Article Title: "To Make a Good Product Better": The Fairmont Creamery Company, 1884-1984


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Article Summary: The Fairmont Creamery Company, incorporated on March 29, 1884, in Fairmont was founded for the production and sale of butter, eggs, and poultry, by Wallace Wheeler and Joseph H Rushton. The company underwent many changes during its history and developed true innovations during its almost 100-year history. Its building at Fairmont was entered in the National Register of Historic Places on December 15, 1983.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Joseph H Rushton, Wallace Wheeler, Edgar F Howe, S F Ashby, S M Babcock

Place Names: Fairmont, Fillmore County, Nebraska; Omaha, Nebraska; Crete, Nebraska; Chicago, Illinois; Dubuque, Iowa; Portland, Maine; Spokane, Washington; Devil's Lake, North Dakota; New Orleans, Louisiana; Green Bay, Wisconsin; New York City, New York; Friend, Nebraska; Moorhead, Minnesota; Houston, Texas; Cincinnati, Ohio; San Lorenzo, California; Kansas City, Missouri; Council Grove, Kansas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Photographs / Images: Edgar F Howe; Fairmont Creamery Company headquarters, Omaha; original creamery building in Fairmont, Nebraska; Fairmont's variety of products and packaging, from Fifty-Sixth Annual Report, 1940
The Fairmont Creamery Company was incorporated March 29, 1884, in Fairmont, then the trading center of northern Fillmore County. The company was founded for the production and sale of butter, eggs, and poultry by Wallace Wheeler, an implement dealer, and Joseph H. Rushton, a Fairmont attorney. Local townspeople and farmers owned the remainder of the $5,000 total stock.

During 1884 and 1885 the creamery operated only in the summer months due to a lack of raw materials. However, the company was soon a profitable enterprise for its stockholders. During this early period drivers made daily rounds to farmers, picking up milk and delivering it to the creamery. The producer was paid monthly for the cream skimmed from this milk. Later on, Fairmont provided skimming stations where the producer brought his milk to be separated by a large power separator. The farmer then left the cream at the station and hauled the skim milk home, often to be used for hog food. When hand separators were introduced in Nebraska about 1900, the skimming stations were no longer needed. Farmers separated their own cream at home. Fairmont provided separators to patrons on contract, and the company withheld part of each month's cream check to apply to the purchase.

The Fairmont Creamery Company's first product was butter. Edgar F. Howe came to Fairmont as a butter maker in 1886. During this first year Howe was responsible for all operations at the creamery, from firing the boiler at 5 a.m. to meeting and recording the activities of the cream route driver after 6 p.m. It was under Howe's able direction that the company began to expand and gain nationwide recognition. In 1888 Howe supervised the production of 210,000 pounds of butter. During the next seven years six plants were started by
Edgar F. Howe directed Fairmont Creamery Company operations as it expanded from its small-town Nebraska origin into the national market.
Fairmont Creamery Company received a vote of confidence in November, 1889, when its Diadem brand of butter won first prize at the American Dairy Show in Chicago. Howe made the prizewinning butter personally. That same year, Fairmont took first honors at the National Buttermakers’ Convention in Dubuque, Iowa. The company took other first place honors for the Nebraska-made butter in many categories at the 1889 annual meeting of the State Dairymen’s Association of Nebraska.

With the addition of the Crete plant in 1889, the Fairmont Creamery Company made a total of 410,000 pounds of butter. During the first years of Fairmont’s history, Howe devoted all his time to supervising the making of butter in Crete and Fairmont. He served the Fairmont Company for over 50 years, advancing from butter maker during the “one man-one churn” days to president of the organization in 1933.

The Fairmont Creamery Company continued its rapid expansion after the turn of the century. The general offices were moved from Fairmont, Nebraska, to Omaha January 1, 1907, which was a more convenient location, and the original building in Fairmont was sold to Dr. S. F. Ashby. The company opened plants in towns from Portland, Maine, to Spokane, Washington, and from Devil’s Lake, North Dakota, to New Orleans, Louisiana. By 1930 the company had nearly 3,000 cream stations throughout the United States providing a market for the farmer’s home-separated cream.

Fairmont’s popularity with consumers was in part due to the complete line of dairy products offered. By the 1930s the company also processed and sold eggs, poultry, fresh and frozen fruits, vegetables, and ice.

Eggs were first handled by Fairmont in 1889, and by 1893 they were being wholesaled at the Crete plant. In 1908, Fairmont was one of the first creameries in the country to pack and market frozen eggs sold to bakers. The Fairmont Creamery Company had reduced this process to a science; the Omaha and Crete plants were used by the Department of Agriculture in researching frozen eggs.

