

Aroostook County rising

Light industry comes to northern Maine



Kauffman Metals “looked like any other light industrial building (but for) a collection of horses, ponies, and bicycles in the parking lot.” (RD photo)

by David Greenberg

Fourteen years ago Norman Kauffman and his family, along with several other families, moved from one of the largest Amish communities in Iowa to a sleepy town in Northern Maine, on the New Brunswick border. Like so many other towns that depended on forestry for its economic base, Smyrna Mills was experiencing hard times. There were many affordable homes and farms waiting for buyers. It was just the opportunity Kauffman and the others were looking for.

I first contacted Norman Kauffman because he is a horse-drawn equipment dealer. Later I discovered he also runs an organic dairy farm, which supplies the milk for Sonnetal Cheese, a company operated by a son, Robert.

Over the course of several phone calls, Norman helped me find a reconditioned McCormick No 9 mower, a disc harrow, and wagon gear from Amish manufacturers in Pennsylvania and Ohio. He arranged for the equipment to be shipped to his farm very affordably.

About a month after placing the order, I got a call saying the equipment had arrived. After contacting many trucking companies, it became clear that it would cost a great deal to have my machinery shipped home to Nova Scotia. My best option would be to rent a U-Haul truck and get it myself.

Upon pulling off the highway at Smyrna Mills, the first thing I noticed was a share-the-road sign with a picture of a horse-drawn buggy. A minute later I was approaching a country store. In the parking lot there was a sulky cart hitched to small pony. There were no other vehicles about, and no lights on in the store.

I hoped that the store was open because I needed rope to

secure my equipment. It was. Inside, it took a moment to adjust to the dim light that filtered in through widely spaced skylights. A young man with a friendly, open face and the



This share-the-road sign greets visitors to Smyrna Mills, Maine. (David Greenberg photo)

typical Amish haircut and beard was at the checkout. An older man and a young girl were stocking shelves with bags of dried fruit.

After buying a length of rope, a beautiful heavy-duty cookie sheet, a pocketknife, and some gloves, all at bargain prices, I headed down the road to Kauffman Metals where I would find my horse-drawn gear.

Kauffman Metals looked like most any other light industrial building. Instead of pick-up trucks in the parking lot, however, there was a collection of horses, ponies and bicycles. Behind the building was a wind turbine that, I was later told, compressed air to power tools in the metal shop.

LOADING UP

I backed the U-Haul up to where my equipment was piled at the edge of the parking lot and headed for the office. Before I made it to the building, a young man approached. "You must be David; my father said that you would be coming." With that he walked to the truck, calling names as he went. As each name was called, a man came out of the workshop. "Amos, Titus, Andrew, Peter, Stephen, come on, we have a little work to do." The men streamed from the shop almost running.

As soon as the door to the U-Haul was opened, the equipment was flowing in. First the mower was hoisted in by four of the men, next the wagon gear. Just before hefting the largest piece aboard, the double gang disc harrow, a young man not old enough to shave spoke up. "I think we should have put the disc in first," he said. "That way its pole will fit over the mower. I don't think this way will work." Norman's son agreed immediately and without another word everything was unloaded and moved aside. The disc harrows, which took eight men to lift, were put aboard and everything else fit perfectly around them, just as the boy had suggested.

