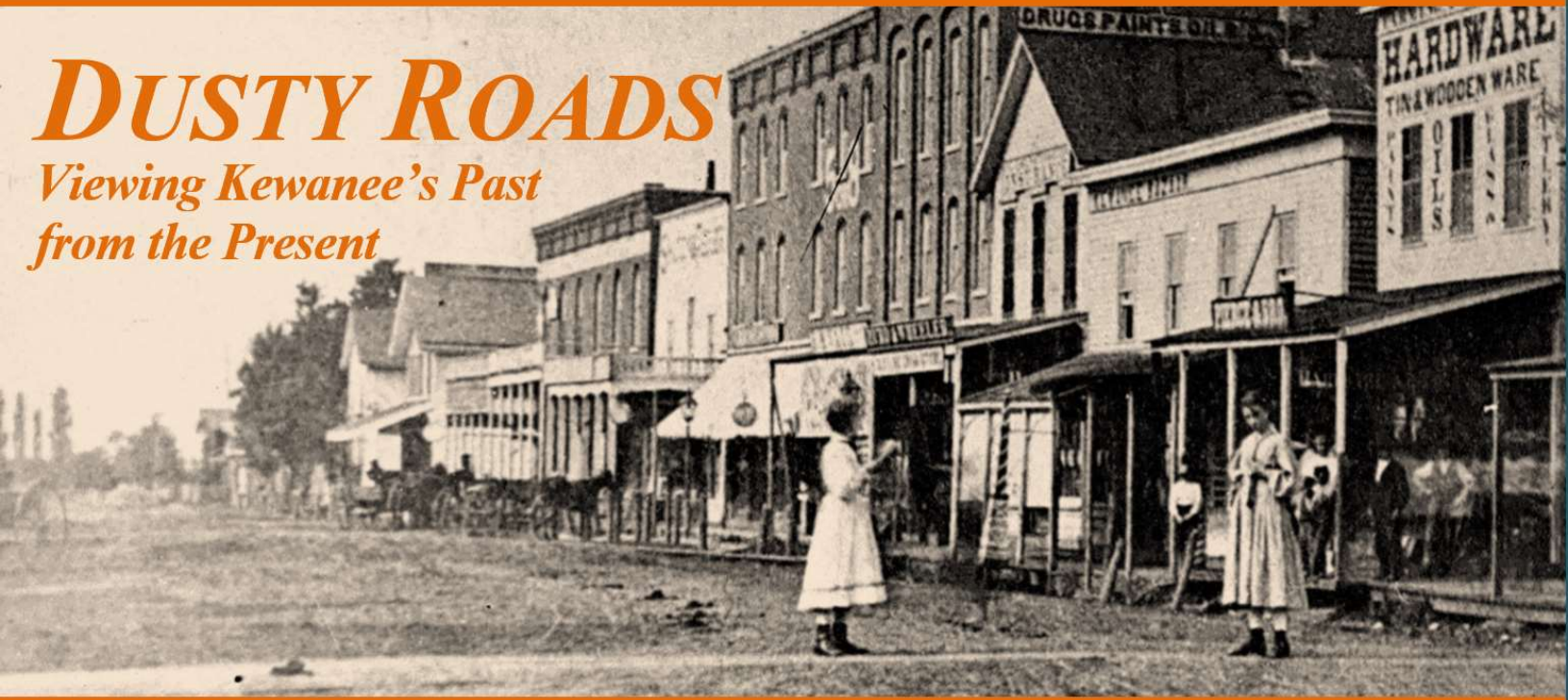


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

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Elmo the Milkman

He was at the Transition from Horse-drawn to Motorized Milk Delivery

From my birth in 1949 until 1953, we lived on the west side of Franklin Street, at its intersection with Division Street. Richard's Dairy was located kitty-corner from our house, slightly to the east and on the other side (south) of Division.

That's where Elmo, our milkman, worked.

My first recollection of Elmo was when he was driving a single horse-drawn milk wagon. He would walk down the street, the horse following him. Periodically he'd hop back in the wagon, after which he would alight with a metal wire milk bottle holder, walk up to our front porch, lift the lid on our metal milk box, and then swap out the empty bottles for full ones, sometimes dropping off some butter and cream as well.



