

# The Crooner, A Dropped Vowel, And Three Centuries of Dairy Production in New York's Unadilla Valley

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He made 400 more studio recordings than Frank Sinatra, and had more number one singles (38) than the Beatles (24) or Elvis Presley (18).<sup>i</sup> He made enough screwball movie musicals during the Depression Years to save Paramount Pictures from insolvency. His name was Bing Crosby. To say that he dominated the electronic media of his day is an understatement. Yet his first radio show, sponsored by Woodbury Soap, had no great success. The story changed on January 2, 1936 when, under his new sponsor, the Kraft-Phenix Cheese Company, Crosby debuted as the host of the Kraft Music Hall.<sup>ii</sup> It must be stated that the predecessor of his sponsor, the Phenix Cheese Company, is a main topic of this paper. But while we are on the subject of KMH, let me add an anecdote that relates to my self-adopted role as a Central New York storyteller. One feature of KMH was its ability to mix classical performers with comedy and popular music, with Bing as the leavening that made this layer cake rise. On one broadcast, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, concert pianist and conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, was slated to finish the show by performing a piano concerto.<sup>iii</sup> But because the show was running late, the director ordered the audience not to applaud at its conclusion. Unfortunately, Ossip, who arrived just in time to play, was not informed of this. He played his heart out, stood up, faced the audience, and met total silence. Nonplussed, he rushed out of the theatre before he could collect his goody box of Kraft cheeses and never returned. For us, the additional fact that Gabrilowitsch's wife Clara Clemens was the only child of Mark Twain to survive to adulthood is of great interest. For today, if you visit the gravesite of Twain in the shadow of the Elmira NY reformatory, you will find that its design extols more the son-in-law and his wife than Mark Twain himself.<sup>iv</sup> Families can be strange.

## Origins

The beginnings of Phenix Cheese, whose most famous product was Philadelphia Cream Cheese, were not in the Unadilla River Valley of Chenango County but 140 miles southeast in Chester, Orange County, NY. A farmer named William Alfred Lawrence took note in 1873 of the cardinal rule of manufacturing: the more value that can be added to a basic product by its producer, the more profit it can command in the marketplace.<sup>v</sup> So while his fellow farmers were content with shipping bulk milk in the newly-developed Erie RR refrigerator cars over 60 miles from Chester to New York, Lawrence endeavored to manufacture Neufchatel cheese, a type of whole or skim milk soft cheese rolled into cylinders. Neufchatel was made by using rennet (the dried fourth

stomach of an unweaned calf) to curdle whole or skim milk, after which the curds were poured into cotton bags which were then pressed to drain off excess whey. After salt was added, the mixture was shaped into small cylinders to be wrapped and shipped to the City. Some time after the initial success of this product, Lawrence was approached by the first class New York grocery chain Park and Tilford looking for a richer and more delicate cheese. Lawrence upgraded his Neufchatel product by adding cream with salt in the final phase. Compared to Neufchatel, this new product which Lawrence called cream cheese contained 6% fat rather than 4%. By the 1920's the fat content had risen to 33% making the cheese smoother and softer. In 1889 Muenster sold for 13, Swiss from 13 to 15, and cream cheese for 30 cents a pound. Clearly Lawrence had picked a winner.

### The Middleman

Alva Reynolds distributed cheese from farms to markets in the city of New York.<sup>vi</sup> In 1880 he approached Lawrence, the first industrial manufacturer of cream cheese in America, about distributing his product in New York City. By that time, cream cheese had been made in small amounts by farmers outside Philadelphia, Pa., and the recipe had been widely circulated in cook books. Instead of using Lawrence's plain wrapper, Reynolds had the idea of marketing it under the brand Philadelphia Cream Cheese. He enclosed the squares of cream cheese in paper and then covered them with a foil Philadelphia wrapper printed in red and blue. To increase the value of the product, he added the term Excelsior to the label. Right up until today, manufacturers who are essentially anonymous to the public use descriptive terms like "prime", "select", and "super" to emphasize their product's quality. Appropriating New York's state motto may have been a subtle way of saying the cheese was made in New York. It sold so well that Reynolds hired another Chester manufacturer named Charles Green to produce cream cheese under the Philadelphia label. Aiming to increase his control from distribution and advertising to production in 1885 he began to manufacture the Philadelphia product at a former creamery in Bloomingburg, NY, 18 miles northwest of Chester.

