

## DAIRY FARMS THROUGH THE YEARS



### Visit to "Blooms" Dairy Farm of E. R. Conner, Manassas, Virginia

*Oh! Happy the farmer who lolls on his plow,  
No walking the furrow for the husbandman now.  
Content is his face, and with clothes like an actor,  
The whole of his labor is steering the tractor.  
Serenely the milkman now summons his kine.  
Then a tiny electrical motor he throttles,  
And twiddles his thumbs till a quarter past nine,  
While the milk is withdrawn and collected in bottles.  
There weren't any tractors when I was a lad,  
And a wearisome tussle till darkness I had.  
They didn't milk cows by mechanical means,  
When I was youthful and a laboring hick.  
I milked fourteen cows in my tattered jeans . . .  
I think I just got here too durned quick!*

These lines are from a poem entitled "Times Have Changed," which was written by Mr. E. R. Conner, Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association member from Manassas, Virginia, who is now 81 years young. As a continuous shipper of fresh milk to the Washington market over the past fifty-three years, Mr. Conner has a record that can be matched by few, if any, other Association members.

Always a man of forthrightness and indomitable courage, Conner took the bull by the horns, figuratively speaking, when he first decided to ship fresh milk to Washington and found no convenient rail point close by. By writing directly to the superintendent of the Northern Virginia division of the Southern Railroad, he succeeded in getting a milk stop established right at his farm! The railroad dubbed the new stop "Blooms," and Conner followed suit by naming his dairy farm "Blooms" also. Today, of course, the diesels swoosh right on by, but the name "Blooms" remains on the substantial gateposts of the Conner dairy farm.

The size of that first rail shipment, fifty three years ago, was a mere twelve gallons! Today Mr. Conner chuckles as he recalls that he loaded two milk cans aboard the puffing, waiting train—a 10 gallon can and a partially filled 5 gallon can. For a while a couple of his neighbors also took advantage of the "Blooms" shipping point, and the loading platform which Conner himself had built, but they dropped out a few years later.

The milk was cooled in those days by immersing the milk cans up to their necks in sawed off barrels filled with cool water from a spring-fed stream. But since Conner also ran a thriving meat market in town and an ice house in connection with it, his milk could enjoy faster and better cooling in hot weather than milk of many others. The ice, incidentally, was not man-made, but was sawed each winter from local frozen streams.

Old records have a way of becoming lost, but Conner distinctly remembers shipping his milk to A. B. Waters, then located on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, around 1905. Corbin Thompson—no relation to the present Thompson's Dairy people—and located on 4½ Street, S.W. was another Conner customer in those days, as was John Gregg on O or P Street, N.W. For short periods during that same era, Conner sold milk to George M. Oyster of Connecticut Avenue, N.W., whose successor is today's Chestnut Farms Dairy. At times milk brought as low a price as 10c per gallon, and he had to wait for payment once per month.

### VA ROOM

ment was on a gallonage basis, with no premiums for butterfat or quality. In fact, Conner remembers one Christmas Eve back then when he and his hired man spent the whole day tramping the streets of Washington, begging someone to take his milk. There was no such thing as a reasonably sure market in those days, dairy owners cutting shippers off for the slightest provocation. Dairying newcomers, Conner says, frequently do not understand the severity of marketing problems faced by producers before the advent of cooperatives such as the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association.

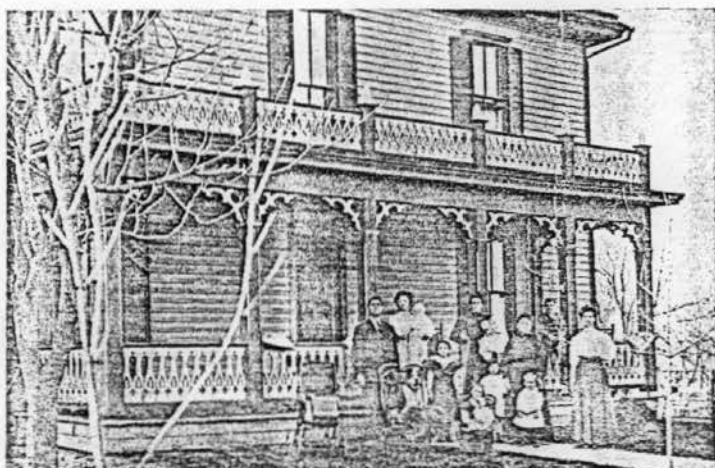
A firm believer in self-help wherever possible—that is, farmer owned cooperatives—E. R. Conner was a Charter Member of the organization that has become today's Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association. On the wall of the office of the Association's Secretary hangs a framed copy of a stock certificate issued June 10, 1905 to E. R. Conner. That one share was



Conner was a handsome young man at the time of his marriage. Today he is heavier, in keeping with his substantial position in the Manassas area.