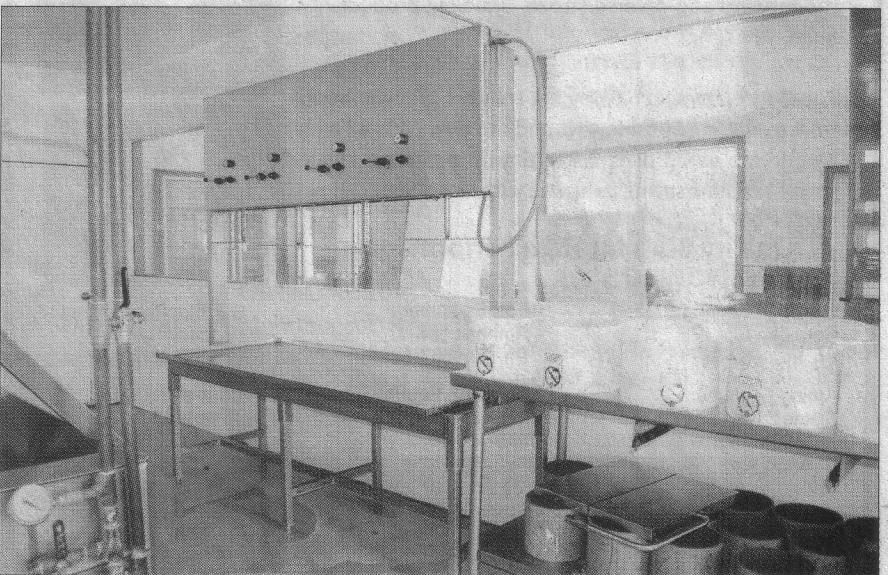
As wonderfully surreal as my metal shop experience was, the scene ahead of me looked like a re-enactment of a 1970s *Mother Earth News* eco-utopia article. On the right were several houses, each with a wind turbine, a little greenhouse,



At the Kauffman farm in Smyrna Mills, ME, wood, wind, muscle, and good sense power most of the operations.



At Smyrna Mills, cheese is kept cold without electricity. An insulated room above the cheese is filled each January with ice cut from a near by pond. Trap doors circulate the cold air as needed.



The production area at Sonmental Cheese in Smyrna Mills. Pressing, pumping, and stirring are done using compressed air, and skylights and windows brighten the rooms.



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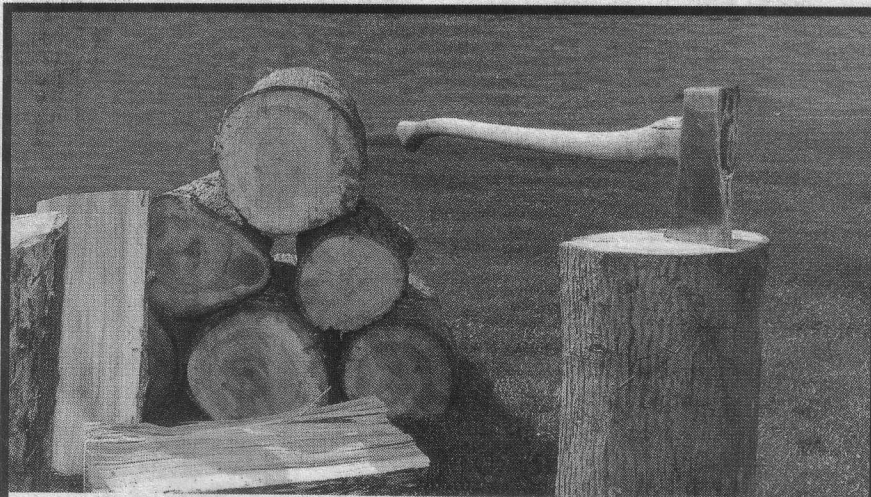
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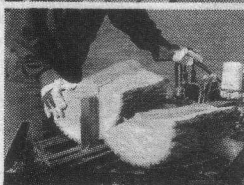
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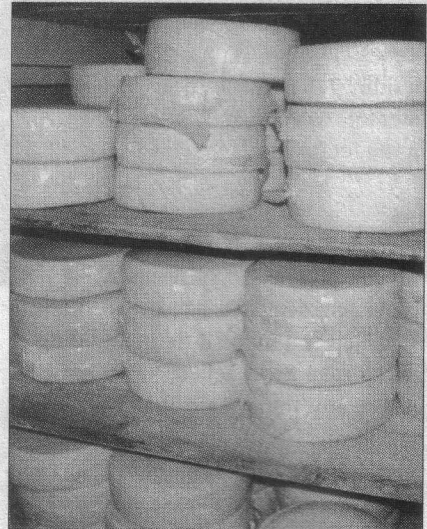
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and raised bed gardens in the front yard. On the left, a young teamster was standing on a forecart pulling a small square baler hitched to a beautiful team of Belgians. Both the man and the horses were perfectly still, probably resting. To complete the picture, a hundred feet ahead two girls in long dresses were riding bicycles down the road.