1870s milkmen

But by the next year, Elmo was driving a motorized milk truck.

Elmo left a life-long impression on me and, I'm sure, on many others.

Elmo was born on April Fool's Day in 1911 in New Orleans, Louisiana. His dad was born there at the beginning of the Civil War, and his great-grandfather there before the War of 1812. Elmo's mom was also from New Orleans.

Unfortunately, both of Elmo's parents died in New Orleans in 1919, when he was only eight years old. After their deaths, Elmo and two of his five siblings lived with an aunt and uncle and their family in New Orleans.

By 1930, however, Elmo was living with his sister and brother-in-law in Kewanee and working at Richard's Dairy delivering milk.

So how did Elmo's milkman job come about?

Prior to the late 1700s, most families had their own cow. But as industrialization led to the transition of families from rural to urban living, people no longer had a place to keep a family cow. So folks began looking to nearby dairy farmers for their milk. And soon, the farmers began delivering the milk, the first deliveries occurring in 1785 in Vermont.

At first, milkmen hired by the dairies brought a metal barrel full of milk and from it filled whatever containers the city-dwellers had.

The earliest deliveries were on foot. But soon wagons were used, some pulled by the milkmen, some by other animals, such as dogs, and then eventually by horses.



1880s dog-drawn milk wagon

But in 1878, the Lester milk jar received a patent, and for the first time, milk was sold in glass bottles. In 1884, a new patent was issued for a bottle with a cap.

Because milk was perishable and there was no refrigeration, daily delivery prevented spoilage, and the standardized glass bottles made milk easier to deliver and to track sales.



Little's Kewanee Dairy milk wagon, ca 1st quarter of 20th century

Each day, the milkman would take orders from his customers and then would deliver

I overcome these difficulties by making my cans of glass, and by making them of a substantially plane surface inside and outside, without recesses in which unclean matter might collect. The can of this form is easily cleaned, and, being without the usual neck, of less diameter than the main body, it affords a large surface for the cream, which is all easily accessible; also, it is more easily emptied of its contents, and is more useful as a vessel to contain the milk while in the hands of the consumer.

Excerpt from Lester patent

the order the next day. And most of us can recall the insulated box we kept on our front porches into which the milkman would remove empty bottles, replace them with new bottles, and collect payment.

But after the kinks were worked out of motorized vehicles, well, the horses were sent out to pasture. Before long, home milk delivery ended, for a number of reasons.

By the 1930s and 1940s, home refrigerators became common, replacing the icebox. As a result, daily delivery was not as important.

Also, the development of larger grocery stores with refrigeration units opened, permitting consumers a one-stop-shop for groceries.



And, as suburbs developed, milkmen had to travel farther to sell the same amount of milk.

Finally, as more people owned their own cars after World War II, it was much easier to do their shopping all at once and at their convenience.

But back to Elmo.

By the mid-1930s, Elmo was married with two children. So by the time I probably first saw him, he had been delivering milk for over twenty years. He continued to work for Richard's Dairy until he retired in 1971.

Elmo passed away in 1981, survived by his wife and his two daughters.

For many of us, though, Elmo continues to live on with this jingle:

“Rain, shine, snow or sleet, Elmo’s wagon is on the street.”



“MEADOW GOLD MILK IS THE BEST MILK”

SAYS
Elmo LaBlanc


Elmo lives at 1111 Rockwell St., is married and has two girls, age 13 and 14. His hobbies are fishing, hunting and golf. He has been with Richards' Dairy for 20 years, his route covering the west end of the city. The kids on Elmo's route say "Rain, shine, snow or sleet, Elmo's wagon is on the street."

MEADOW GOLD DAIRY PRODUCTS

are the best you can buy . . . For a family meal or just an in-between meal snack, dairy products give added nourishment and energy. Keep plenty of fresh Meadow Gold milk on hand for every member of the family.

RICHARD'S DAIRY
PHONE 2550

April 2, 1949, Star Courier ad featuring Elmo



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.