

The Local Egg Grading Station

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I love the old history books that I get to read for my job. These heavy tomes have become dear friends to me, and just like human friends, I'm always learning new things from them. We share some viewpoints, and disagree on others, but if you're interested in the details of European settlement (and not so much the motives behind it or the consequences of it) these community history books are a good place to start. And just like human friends, when you get to a place where you think you know them well, you run across something new and entirely fascinating.

This photo of the Manitoba Co-op Egg Station in Boissevain caught my eye the other day. With the tell-tale spire of the United Church in the background I recognized it as my home town, and the thought that there used to be an egg grading station here is fascinating to me. Like most of us North Americans, I've become lazy in thinking about where my food comes from. You buy eggs in the store, right? They arrive like everything else does – in a truck from “Somewhere Else.”

This little building on Main Street used to be quite the centre of activity. It began operating in the 1930's and at first was only open in the springtime, but it soon became a year-round operation. During the peak season—April and May—employees were known to work 16 hours a day, Sundays in-



▲ The Manitoba Co-operative Egg Station in Boissevain, pictured here on South Railway St right next door to Jackson's Shoe Repair Shop (present day Community Centre). It later moved to Broadway St, to the building just north of the present-day Post Office. The man in the centre is George Opperman, who built the crates that were used to transport the eggs out of town.

“We held two eggs in each hand and swirled them around and looked at the light.”

cluded! Local producers brought in fresh ungraded eggs, and after they were graded and packed, the farmer would receive a cheque for the value of their eggs, depending on size, quality and the going rate for eggs at the time. Eggs were available for purchase from the Egg Station, and any excess eggs were shipped twice a week to Winnipeg via the CPR.

A similar facility operated out of the Melita Creamery.

The creamery opened in 1912, but added an egg-buying station in 1935. Bern Minschall worked in the creamery in 1944 alongside three of her sisters and a brother. In addition to other duties she remembers grading eggs. “We held two eggs in each hand and you swirled them around and looked at the light. This light shows everything, just like an x-ray today. It was quite a bright light and big. We just [shined] the light right through

the egg, you could see the whole thing.” She's referring to a process called “candling,” named such because in the beginning the light of a candle was used to illuminate an

egg. Candling can reveal the size of the yolk and whether or not there are any cracks in the shell. “It had to be a real perfect egg to be an A.” Bern continues. “It depends on the yolk, how nice it is, and no defects in it. And then the B would be a little bit darker yolk. Not a lot, but this was hard to distinguish between an A and a B. And of course a C was a crack, D was any blood in the yolk or anything [and] they all went in different crates.”

I think it's remarkable that the Melita Creamery had 6 full-time egg-handlers, who worked almost day and night during the peak season. Though the eggs were available for sale locally, most of the eggs were shipped out. The creamery also started a hatchery in 1951, which sold about a million chicks to farmers and households in the surrounding area.

The Manitoba Co-op Station in Boissevain closed in 1960, and the Melita Creamery in 1982. There is no place we can go to see people grading eggs by hand anymore. These days egg production happens in giant facilities that are a ways off the main streets of our small towns.

Sources:

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