### To the Unadilla Valley

In 1892, Reynolds partnered with Eugene E. Sage to buy the Empire Cheese Company in South Edmeston, NY, located 120 miles northwest of Bloomingburg. Besides products of its own brand, the plant made cream cheese under the Philadelphia name.<sup>vii</sup> To further the narrative path I will follow, it's worth knowing that South Edmeston is located in Otsego County, not Chenango County. If you drive north a few clicks out of New Berlin on State Rt. 8 and make a right hand turn on Chenango County Rt. 25, you will pass under an enclosed overhead walkway which connects the distribution (south) and production (north) arms of the majestic Chobani factory. Continue driving east, and as soon as you cross the Unadilla River Bridge, you are on Otsego County Rt. 20, entering the hamlet of South Edmeston. The original Empire Cheese factory was located near the church on the south side of County Route 20.<sup>viii</sup>

In 1900, calamity struck when the Empire Cheese Plant burned down. Alva Reynolds temporarily turned to a processor in Chittenango, NY, F.H. Gates & Son, to produce his cream cheese.<sup>ix</sup> Meanwhile, a group of local farmers pooled to rebuild the destroyed factory on the same South Edmeston site. Although the new factory rose from the ashes of the old “like a Phoenix”, it was unintentionally named the Phenix Cheese Company.<sup>x</sup> In 1901, Reynolds turned back to the Phenix plant for production, which continued to make cream cheese under the Philadelphia brand until 1903. By this time Reynolds had expanded the sale of his product beyond New York to groceries in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, and Chicago.<sup>xi</sup>

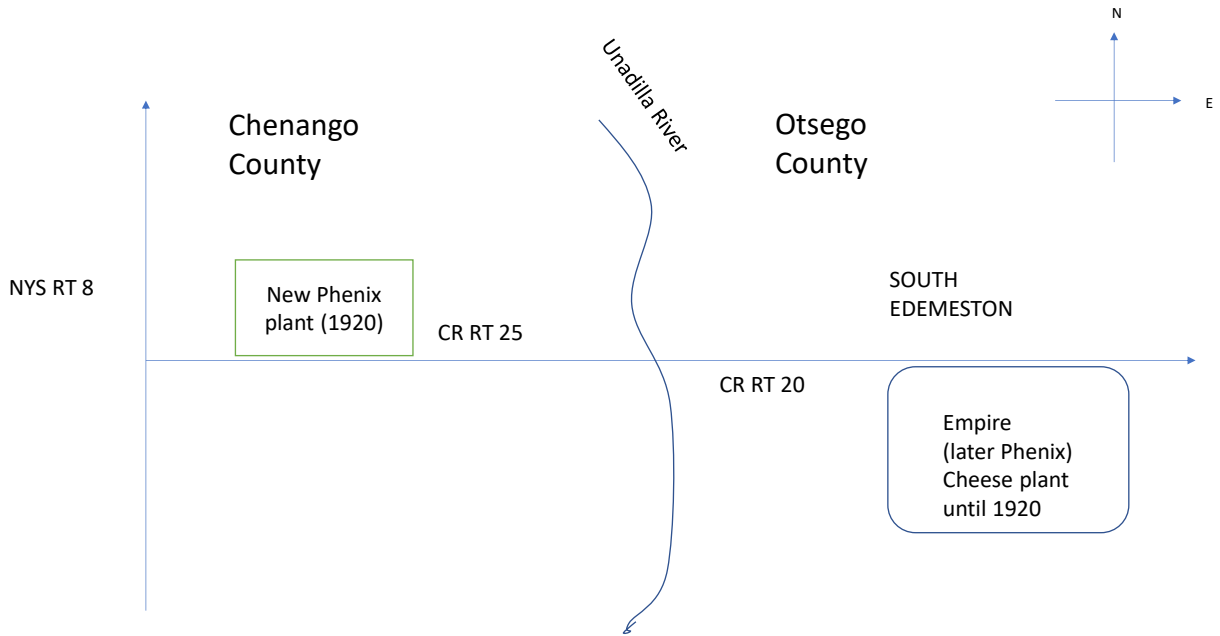
In 1902, Reynolds offered to sell his inventory and the rights to the Philadelphia Brand to Phenix Cheese. When the deal was consummated in 1903, Phenix of South Edmeston was in the position of producing one of the most widely known cream cheeses in the United States. Reynolds then left the cheese business and ended up in New Jersey politics.<sup>xii</sup> In 1920 a modern, more sanitary plant was built on the west side of the Unadilla River north of Chenango County Route 25 where it met Route 8.<sup>xiii</sup> In 1928, Phenix Cheese combined with another national cheese outfit, J.L. Kraft of Chicago, which in the same year had introduced its own product Velveeta.<sup>xiv</sup> The resultant Kraft-Phenix Cheese Company introduced the faux-mayonnaise/salad dressing Miracle Whip in 1933 which was promoted by the radio show Kraft Music Review, predecessor of Bing Crosby’s KMH.<sup>xv</sup> By the early 1940’s, the Kraft-Phenix factory at South Edmeston had become the most important customer of the north end of the Unadilla Valley Railroad.<sup>xvi</sup> The factory went on to produce most of Kraft’s well known products for 65 years. By the 1980’s it was making Breyer’s yogurt.<sup>xvii</sup>

