.


17. North Country Eco-Ag Center and OGBA, “Certified Organic Growers (partial list) November 1, 1975,” Sprouts, Jan./Feb. 1976, p. 8, MHSL; Fernholz interview; Martin Diffley, telephone interview with author, Oct. 1, 2010; Roger Blobaum, email to author, Sept. 10, 2012; Riddle email; North Country Eco-Ag Center and OGBA, “Certification Standards/Crops & Livestock,” Sprouts, Jan./Feb. 1976, pp. 3–4, MHSL. NOFA-Vermont’s guidelines from 1988 include one page on animal husbandry, with recommendations to feed as much organically produced rations as possible, though “a percentage of conventionally produced feeds may be permitted.” Vermont Organic Farmers, Standards and Applicant Information Booklet (Richmond: Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, 1988), 9, 16. In the 1989 version of the Booklet, dairy was a subheading of the “Livestock” chapter, with the statement that “because the commercial production of organic animal products is a relatively new industry, the standards . . . will be revised as new information is developed.” Enid Wonnacott, interview with author, NOFA-Vermont office, Richmond, Vt., Apr. 11, 2012.

18. Engelbert interview; Engel interview; Wonnacott interview.


23. Engel interview.


27. Roger Blobaum, “Barriers to Conversion to Organic Farming Practices in the Midwestern United States,” in Environmentally Sound Agriculture, 263. In Lockeretz’s study of 174 midwestern commercial-scale organic farms, only a third of farmers sold their products through specialized organic channels, and just a third of these (12 percent of the total sample) sold at least half of their products in this way. The top perceived advantages were “healthier for the farmer and his family,” “healthier for livestock,” and “in harmony
with nature.” Wernick and Lockeretz, “Motivations and Practices,” 22, 21. A follow-up survey, ten years later, showed that most farmers who used organic methods continued to do so for the health of their families and their livestock. However, they reported little change in institutional support or the availability of markets. Lockeretz and Patrick Madden, “Midwestern Organic Farming: A Ten-Year Follow-Up,” American Journal of Alternative Agriculture 2 (Spring 1987): 57; Lockeretz, “Organic Farming in the Corn Belt,” 541.

28. Patenaude of Wisconsin, for example, was certified organic in 1988, but unlike others in the Upper Midwest, he did not produce grain. The extra cost of organic feed and the fact that he sold conventionally made it financially difficult for him to maintain his certification. Working Land Fund, Organic Dairy Directory, 9.


30. Engel interview.


33. Engelbert interview; Riddle email. The 1980 USDA report revealed that under chemical-intensive management, livestock farmers experienced “a higher rate of birth mortality, decreased reproductive efficiency, and increased respiratory ailments among their livestock, resulting in lower production, and higher veterinary costs.” USDA, Report and Recommendations, 17.

34. Cordes interview; Engelbert interview.

35. Engel interview; Adam Parke, telephone interview with author, Feb. 19, 2013. In a 1977 study 18 percent of respondents reported a temporary drop in income following conversion to organic production; 60 percent reported no drop; and the remainder (22 percent) were uncertain about their gains and losses because of external factors such as drought. Wernick and Lockeretz, “Motivations and Practices,” 22.


37. Maroney interview.


40. Schneider interview.


42. Ibid.


45. Lazor interview.

46. Ibid.

47. Everhart interview; Bryan Pfeiffer, “The Cream Rises at Vermont’s Smallest Dairy,” Barre-Montpelier (Vt.) Times-Argus Farm Show Supplement, Jan. 27, 1987, 16A.

48. Everhart interview.

49. At times, the differences between the back-to-the-landers and the conventional farmers interested in transitioning led to debates on what could and should be allowed in organic milk production. Many farmers were reluctant to give up occasional antibiotic treatments, something early standards allowed. Everhart interview.

50. Maroney interview.

51. Everhart interview.

52. Maroney interview.

53. Engelbert interview.

54. Guthman, Agrarian Dreams, 27. Sales of organic dairy products increased over 500 percent between 1994 and 1999. Dimitri and Greene, “Recent Growth Patterns.” 2. This growth attracted the interest of the large agribusiness corporations that dominate the organic dairy sector today.