

Wisconsin's Dairy Industry And Riding Wisconsin

Whichever distance is chosen for RAW's 2026 edition be assured of much beauty, seclusion, low traffic rates and plenty of "America's Dairyland" history. What of this history and why? Surely, without the early dairy farms of Wisconsin we'd be without the rural roads of today.

We know that in 1837 Charles Rockwell produced cheese near Fort Atkinson in Jefferson County. The Wisconsin Dairyman's Association was founded during 1872 in Watertown as a marketing and educational entity to local farmers. In 1891 and still very influential today, The Wisconsin Cheesemakers Association began and is now an international organization. In 1902 The Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association was established to help tie together commerce in the State. These organizations plus resettlement of east coast New Yorkers skilled in cheese making craft plus Scandinavian and German immigrants of the 1880's discovering new property deep in the coulees and hills give the foundation to dairy work and our rural roads. (*Wisconsin State Historical Society: The Rise of Dairy Farming*)

While "America's Dairyland is still embossed on Wisconsin license plates the State is a shadow of its former self at least by measure of the family farm. The remnants of this decline are seen in many areas of Wisconsin but are pronounced in Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties as they were strong milk producers for many years. In 1950 there were about 150,000 dairy operations in the State. In 2010 about 12,900 remained with sharp declines in herd size. (*Wisconsin DNR: Agriculture Counts: Wisconsin Livestock Agriculture Census, 2010*).

In 1993 California overtook Wisconsin in pounds of milk produced leaving some of us wondering if we'd lose our honorary license plate title. The great western State still outpaces us for pounds of milk produced but we retain the top spot nationally as cheese producer and have for over 100 years.

Roads of all RAW venues bring you close to this history. As you ride the RAW '26 roads take a few moments to appreciate the history of the abandoned farm buildings as remnants to the halcyon days of Wisconsin's past. Consider the effort, the daily life growth of the families and enterprises the Associations made up to develop the uniqueness Wisconsin now offers us as riders.

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