Prince William County Public Library  
Manassas, VA.

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Here Conner is with his young wife, his children, his mother, his sister and her children, in front of the Conners' home in Manassas. This is the type of family "portrait" prized by many families. An "old home place" has a way of changing with time, so a photographic record is valuable.

worth one dollar since The Milk Producers Association of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, the forerunner of today's Association, had a total capital stock amounting to \$1,000. The 1905 stock certificate is signed by Joseph M. Roberts, then the President, and H. T. Pancoast, then the Secretary.

E. R. Conner was born in Manassas, where his father had opened a general store in 1856. He was the youngest of three children. When he was six years old, the family moved to a farm outside Manassas. From there young Conner walked three and a half miles every day to school in Manassas, except for those "vacations" when the schools would close to allow the kids to help with the planting and harvesting of crops. Pay for such work in those days was the meagre amount of only 25c a day for thinning corn! However, such low wages were not quite as bad then as they would seem today, because store prices were not very high either. For instance, an old ledger in Mr. Conner's possession shows that his father was charging only 25c for a gallon of molasses in those days, and the same price for a like volume of vinegar. Whiskey, however—pretty much a "staple" back then—brought double that amount, 50c per gallon, 12½c per quart!

When he was about fourteen or fifteen years old, Conner's shrewd business sense began to come to the fore. Marching up to the bank in town, he persuaded the banker to loan him \$50 at 6% interest. Adding \$10 of his own money to that of the loan, he purchased a pair of oxen, which were then in common use for hauling wood and other heavy loads. After feeding them for a short while, young Conner drove them all the way to Warrenton to weigh them. Finding that they weighed a full 3,000 pounds, he promptly sold them for \$84. The \$24 profit which he made thus easily and quickly was more than many adults realized in a full year's time.

When he was about 20 years of age, young Conner moved back to town and opened his own butcher shop, which he continued to operate personally for the next forty years. His prices for choice beef about the turn of the century are enough to make any modern housewife drool with envy for the bargains which Manassas housewives were able to get then. The tenderest steaks sold as low as two pounds for a quarter! Roasts were only 8c per pound, stew meat merely 4 or 5c per pound! Even those prices allowed adequate profits since Conner only had to pay \$6 per month for the rental of the store he

occupied. With his initial capital of only \$75, Conner was able to purchase a cow for butchering, a sturdy meat block, necessary scales, a saw, and pay some rent in advance!

It was customary then for people to select their cuts of meat on Friday or Saturday and ask the butcher to keep it in his refrigerator until Sunday morning. In addition to keeping the meat chilled, the refrigerator served another purpose—that of combatting the problem of buzzing flies, since there were no screen doors in use at that time. Conner supervised all of his own butchering, which was always done at night in order to utilize his \$10 a month clerks to maximum advantage in serving customers during the day. The price of butchering a beef was then only \$1 per animal.

At about that same time, Conner began dairying by buying the old stone house still standing on the farm at "Blooms" and 80 acres of land. His starting herd numbered less than fifteen. From such modest beginnings he has added land until the farm today contains 436 acres, and the herd has been built up to approximately 50 Holstein-Friesian milkers at present. With only 175 acres devoted to dairying, he ships an average of 100 to 150 gallons per day. The rest of the acreage is given over to livestock.

The old silo in use when Conner first began dairying operations was a homemade affair which held approximately 100 tons of silage. It was filled in one day, allowed to settle overnight and refilled the following day. The barn was intended to accommodate about 20 cows. Whenever weather would permit, milking was done in the yard just outside the barn as it was generally considered more sanitary than the interior of a dark and dirty barn. Here, again, the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association has served an extremely valuable purpose, Conner says, by constant emphasis upon better and better quality of milk, and the conditions for its production.

Much of the work on the farm was done with the aid of a team of mules. Even today, E. R. Conner still owns and uses one mule team, which he insists is better than any tractor ever built. The unpredictable

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### "Blooms" Dairy Farm

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bility of machinery breakdowns was responsible for some loss of hay this year, when a baling machine broke down too late in the day to round up another and hard rains came that night.

