

NEWS

DeLaval Separator Co. device made cream easily available

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In 1882, Swedish engineer and inventor Dr. Gustaf de Laval developed the first centrifugal separator making it possible to separate cream from milk faster and less cumbersome, without having to let the milk sit for a time and risk turning it sour.

Using the mechanical device, dairy operations separated milk from cream while it was still warm, doing away with previous processes that were time consuming and could result in waste.

In 1891, the De Laval Separator Company was incorporated in the United States in Bloomfield, New Jersey, and shortly after, the plant relocated to Poughkeepsie. Upon opening, the Dutchess County operation had 50 employees working in various departments associated with the process.

Based on a 20-acre parcel on the east bank of the Hudson River, just south of today's Pine Street at the foot of Rinaldi Boulevard (now vacant land), the operation began in an old horse stable while a series of buildings was being built. The land was given to the company by the local Chamber of Commerce through a \$10,000 industrial fund, raised specifically for that purpose.

When the multi-building complex was complete its floor space took up a full 10 acres of the land. The interior of the structures included four laboratories, a carpenter shop, printing department, designing and drawing room, research department, pattern shop, tool-making division, a blacksmith shop, boiler rooms, a power plant and other support services space.

The majority of tools used throughout the plant were manufactured on-site in the De Laval machine shop. By the turn of the 20th century the separators became wildly popular and by 1920 more than 80,000 cream separators were being manufactured every year.

In 1929, Poughkeepsie architect Stanley H. Chadwick designed and oversaw construction of the complex's new foundry. It was used to manufacture castings for the cream separators and other products the company turned out.

“We used De Laval separators, along with other dairy operations in the region,” said Ed Fitchett, of Fitchett Brothers Dairy, which operated in Poughkeepsie from 1904 through 1984. “I remember driving down to the riverfront plant and there was always a lot of activity going on. The company was one of the major employers in Poughkeepsie.”

By the late 1930s, De Laval diversified its product line and began to experiment with new products. One, developed in 1939, was meant for use in bars and was a non-drip liquid container — based on a patent filed in England — that mechanically mixed drinks with perfect proportions of the respective alcohols.

The new device was primarily tested in the taproom of the Nelson House Hotel on Market Street in Poughkeepsie where it experienced significant success. There, it was used to mix martinis and Manhattans, the most commonly purchased cocktails of that era.

While the company's sales department and general offices were originally based in New York City, branch offices began to open in other locales, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, as well as Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg in Canada. Agents representing the company were located in virtually every major city across the country.

De Laval Separating Company eventually became a part of the larger Alfa Laval portfolio. During World War II, the company provided considerable assistance to the U.S. Navy in overcoming a shortage of lubricating oil by developing oil separators.

“I worked in De Laval's bookkeeping department during the 1940s and it was a very busy place,” recalled Jeanne Byrnes, who left the company in 1958 and with her husband John established Byrnes Message Bureau. “I enjoyed working at DeLaval very much.”

In 1964, De Laval relocated its operation from the riverfront to a site along Route 44 in the Town of Poughkeepsie. There, it operated out of a 400,000 square-foot plant that was located on 80 acres.

The Poughkeepsie plant shut down permanently in 1990 and Alfa Laval was taken over by Tetra Pak, another successful company in the food industry, the following year.

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