A few minutes later, I was pulling up to Norman's farm. There was no one to be seen but I could hear a motor running



In the ageing room 10-pound rounds of cheese are kept cool on wooden shelves.

near one of the barns. The sound led me to several young men loading square bales into a bale wrapper. Fifteen bales were stacked into a cube, compressed from the sides and top, and then pushed forward as the plastic was wrapped around and around. It was obviously lots of extra hand labor to put up haylage in square bales, but there would be no need for an expensive bucket loader to feed this hay.

I was given directions to where I would find Norman, baling hay in a field beyond the Sonmental Cheese plant. When I found him, Norman's feet were almost straight up in the air. He was clearing jammed up hay from the baler. The machine was hitched to four Belgians. Another of his sons, who looked to be about 11 years old, was at the reins.

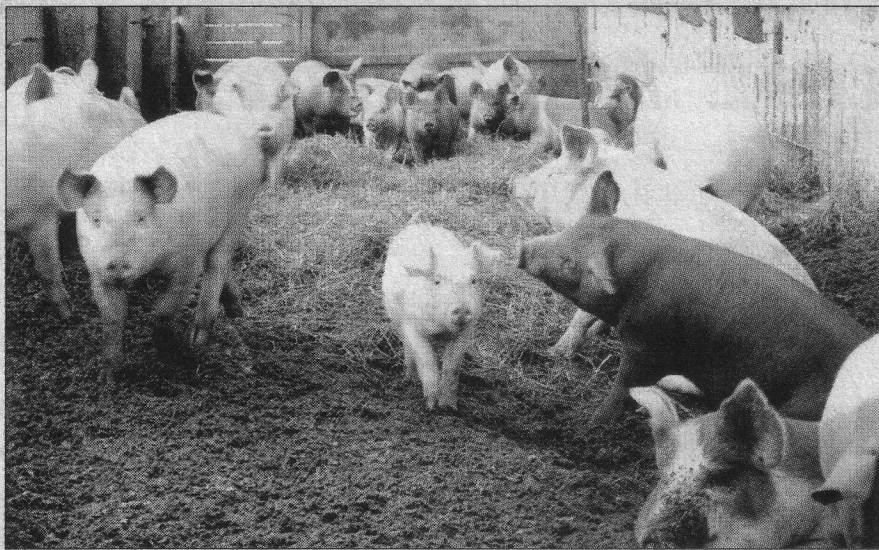
I stood there for a few moments, watching Norman wiggle and tug at the clogged hay. When the machine was

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Hogs at Smyrna Mills are fed grains soaked in whey, a protein-rich by-product of cheese making.

finally clear, he pulled himself upright and said hello, shaking my hand. He asked who I was and what I was there for. This was odd. Everyone else had been expecting me because Norman had told them I was coming.

As soon as I told him who I was, his eyes twinkled and he shook my hand again, this time as if I were a long awaited friend. With that, we left his sons to finish haying and walked up to the cheese plant.

CHEESE PLEASE

As we approached the building we could hear a phone ringing in the bright office and packaging room. Norman picked it up. Laughing, he said to the person on the phone "Of course you can't ever get a hold of us. We're Amish! You're lucky I happened to be showing someone the cheese plant, now what can I do for you?"

After putting the phone down, he showed me the ageing rooms. It was quite a sight. Several small rooms were lined with wooden shelves, each laden with 10-pound rounds of cheese. But how could the cheese be kept cold without electricity? The old way was the answer. Ice was cut from a nearby pond every January, hauling it with horses to a heavily insulated room above

the cheese. From there, two trap doors could be opened as needed to circulate cold air.

The cheese production area looked much the same as that in other small-scale artisan cheese plants I'd seen. There was no electricity. Large skylights brightened the room. Pressing, pumping, and stirring were done with compressed air.

Years ago I helped a neighbor buy equipment for his small cheese production business. I had an idea of how much money it takes to set one up. "Did you get government money to help build this?" I asked.