For many years a leading dealer in livestock of all sorts, E. R. Conner is still active in buying and selling beef and hogs and occasionally a few horses. Although he has sold his interests in quite a few farms throughout his area, he still retains a substantial interest in several. A third interest today is real estate of all sorts. For example, after tearing down sheds on a 5 acre pasture which he owned in Manassas, he developed an attractive new subdivision. With 10 homes already built and two lots still left, this new use is more profitable than the old for those 5 acres, he chuckles.

For a man with wide and varied interests, who yet insists upon careful dairy farming operations, the proper tenant-owner working relationship is essential. While Conner insists that no farm owner can expect more than two really good tenants in a lifetime, his own tenants' records sound pretty fine. His first tenant lived at "Blooms" for 22 years! Another tenant ran the place for 12 years, and a third for 7 years. The present tenant is a young man,

Marion C. Sowers, who came there from the mountains of West Virginia.

Asked what he believes is the best basis for a good tenant relationship, Conner promptly replies "on halves." In his case he sells his tenant a half interest in everything on the farm with the exception of the buildings and the land, for which the tenant signs a promissory note. The valuation for such an agreement is made by appraisers chosen by each man, the appraisers in turn, selecting a third man. Thereafter all losses as well as all gains are shared equally by Conner and the tenant. All expenses are split, with the exception of taxes and the cost of any new buildings that may be erected. For example, Conner will usually pay for the materials needed for new fencing, while the tenant supplies the labor for its erection.

Among the interesting recollections related by E. R. Conner is the fact that he was the first to enjoy electric lights in Manassas. This came about because he had built an Opera House in town and installed a small dynamo in the backyard of his house to provide lighting for the exciting traveling shows which he engaged on a regular basis. Not long afterwards moving pictures were invented and their introduction sounded the death knell for traveling shows. Climbing aboard this new "band-wagon," Conner also operated a motion picture theater in Manassas for a time, charging 10c admission to view this novelty. The op-



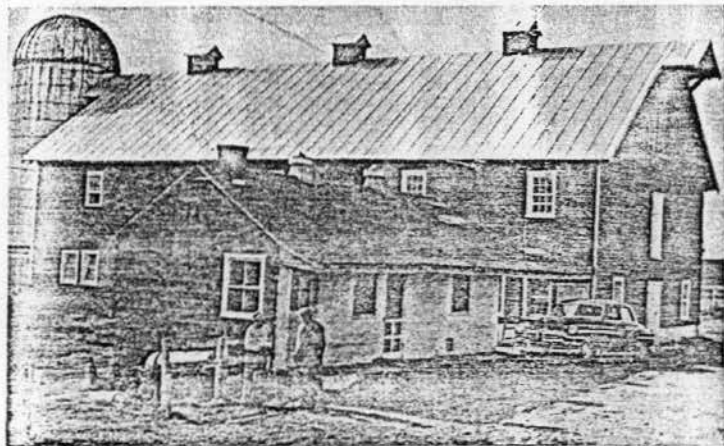
Conner with a pair of young gray mules about 50 years ago. Notice the striking resemblance of Conner to the young Franklin D. Roosevelt.

era house was then converted for use as a hall for dances and meetings. The first big meeting held in the Conner Building was a reunion of Confederate Veterans, attended by the famous "Gray Ghost," Colonel John Singleton Mosby, and his family.

"There were very few houses in Manassas when I first moved here — not more than fifteen or twenty, I guess," Conner muses. "There were no paved streets or side-walks then, of course, and I can remember many a time seeing a team and wagon stuck deep in the mud, having to be pulled out." The town has grown more in the past 10 years than the previous 40 years, Conner believes. Not only has he witnessed this growth, but E. R. Conner can take pride in the contributions he has made to the community. His civic mindedness was shown by his service as a town councilman for more than 20 years.

Mr. Conner is especially proud of his service in the State Legislature for four years, 1940 through 1944. He made many friends at the Capitol. As a consequence only one bill which he introduced failed to secure the majority of votes necessary for passage.

Mr. Conner was also instrumental in satisfactory completion of arrangements for the construction of the battlefield museum, the acquisition of the old Stone House, and the operation of these historical places by the National Park Service.



E. R. Conner discusses day-to-day problems of operating "Blooms" with his tenant, Marion C. Sowers, formerly of West Virginia. Behind them are the milk house and big red barn. Good owner-tenant relationships have given "Blooms" long records of operation by the same tenants.

