

## Cheese Making

By Norman P. Carlson, Collections Manager

Here at the Fenton Museum, we talk a lot about the homespun era by which we mean the period from first local settlement around 1810 to around 1850. The term comes from home spun fabrics and textiles, but by extension it is a reference to the first few decades of local history when, by necessity, the settlers made nearly everything they used themselves.

First of all, except for textiles in England and incipiently in New England, very little of anything was factory-made or pre-assembled anywhere in that era. The inventions of machine tools had not been made. There was no transportation system adequate to support an industrial economy; there were no banking, credit, or communications systems adequate for an industrial economy, and the knowledge of how to set up and organize big manufacturing buildings and companies had not been acquired.

Most of these factors were even more true in a newly settled country where roads were terrible to non-existent, horses were rare and oxen not abundant, steamboats had just been introduced, and railroads and the Erie Canal were in the future.

The necessity of local production was especially applicable to foods, all of which to a greater or lesser extent were perishable. Land was the one productive resource nearly everyone had invested in. Settlers could grow their own crop seeds and their own animals for both work stock and food and even make their own tillage and harvest tools.

Most families had one or more cows. Each cow provided a reliable food source for a number of years. Milk was both highly perishable and seasonal (no milk in the winter back then), but butter and especially cheese could be preserved and consumed over a considerable time period, if you could make it properly in the first place.

The cheese making process was considerably more complicated and laborious than butter churning, and it required a great deal of skill and respect for sanitation. Hours of time and strength of arm had to be matched with careful attention and weeks of patience.

This press came to us in 1966 from the couple who in 1920 had purchased the birthplace of Governor Fenton, the home of his parents (George W. and Elsie Owen Fenton) from 1809 until their deaths in 1860 and 1875. The governor's father had come to this area even earlier, 1807, by way of Warren. The press appears to be very old and homemade, but very well made and much used. Nearly every part including ratchet gear and pawl are wood. The few nails in it are actually blacksmith-made, not cut nails that are often confused with blacksmith made nails.

The advent of, first the Erie Canal in 1825, and much more so the railroads in 1851 to Dunkirk and 1860 to Jamestown, combined with plank roads, created the opportunity for butter and cheese production on a rewarding commercial scale. In 1845 the first shipment, 7,000 or 8,000 pounds, of cheese from Chautauqua County to New York City was made over the Erie Canal. It was from the Terry farm in Gerry. Starting in 1861 Asa Burnham of Arkwright began building cheese factories and operating them on the co-operative plan. By the 1890s there were up to two dozen cheese factories and creameries in a single Chautauqua County town (Hanover) and they were everywhere. The home farm, hand powered cheese presses were set aside or broken up for firewood, to the relief and delight I am sure of many a woman. The last Chautauqua County cheese plant closed in Niobe August 24, 1952.

With the back to basics movement, it is probable that some local people are again making cheese for their own consumption and the history of local cheese has come full circle.