My host replied in a gentle, relaxed tone of voice, "David, you must know as well as I that anything the government touches loses its soul."

RETURN TO SMYRNA

The following year, on my way to spend U.S. Thanksgiving with my parents, my partner Jen and I stopped by Smyrna Mills. We checked out the general store and then headed to the cheese plant. Robert was just finishing up work in the cheese room. He was hosing down the walls, equipment and floor with steaming hot water. Looking in from the front room through the observation windows, all we could see was billowing steam. Once he noticed us, Robert emerged from the cheese room and greeted us, showed

When he learned my name his eyes twinkled and he shook my hand again as if I were a long awaited friend.



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us around for a few minutes, and sold us a big wheel of cheese. I wanted to ask more questions about cheese making but since we had showed up unannounced at the end of a busy workday we made our way to the door.

Before leaving, I asked if we could come back on our way home in a week to do an interview. Robert agreed and pointed to the phone number printed on the receipt for the cheese. Above the number were the times he would be in the cheese plant to answer the phone.

We returned a week later to find Robert once again cleaning up, this time an

“You must know as well as I that anything the government touches loses its soul”

Robert Kauffman

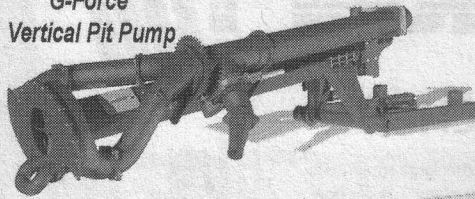
hour before lunch. We were treated to an in-depth tour of the cheese plant and saw the whole ageing and storage area as Robert discussed all of the varieties of cheese they were producing. A new addition was hard, aged goat cheese. Bright white wheels were ageing along with the yellow cows' milk cheeses.

This time, we got to see the inside of the ice storage room. Robert said that it holds 45 tons of ice and lasts all year. Three teams of horses and about 12 men can harvest enough ice to fill it in a single day. Inspecting the foot-thick foam insulation above the ice, I thought of what a practical blend of old and new this was. There was no sawdust insulation in this icehouse. On December 1, we saw just a few blocks of ice left, almost 11 months after the icehouse had last been filled.

As Robert nudged the old ice with his boot, he said that even if he had electricity, he would continue using the ice. He told us that early on he used a gas powered compressor to cool the cheese. But the constant noise, breakdowns, and fuel consumption were a great strain on his nerves and finances. The ice is quiet, does not break down, and does not cost

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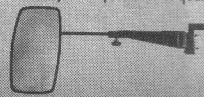
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Back in the cheese room, I asked Robert about the regulations he faces from the State. He said that when they started planning this project they expected to be handed 500 pages of rules and regulations. Instead, Robert said the inspectors have been extremely easy to work with. They were told to get started building the plant and that the inspectors would check in from time to time. The inspectors also told them that as long as the cheese was kept cold, the use of ice would be fine. I could not help but wonder what a boom there would be in family-scaled agriculture if inspectors like this were the norm elsewhere.

HAPPY PIGS

Next we went out to see the hogs. Robert feeds them grain soaked in whey, a protein-rich by-product of cheese making. They looked healthy, bright eyed, and calm. Deeply bedded on abundant clean straw, this was another example of how they do things so well in Smyrna Mills.

Robert is still searching for a convenient way to market pork. He would prefer to sell whole animals rather than meat by the cut. This led us to a discussion about marketing in general. He said that the reason they started making cheese was to gain access to consumers in urban centres to the south, where there are people eager to pay for high quality food.

The demand for the cheese has been strong enough that Robert is using every drop of milk his father's herd of 30 cows produces. Another dairy farmer in the community was about to start shipping milk to the cheese plant, and the year before a goat milk dairy from yet another family in the community had started shipping.

FOOTNOTE

As I write this, I am snacking on a big chunk of Sonnentag Asiago on crackers, with some homemade tomato chutney. The memories of Smyrna Mills add an extra dimension to the wonderfully nutty taste of this grass fed, raw milk cheese.

(David Greenberg farms and writes from his home in Centre Burlington, N.S.) ●