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His interests in history, civic pride, and dairying were brought together in his active support of the Dairy Festival, an annual event in Manassas for about a decade. This one-day festival featured pageants, tableaux and oratory in the town park, a fancy parade through the main street, and much fun by all. One of Conner's teams of oxen was a picturesque sight in one parade, contrasting the oldest methods of milk delivery with the then most modern delivery carts pulled by snowy white horses. In another year's parade, E. R. Conner, dressed in satin knee breeches, powdered wig, and tri-cornered hat, depicted George Washington as a Virginia planter and patron of agriculture.

Incidentally, Mr. Conner has some views which are not often expressed, but nonetheless make considerable sense. In the old days, Manassas used to have quite a few disastrous fires. Vacant lots where frame buildings once stood were bought up by Conner, frequently at the suggestion of the town banker. But for quite another reason, E. R. Conner believes that fires are good for old towns — because "they get rid of a lot of old deadwood," he says. Fire insurance was not uncommon even then, so losses were not too great, and rebuilding was almost always done with brick in a bigger and better manner. Among his business enterprises early in this century was a sawmill powered by a puffing, noisy steam engine. Labor for the lumber business could be had readily at prices such as \$1 per thousand and for cutting timber. Total costs for finished lumber amounted to about \$6 per thousand, which brought \$8 per thousand at the mill, \$10 delivered in town.

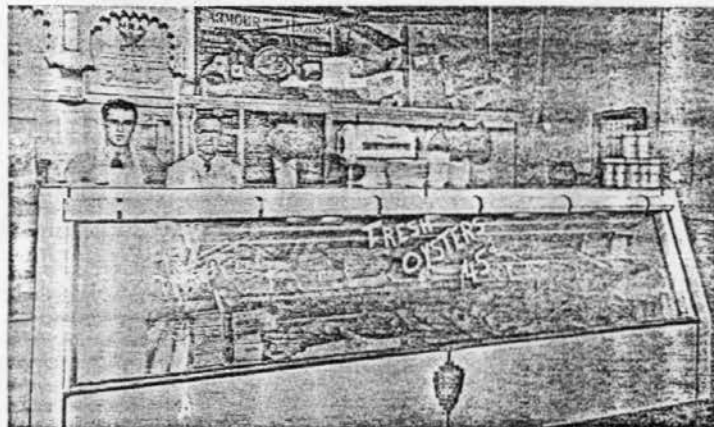


Conner sits astride his snowy white horse, ready to portray George Washington as a patron of agriculture in the Dairy Festival.

E. R. Conner is a member of the State Dairymen's Association, a charter member of the local Kiwanis club, and attends the Methodist Church usually, although he shares his interest in all local churches. When he was 30 years of age he married the former Anna Newman. Her parents had come from Switzerland, settled in Manassas, where the two young people met. Their four children are all living. A son operates one of his father's farms near Catharpin, Virginia. A daughter, Mrs. Frank Cox, is married to the Prince William

"transportation of milk to Washington." His argument was based upon the fact that his milk was then going to a local dairy instead of Washington. Soon afterwards, however, reflection upon the explanation of the necessity of charging all producers alike caused him to "see the light," and he has wholeheartedly supported the Association and its policies ever since.

"You know, I'd like to see those new offices of the Association in Arlington one of these days," Mr. Conner says, "but I don't know when I'm ever going to find the time."



This is the way Conner's meat market in Manassas looked at Christmas time about 1934. Notice the old NRA Blue Eagle on the back wall and the price of oysters. Shown with Conner are his clerks, Messrs. Hite and Broadbush.

County Agent. Another daughter, Mrs. Jack Ratcliff, is married to the County Surveyor, and the third daughter, Mrs. Edgar Rohr, is married to a merchant with several stores in Manassas and nearby towns.

Asked about the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association, Mr. Conner smiled genially and stated his willingness to go along with the wise decisions of the majority, represented by the election of outstanding dairy farmers to the Association's Board of Directors.

But such mellow satisfaction with the Association's policies has not always been the case. Once, soon after the first hauler in his area, a Mr. McCoy, began to make the rounds in his truck with solid rubber tires, E. R. Conner disagreed with the Association's practice of deducting from his milk check an amount charged against

As for the future of dairy farming in the Virginia and Maryland area, Mr. Conner is optimistic. True, labor costs are going up, and that is forcing some producers out of business. But milk prices are holding up, and those producers who decide to remain in business and have a good dairy and a good herd are sure to gain considerably over the next few years, Conner states with conviction.

Yes, times have changed. Dairying over the past half century has changed greatly. But it is good that a producer such as E. R. Conner, who can look back over those years, can also look forward with such hope for the future. The Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association is proud of members like E. R. Conner — a continuous shipper to the Washington Market for fifty three years.