

The Milk Man Cometh

“For the first time in 20 years, reports show we’re drinking more milk.”

by Tom Green

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ONLY HOME MILK delivery. If you didn’t have a cow, a local farmer with a horse-drawn wagon would visit each family and business. From large cans in the back, he would ladle out the sale into pitchers, bottles, tin cans or whatever was handy. Milk was a popular but difficult product.

The invention of the milk bottle in 1884 brought uniform shapes for better storage and transport; other dairy innovations flowed rapidly. With automatic fillers and cappers, milking machines, pasteurization and tank trucks, home milk delivery churned into a golden era. But a spoiler was on the horizon. Refrigeration soon became the best and worst friend of the neighborhood milkman.

A 1939 Time magazine editorial argued that home delivery artificially kept milk prices higher

and local stores should be able to stock and sell the products.

Over the next 35 years, homogenized grocery and convenience stores soon made home delivery obsolete. The gleaming white-suited men delivering daily doses of dairy delights became a quaint remnant of the days when mothers dressed for dinner in aprons and pearls. Milk was still a major commodity – even the government advocated drinking it – but less than 10 percent of American refrigerators had home-delivered milk by 1973. Today, fewer than 100 companies offer home milk delivery in small pockets across the nation and collectively they do not even represent one percent of the \$18 billion in annual U.S. milk sales, but their popularity is growing. Hectic modern life, rather than killing off home deliveries, has reinvented the service.

“There’s no such thing as a quick trip to the store anymore,” says Vern Prickett of Homestead Milk Delivery. “My customers are working farmers, busy families and even single men. The last thing they want when they get home is to realize they are out of milk. They don’t want to drive to town or all the way to Aberdeen. And, if you have to lug the kids along, you know you will end up buying more than just milk.”

Homestead is a return to the old-fashioned, service-orientated milk delivery business – minus the horse-drawn wagon – with “Vern the Milkman” as the sole employee.

Vern is a common fixture on the morning landscape rumbling the gravel roads and highways of northeastern South Dakota in a 1994 International. He bought it five years ago after it was retired by Anderson Dairies in Iowa. Despite an odometer that just rolled over 200,000, Vern says the diesel-powered unit is still a step up from his old ride: a converted Old Home Bread wagon.

Long before the first streams of dawn, Vern is in an Aberdeen warehouse loading the racks of his refrigerated truck with Cass County Dairy products. By 4 a.m., he is hauling moo juice to more than 150 homes, schools and businesses along one of four daily routes in a 50-mile radius of the Hub City.

“I also deliver eggs, juices, butter, margarine, sliced cheese, ice cream, even salsa and bread. I can bring the dairy aisle to your doorstep.”

What he doesn’t bring is the typical resume of a milkman. After four years in the Marines and another 16 with the Army National Guard, this jolly man with a soft voice wanted something new.

“I didn’t want to take orders. I was tired of working for the man,” Vern said with his warm eyes and quick smile fully employed. The hair may still be short but a peppery goatee and comfortable frame hide his leatherneck days; the new direction suits him. “Being out here on a perfect day, there’s nothing better. I don’t mind the drive, eat lunch every day in a different city and get plenty of exercise. It’s been a long journey and I like where I’ve landed.” This summer, Vern and his wife, Cory, will celebrate his 10th year as a milkman.

Opposite: Vern Prickett steps off his 1994 International milk delivery truck as he makes a delivery to one of the more than 150 homes along his four daily routes. **Cover:** Vern Prickett, owner of Homestead Milk Delivery in the Aberdeen, S.D., area, has been delivering milk to homes in a 50-mile radius of Aberdeen, S.D., for the past 10 years. For more on Prickett’s business, visit www.vernthemilkman.com. Photos by Doug Dreyer/Dakota Images

Vern’s natural charm takes the credit for some of that decade of success. Instant bonds develop with everyone he meets; yet he often greets more animals than people.

“I don’t always get to talk with customers on my deliveries. Actually, I see their pets more. I even carry treats for them. When dogs hear me pull up the drive, they are usually waiting for that snack with their tails a-wagging. I don’t know the name of every dog on my routes but I know the attitude,” he said with a chuckle.

Vern’s business remains steady even in the summer months and it may soon be on the rise. Milk drinking is showing signs of new life.

“For the first time in 20 years, reports show we’re drinking more milk. Milk consumption has risen 1.2 percent,” said Donna Sharp, secretary of the National Dairy Promotion and Research board.

The black and white Holstein cow, the dominant breed used by American dairies, produces most of that sweet white goodness. Growing spotted cattle numbers in Minnesota and South Dakota fields mean area dairy farmers generate more milk than residents can consume.

“We overproduce,” said Darwin Kurtenbach, administrator of dairy for the S.D. Department of Agriculture. According to Kurtenbach, in 2005, South Dakota produced 1.4 billion pounds of milk from 81,000 milking cows, averaging 17,741 pounds per cow. “However, 80 percent of the milk produced here has to leave the state. It may cross state lines in a variety of forms, be it shipped as bulk fluid, powdered, made into cheese or as part of a finished product, but it will be consumed elsewhere.”

“About 60 percent of the milk from the upper Midwest goes to making cheese,” Sharp chimed in. “Milk products from our area impact meals across the country.”

Minnesota is the nation’s fifth largest dairy producing state with more than 100,000 dairy cows on about 9,000 dairy farms. South Dakota has only 466 Grade-A dairy farms (meaning they meet the strictest of quality and production standards) and ranks 24th in the nation. But Kurtenbach sees promise.

“We’ve seen great increases in dairy production in South Dakota and are averaging a 5 percent to 6 percent increase annually – double the national average,” he said. “I expect we will be among the top 20 dairy producing states in the nation in just a couple years.”

If his sales grow in a similar fashion, Vern the Milkman and his cream-colored milk machine will spend even more time on the roads of Brown County and he may have to buy a bigger bag of doggie treats.