The first Fairmont poultry department was established at
The Fairmont Creamery Company was headquartered in Omaha after 1907. (Below) The original creamery building in Fairmont, Nebraska, is now on the National Register of Historic Places.
the Crete plant in 1910, and the company soon became nationally known for its Puritan and Plymouth brands of “milk-fatted” poultry. Commercial chick hatcheries and poultry supplies were handled at many Fairmont plants.  

Ice cream was first manufactured at the Omaha plant in 1907. Originally it was frozen by the old ice and salt method which was slow. This gave way to freezing machines with hollow jackets through which refrigerants were mechanically circulated. By 1934, ice cream was made at nearly all plants. 

Fairmont entered the cheese business on a large scale in 1915 at its Green Bay, Wisconsin, plant and soon every Fairmont plant carried bulk and packaged cheese. Frozen fruit and vegetables were introduced in the 1920s without major renovation, since all plants had refrigeration. 

By the mid-1930s Fairmont produced more than 30 “Better Food Products” and operated by the motto: “To make a good product better.”

The Fairmont Creamery Company was always a leader in innovative ideas. As early as 1888, when Fairmont shipped tubs of butter from Fairmont, Nebraska, to New York City, tubs were lined with parchment paper, an original Fairmont idea which became universal. When unpacked from the tubs, the butter came free and was in much better condition than unlined shipments.

Fairmont also was the first creamery in the United States to use the Babcock Test, an accurate means of obtaining the percentage of butterfat content in cream. It was invented by Dr. S. M. Babcock of the University of Wisconsin in 1890. Fairmont used this test in 1892 at the Friend Creamery, and thereafter it became a standard measurement in the industry.

In 1902, a laboratory was established at the Crete plant. Here researchers studied and developed methods for standardization of the acidity in cream for pasteurization, tested butter for the percentage of moisture and butterfat content, and ran other tests to insure consistently excellent products. By 1906 a comprehensive lab was built at the Omaha plant.

In 1920 Fairmont created what is believed to have been the first refrigerated ice cream delivery truck in the United States. This truck, built by an Omaha mechanic, was used to service retail stores from the factory.
The Fairmont Creamery Company established an experimental farm by the 1930s at Moorhead, Minnesota. There the company maintained purebred Guernsey cows and turkeys for breeder stock.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1947 the Fairmont Creamery Company changed its name to Fairmont Foods Company.\textsuperscript{16} By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the company expanded into snack foods through the acquisition of several potato chip companies, cookie, cracker and frozen pizza manufacturing operations, and a soft drink bottling company. Fairmont also continued to expand in the dairy industry with the acquisition of the Abbott Dairy in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1967, Fairmont Foods purchased Utotem, a chain of nearly 350 convenience foods stores located in seven states; Utotem also owned three ice plants in Houston, Texas.\textsuperscript{18} During the 1970s, Fairmont Foods closed and disposed of several of its original dairy and snack food operations and moved its headquarters from Omaha to Houston.\textsuperscript{19} In March, 1979, Fairmont's board of directors formally approved a plan to concentrate the company's resources in the Utotem convenience store business. Fairmont Foods Company became a wholly owned subsidiary of American Financial Corporation of Cincinnati, Ohio, in July, 1980, and in 1982 changed its name to Utotem, Inc.

Today Utotem, Inc. operates approximately 960 stores in 12 states, mostly in the Sun Belt. The company also operates Giant Snacks, Inc. of San Lorenzo, California, which manufactures beef jerky and beef sticks. Fairmont's remaining dairy operations consist of a fluid-milk processing plant in Kansas City, Missouri, and a cultured products plant in Council Grove, Kansas. The last ice cream processing plant, located in Omaha, was closed in December, 1982.\textsuperscript{20}

The Fairmont Creamery Building at Fairmont was entered in the National Register of Historic Places on December 15, 1983. The building is nationally significant in the area of industry as the original plant and general office of the Fairmont Creamery Company from 1884-1907, the first 25 years of the company’s nearly 100-year history. Fairmont has been a leader in the dairy industry due to its excellent quality control in production and its progressive ideas. Many of these plans were implemented during this early period of the company’s existence.
Fairmont was shipping products nationwide from this original plant in the 1880s, and as early as 1900, plants were being built in other states, attesting to the excellence of the products manufactured.

NOTES

1. *Nebraska Signal* (Fairmont), May 1, 1884, p. 8.
2. Ibid., May 29, 1884, p. 5.
6. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.