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Ernest Brog:

Bringing Swiss Cheese to Star Valley, Wyoming

*by Alexandra Carlile,
Adam Callister, and Quinn Galbraith*

I. Introduction

Star Valley is a small community on the western side of Wyoming, today consisting of the towns Alpine, Afton, Thayne, and others. The area, sometimes known as “Little Switzerland,” is a thriving community with a newfound focus on tourism and other businesses and services.¹ Star Valley was originally settled by pioneers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1870s.² At the time the area was considered the frontier of settlement in the American West, in which, according to one current Star Valley resident, “people were just trying to eke out a living.”³ With harsh winters and snow so deep that it completely covered fences and signposts, survival was difficult. Star Valley was sometimes known in those early times as “Starve Valley,” and residents would often have to snowshoe for miles to bring their families flour from the railhead. Residents tended to be farmers with large families who relied on their own farming and cattle for food and sustenance. This resulted in a large number of farmers becoming involved in dairy farming, which would become even more significant in later years.⁴

¹ “Star Valley History,” *Star Valley Wyoming*, Accessed September 27, 2019, <http://www.starvalleywy.com/History/>.

² “Star Valley History.”

³ Fred Brog (Brog’s son) in discussion with Quinn Galbraith, September 2019.

⁴ Fred Brog.

In 1896, long before world wars or the invention of the Model T Ford, Ernest Brog was born in Switzerland, where his family had been making cheese for over 300 years.⁵ Young Ernest spoke French, German, and Italian, and spent his youth traveling through Europe. He graduated from a cheesemaking school and was considered a master cheesemaker. When he was about 21 years old, Ernest felt limited in the small area of Switzerland and immigrated to the United States to seek greater opportunities. He initially moved to Madison, Wisconsin, an area with a large population of Swiss immigrants. After a year or two, Ernest began to feel that the land of opportunity was the West, where fewer cheesemakers worked. The other Swiss immigrants in Wyoming challenged Ernest. They argued that making Swiss cheese so far west would be impossible; Ernest set out to prove them wrong.⁶

Ernest headed west and ended up in the Driggs and Alta area of Idaho where he met the Kaufman family. The Kaufmans had emigrated from Switzerland as well, largely due to religious persecution arising from becoming members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They had settled in the Idaho area because the mountains reminded them of their high-altitude home. Rudolph Kaufman hired Ernest to make Swiss cheese for him. This was initially a successful arrangement, but was cut short when Ernest eloped with Rudolph's daughter Martha. She was 16 at the time, and he was 26. The couple were married and traveled to Rexburg, Idaho, and then Montana before ending up in Star Valley, Wyoming.⁷ Over the next few decades, Ernest would change the course of life in the valley.

II. Cheese

The biggest contribution of Ernest Brog to Star Valley was his innovative approach to Swiss cheese. Brog's efforts as manager of the Star Valley Swiss Cheese Company would bring national fame to Star

⁵ "Swiss Cheese Helps Eyesight," *Star Valley Independent* (Star Valley, Wyoming), March 13, 1941.

⁶ Fred Brog.

⁷ Fred Brog.



Ernest Brog

Valley, Wyoming.⁸ Ernest, who was invited to Star Valley by a group of dairy farmers from Freedom, Wyoming, organized a farmers' cooperative upon his arrival.⁹ Ernest himself was in charge of purchasing, installing, and overseeing, the cheese-making operation without ready access to water, electricity, or sanitation systems; he would also be-

⁸Howard McKim, "Thayne," in *Star Valley and its Communities*, ed. Lee R. Call (Afton: Star Valley Independent, 1963), 158.

