

The Dairies of Mission Valley

MISSION DAIRY
Pure Milk 8 cents per quart,
Or 25 cents per gallon.
Delivered Morning and Evening.
WESSEL & ALLAN
Postoffice Box 191 San Diego

[Advertisement in the *San Diego Union*, May 7, 1885]

The dairy industry was once big business in San Diego. In the 1950s, dairy products were the third largest agricultural product in the county. One in fifteen San Diegans were connected in some way to dairying, according to one estimate. Mission Valley, today's center of shopping malls and condominiums, was filled with dairy farms.

It began in the 1880s. Serano Allen, a farmer from the East, struggled to make a living for his family growing fruit trees in Mission Valley. According to family history, the hungry Allen's decided to sell some milk from the family cow to buy oatmeal. "The boys sold some milk, then some more," recalled Jack Allen, the grandson of Serano. "The family bought a second cow and then another. That's how the business got started here."

Serano Allen delivered his milk on horseback, morning and evening, carrying a three-gallon milk can on each side of his saddle. As the business grew, he delivered by horse and buggy. The Allen dairy would be the first commercially successful dairy in San Diego.

Willard Hage, a young newcomer to San Diego who had grown up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, discovered the business about the same time. But Hage was a distributor, not a farmer. He grew his business by picking up milk from the farmers in Mission Valley—twice a day, to coincide with the milking—and delivering the raw product directly to consumers. In 1898, Hage went into the creamery business. Hage's Creamery at 5th and G Streets would prosper for decades.

The Ferrari Dairy was the longest lived dairy in Mission Valley. Louis Ferrari, an immigrant from Genoa, Italy, began farming in the valley in the 1890s. Land was cheap in those days, partly because people feared floods from the San Diego River. On sixty acres of land he bought for \$60 an acre, Louis raised chickens and grew corn.

But as the Allen family had discovered a few years earlier, there was little money in truck farming. So the Ferrari's started a dairy business in 1914. In a house near the south side of Mission Valley (on today's Camino del Rio South), Louis and his wife Meri raised ten children. Alongside other dairies in the valley, the Ferrari business prospered.

With pioneers like Allen, Hage, and Ferrari, the industry grew rapidly, along with the rising population of San Diego. From less than 18,000 in 1890, San Diego grew to 75,000 residents by 1920. In Mission Valley, twenty dairy farms dotted the landscape.

Growth in population also meant new development. Eventually, the dairies faced competition from new land uses. When the City Council rezoned Mission Valley in the 1950s to permit new development, the good times were in trouble. Suddenly the “green checkerboard of dairies, gravel pits and farms” faced a future of office buildings, hotels, and a huge shopping center.

A dirt road had bisected the valley in the early years. The Works Progress Administration paved this farmer’s road in the 1930s. In 1949, the road became U.S. Highway 80, and it ran right through the Ferrari pasture land. An attorney advised the Ferrari’s to take the easement money offered for the condemned land and move the dairy elsewhere. Instead, they built a \$28,000 “cow subway” under the highway so their herd could cross twice a day for milking.

Crossing under eight lanes of traffic carrying over 65,000 cars daily, didn’t seem to bother the Ferrari cows. Producing on average over 17,000 pounds of milk annually, the Ferrari heifers usually led the region in production.

Many Mission Valley dairy farmers chose to take advantage of rising land values to sell out and move on. In 1958, the Bond family, which owned a dairy north of the Ferrari farm, entered a partnership with the May Department Stores. The result would be Mission Valley Center in 1961. The Allen family also moved out, purchasing land for a new dairy in El Cajon. “Some people stayed, others stood,” recalled Pete Ferrari, the son of Louis. “I stood.”



Before freeways, sports stadiums, and shopping malls . . . *Special Collections, San Diego Public Library.*

In 1965, Ferrari bought out the only other remaining dairy in Mission Valley. The Guglielmetti Dairy, at Friar's Road and Murphy Canyon, was older even than the Ferrari business. Pete Ferrari walked 75 cows across the river and added them to his herd. Two years later, San Diego Stadium would open on the old Guglielmetti site.

The Ferrari Dairy lasted three more years, closing finally in 1968. "They said the smell from the dairy was bad for the stadium [and] refused to renew my permit," Pete Ferrari remembered. "I figured it was time to sell out and try something else."

With the dairy gone, the family stayed on in the wood-frame ranch house built by Louis Ferrari in 1896. From the last sales of their land, the Ferrari's bought investment property in El Cajon. "It turned out to be very lucrative," Pete told reporter Lew Scarr of the *Union* in 1986. "It made me a millionaire. El Cajon did, not the dairy."

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