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Joy Wallace Dickinson: Here's to the hard-working man who put milk on the map

Joy Wallace Dickinson

Florida Flashback

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Congratulations to the folks who were out in the fresh air for the Milk Run, a 5K footrace on Feb. 11 to benefit the Orange County 4-H. Elsewhere this weekend, shops and eateries will welcome customers to the Orlando area now dubbed the "Milk District," because of its proximity to the T.G. Lee Dairy plant at Robinson Street at Bumby Avenue.

"Check out something different," declares themilkdistrict.com web site, which features spots ranging from the recent and hip to the venerable and vintage.

Hey, Beefy King is always hip.

But let's get back to milk, and the man who put it on Orlando's map: Thomas Gilbert Lee.

Born in Orlando in 1894, Lee didn't bring the first dairy cattle to the city. That honor belonged to one Amanda Ford, who had a cow shipped to the City Beautiful from Ohio in 1882.

By the early 20th century, though, many small dairies had sprung up in Central Florida, and when young Tom Lee went into the business in 1925, he faced at least 50 competitors.

Two cows in 1925

Lee had studied business at Rollins College and agriculture at the University of Florida and had served in World War I before he started out with just the family cow, Hopper, and a gift from his father of 20 acres of land. His dad also helped Lee buy a second cow and a calf.

In the beginning, Lee worked 16- to 20-hour days, doing all the milking, bottling and delivering by himself. He milked his cows in a lean-to shack on Bumby Avenue. He and his wife, Elizabeth did all the household and dairy chores.

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Lee first sold his milk wholesale, to a distributor, but soon he was able to buy a few milk bottles and begin a door-to-door retail trade. The story goes that he had to use his initials for the business to fit his name on a milk bottle. Before long, he was able to hire an employee, who earned \$12 a week.

Deliveries in a Model T

Lee bought a Model T Ford coupe and attached a truck body to it to deliver milk. A devout man, he would disconnect the truck body on Sundays, remove the "T.G. Lee Dairies" signs he had hung on the Ford, and drive his family to and from the First Presbyterian Church in Orlando.

His dairy grew dramatically, despite setbacks such as an outbreak of disease in 1930 that killed all but 14 of Lee's more than 100 cows. He bounced back and, four years later, built a modern milking parlor in which cows were milked by machine. It became an attraction that drew crowds from all over town. Over the years, the business expanded as Lee bought other dairies.

The pasture that became Colonial Plaza

In 1955, Lee sold 20 acres at Colonial Drive and Bumby for \$200,000 to a New York real estate group who planned to build the \$3.5 million Colonial Plaza shopping center.

It would be the largest retail project in the city's history up to that time, and it later became Orlando's first mall (now replaced by the current, later incarnation of Colonial Plaza). Lee built his modern processing plant on the remaining 36 acres just south of Colonial Plaza.

In 1975, the 50th anniversary of T.G. Lee's dairy, nearly 1,000 people gathered at Walt Disney World to pay tribute to him.

Lee died in 1986. Five years before, he had sold the family business to a Chicago company, Dean Foods. But he had remained busy. He was excited about LeeVista, the commercial and residential development in east Orlando that was being built on what was once his dairy land, near Orlando International Airport. He had paid \$16 an acre for it.

Today, T.G. Lee remains the largest dairy in Central Florida, and the Orlando plant where Tom Lee once milked cows in a lean-to shed processes 230,000 gallons of milk at day.

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