⁹"Ernest & Martha Brog History in Freedom, Idaho (Wyoming)," in *The History of the Community and Families of Freedom, Wyoming and Idaho*, ed. Lorna Haderlie (2008), 21-2.

come responsible for cutting, hauling, and contracting the wood supply for the boiler.¹⁰ Ernest promised the farmers that he could pay them double for their milk by selling it as Swiss cheese.¹¹ Under Ernest's supervision, the first Swiss cheese was made in Wyoming on August 26, 1926.¹²

That first load of cheese was driven miles over fields that were three to four feet deep in snow using seven teams of horses. The group had to travel around 50 miles to get from Freedom, Wyoming, to the nearest railhead in Soda Springs, a trip that would have taken about a week. Due to the cold temperatures, the bill of lading was marked "frozen cheese," so when the cheese arrived to the wholesaler in Los Angeles, he was only willing to pay grinder's price for it. Upon receiving a telegram with this news, Ernest himself hopped on a train, headed to Los Angeles, and sold the cheese in person, receiving the full price merited by the quality of the cheese and necessitated by the promises he had made to the farmers. Ernest's quick thinking and ingenuity resulted in a high profit for both himself and the farmers, and Ernest was, therefore, able to successfully begin his Swiss cheese business.¹³

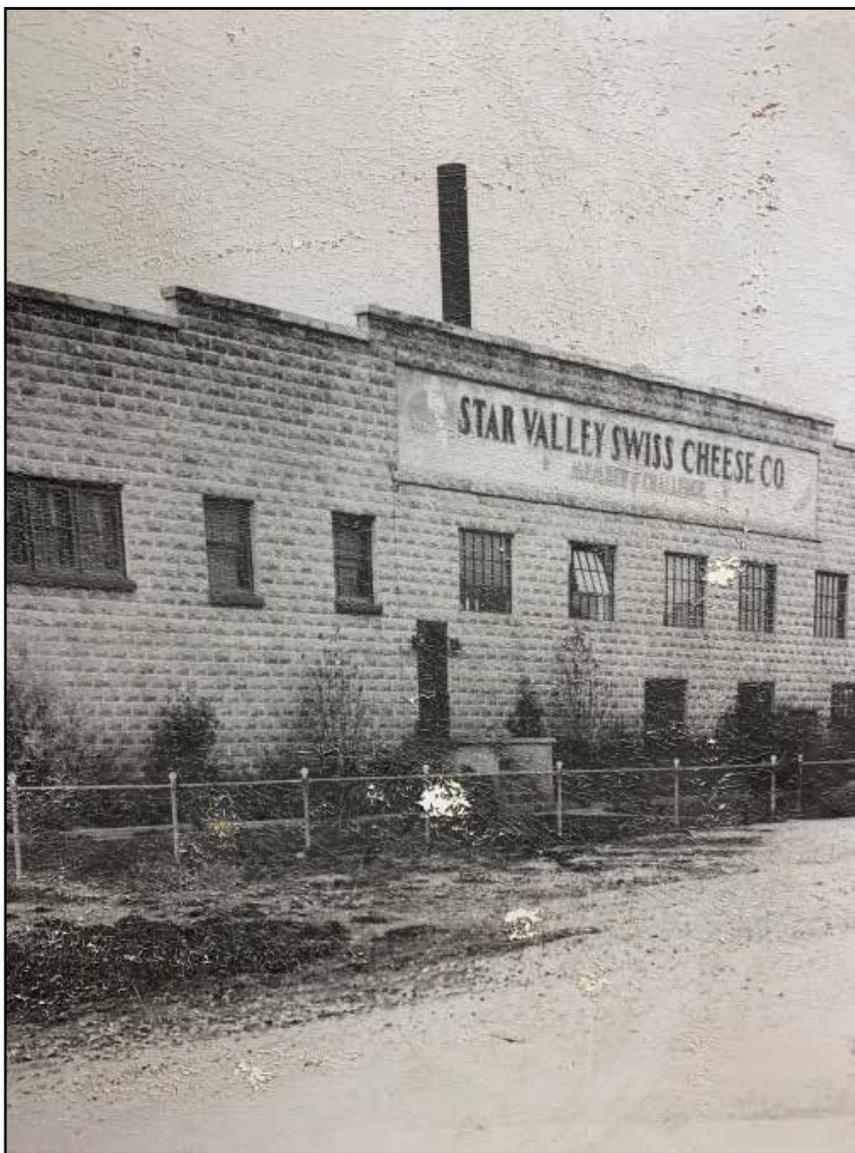
Once Ernest became manager of the Star Valley Swiss Cheese Company, he incorporated aspects of his cheese-based education and modern technology to create an efficient yet quality system for making the Swiss cheese. By 1962, Ernest had a precise system of operation. Each morning, eight milk trucks which carried almost 80,000 pounds of milk per day, would bring the milk from the dairy farms to the factory. The milk was sampled, weighed, and heat separated, after which it was treated with heat and standardized. Electronic equipment would then stir and cut the resultant curd which was piped into smaller vats to be pressed into 85 pound blocks (or, as happened earlier in Ernest's management, 185 pound wheels). The blocks of cheese would be placed in brine solution for 36 hours and then wrapped, boxed, and placed in the

