

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Cheese Factories

When we moved to Livermore in 1970, friends told me about the Cheese Factory. I drove to Pleasanton and enjoyed various cheeses in the tasting room, but that day and every succeeding visit, I always chose a half-round of Monterey jack, the only cheese that originated in California.

Renee Charvo grew up in Pleasanton and remembered passing by the Cheese Factory. Steam would be coming out of the windows and doors. The owner, Dimitrios "Jimmy" Voulitides, was usually "sitting outside on a chair watching the world go by. He always wore a little white cap. He had a small mustache and a twinkle in his eye." Later, when she knew him more closely as his nephew's wife, she appreciated his lively social life and his generosity.

Jimmy immigrated to the U.S. from Greece in 1916 and worked in steel mills in the East. He came to the West Coast in the summer of 1917 and was welcomed by the Greek community in Oakland. He began his business, the Standard Cheese Company, in Pleasanton in 1920 when he was 24 years old. He specialized in jack cheese, but he made many other cheeses. He invented American teleme, a creamy delicately flavored cheese. In 1930 he married Calliope, according to Renee, "a sweet Greek lady, only about four feet eleven. She loved to visit with customers at the store. She and Jimmy would often invite friends to their home, which was next to the store, for a glass of ouzo or metaxa. Sometimes they invited customers for dinner."

Calliope had a sister, Marie Spiliotopoulos, still in Greece, who was raising two sons on her own. Jimmy and his wife visited Greece in 1948. They were childless, and Marie was struggling. They invited her son, George, then eight years old, to come to Pleasanton and live with them. Four years later after the red tape was cleared away, George

arrived. He started at the Pleasanton Grammar School knowing little English, but he graduated from Amador High School near the top of his class and from Cal Poly, where he majored in dairy management and was named the outstanding dairy student in his 1964 graduating class.

His uncle died in April 1967. Spiliotopoulos not only had a degree in dairy management, but also the priceless knowledge from his uncle about making cheese. He took over the business and said, "The Cheese Factory proves Uncle Jimmy's belief that there will always be room for a natural food product produced with all of a man's pride and experience blended into it."

He admired his uncle's uncompromising insistence on the excellence of his cheeses. In 1981 when his factory was making 6,000 pounds of cheese per day, Spiliotopoulos entered the company's cheese products at the Los Angeles County Fair, one of the few in the country that judge dairy products. California Cheddar, California Jack, Jack 'N Dill, and Garlic Jack won gold medals; American Teleme won the silver.

One of the problems with cheese manufacture is the expensive cleanup of the byproducts. After several wrangles with the city council, the cost of the sewer hookup in Pleasanton by 1984 had risen to \$60,000 a year for the cheese business. Spiliotopoulos had made serious overtures about moving the factory to the Central Valley before he died in a traffic accident at the age of 45. His wife sold the Cheese factory several times, but the new owners could not seem to make the business profitable. Large groceries were now competing with their own cheese selections. Finally, Renee gave up the business and sold the real estate. The Cheese Factory sign is still over the old store at 830 Main Street.

The Livermore Cheese Com-

pany was started by immigrants from Italy. Louis Calderoni came first in 1904. His two brothers, Salvatore "Sam" and Charles, came later with their parents, Sarafina and Felice Calderoni. By about 1925 they had started the cheese company in Livermore, making Monterey jack and other kinds of cheese. They built their headquarters about where AAMCO is on Railroad Avenue next to the parking garage across from the rear of the Bankhead Theater. The family home, the factory, and the office were in the same building. The Livermore Heritage Guild has an excellent photo that shows the building and two of their trucks with advertising on the sides.

The Livermore Cheese Company also ran into problems with the city, this time Livermore, about their waste products.

Once Charles and Sam were in court after "fisticuffs together with a few 'footcuffs'" were exchanged in a fight with the city engineer over the company's having dumped whey into the city's sewer system.

To avoid this difficulty, Louis Calderoni and his family built a new office and factory in Tracy in 1933. Louis said that after the Tracy plant was finished, they would use the Livermore building only as a warehouse. In September, just a few months after completion, the Tracy plant burned down.

The building was made of non-flammable material for the most part, but the cheese stored inside became "a raging inferno," according to the *Tracy Press*. The plant was a total loss, which was not covered by insurance. By 1936 the Calderonis were building another plant in Tracy, and several years later the Livermore building was deserted.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)