#### A Phoenix Rises From the Ashes of Phenix

In 2005, the plant was purchased by the young Turkish immigrant Hamdi Ulukaya.<sup>xviii</sup> From its shell has risen the largest Greek Yogurt business (with a sister plant in Idaho Falls, Idaho) in the world. Chobani’s plant employs roughly 1000 workers at the site on Chenango Co. Rt. 25. In the following pictures and map we show how the new grew from the old, and it all started from cream cheese produced in Orange County, with the help of Bing Crosby and some innovative marketing, leading edge manufacturing, and help given to and by a few small communities in upstate New York.



The 1920 Phenix plant as it is embedded in the 2020 Chobani plant on Chenango County Rt. 25. In 1928 it became the Kraft-Phenix plant with a UVRR siding on the left. Heading east on this road, it transforms into Otsego Rt. 20 after crossing the Unadilla River. On the south side of Rt. 20 was the Empire Plant which burned down in 1900 and was rebuilt as the original Phenix plant. (Photo by Author)



A map of key cheese plants in and near South Edmeston.



The gleaming Chobani plant in January 2020. (Photo by author)



How the old fits into the new. (Photo by author)

<sup>i</sup> Giddens, Gary, *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams The Early Years (1903-1940)* (New York, 2001) p. 9.

<sup>ii</sup> Giddens, p. 399.

<sup>iii</sup> Giddens, pp 394-5.

<sup>iv</sup> I wrote my final exam for an Elmira College course on Mark Twain on the couch in the living room of Quarry Farm, where for 20 summers the author visited his sister-in-law and wrote many of his classics including *Huckleberry Finn*. In that very room, which opened into a porch in summer, he heard the tales of former slaves which informed that work.

<sup>v</sup> Most of this paragraph references Marx, Jeffrey A. "The Days Had come of Curds and Cream": The Origins and Development of Cream Cheese in America, *Food, Culture, and Society*, 15:2 (2012), pp 177-195.

<sup>vi</sup> The timeline here traces the timeline outline in Marx, Jeffery A, "Philadelphia™ Comes to New York: The Marketing of Cream Cheese in New York State 1880-1900" in *New York History* Vol. 96, No. 2 (Spring 2015) pp. 182-196.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p 193.

<sup>viii</sup> Cole, Anna Blinn "Rising From the Ashes: A History of Dairying in the Town of Columbus" in *Journal of the Chenango Historical Society* Issue 1 Summer 2012 pp 25-26.

<sup>ix</sup> Chittenango, NY near Syracuse, is the home of Frank Baum, whose authorship of *The Wizard of Oz* is celebrated with a yearly festival attended by munchkins of the 1939 blockbuster movie while they were alive.

<sup>x</sup> Cole, p. 27 (Picture of the factory in Fig. 1, p. 26).

<sup>xi</sup> Marx, "Philadelphia", p 195.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*, p 195.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Cole, p 27.

<sup>xiv</sup> Vickers, Rebecca Lives and Times: J. L. Kraft: The Founder of Kraft Foods (Chicago, Illinois 2005) p.19.

<sup>xv</sup> Giddens, p 397.

<sup>xvi</sup> Young, William S., UV: The Life of a Small Railroad (New Berlin, 2005), p. 93.

<sup>xvii</sup> Cole, p. 28 (Picture of the 1920 factory in Fig. 2, p. 27).

<sup>xviii</sup> See the charismatic leader describe how the old plant was transformed into the new at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGTMSV8QURS>. The referenced TED Talk fills in what happened from 2005 to the present.