¹⁰"Ernest & Martha Brog History," 22.

¹¹Fred Brog.

¹²Elmina Papworth, Rosella Crook, Fern Hyer, Bessie Merritt, Ila Wilkes, Phillis Linford, Howard V. McKim, "Economic Development," in *Star Valley and its Communities*, ed. Lee R. Call (Afton: Star Valley Independent, 1963), 48.

¹³Fred Brog.



curing room. A 72° F temperature allowed for bacterial growth, which created the eyes in the cheese. After six weeks, the cheese was moved to coolers for aging; it would be sold after 60-70 days, or two to six months if it was sold through the storeroom.¹⁴ Ernest initially made

¹⁴ Papworth, *et al.*, 48-9.

cheese in blocks rather than round wheels. His son-in-law believed that this was a practice that Ernest himself developed, and he would later be sued by Kraft for the rights to it. According to the Brog family, Ernest won that legal disagreement.¹⁵

Ernest brought a spirit of innovation to his work in the cheese industry. Initially, frogs and snakes were occasionally found in the milk due to the cooling process in which open pails of milk were placed in the creek. These accidental additions to the milk had to be screened out at the cheese factory.¹⁶ As a result, Ernest began to provide filter discs to the milk producers, which created a cleaner milk supply and, therefore, a higher quality cheese product.¹⁷ Later on, after the invention of penicillin, antibiotics in the milk began changing the cheese's quality and flavor; Ernest had to use his chemistry skills, developed years previously during his education in cheesemaking in Switzerland, to develop a new starter to return the cheese to its original taste and quality.¹⁸

Ernest's innovation also came in handy when a friend who made cheese in New Zealand came to him for help. Ernest's friend's cheese starter had a contaminant, the source of which they were struggling to determine. Ernest was able to determine that the starter was receiving contaminants from a nearby sheep population and helped his friend solve the problem. Relating to the incident, Ernest's son-in-law said, "It was a continual challenge to keep the starter pure enough to make the right kind of cheese. It was always a problem, and that is where he excelled. He understood that."

Ernest, it would seem, had a particular talent for making and selling Swiss cheese, which was often difficult to manufacture well.¹⁹ In fact, 40 other cheese-makers accompanied Ernest from Wisconsin to make cheese in the West. Of these 41 who left Wisconsin, 39 returned to Wisconsin, declaring that "good Swiss cheese was not capable of being produced in the West."²⁰ Ernest, however, stuck it out, putting

¹⁵ Clyde Stock (Brog's son-in-law), in discussion with Adam Callister, August 2018.

¹⁶ Fred Brog.

¹⁷ "Ernest & Martha Brog History," 22.

¹⁸ Clyde Stock.

¹⁹ Clyde Stock.

²⁰ "Ernest & Martha Brog History," 24.

his Swiss-developed skills to good use and making Swiss culture more accessible to rural America.

III. Community

Beyond his economic impact on Star Valley, Ernest Brog was an active participant in the Star Valley community, developing programs and ideas that would help the people of the area for years throughout his life and after his death.

One of the most significant impacts of Ernest Brog on the Star Valley community was his work in introducing electricity to their rural areas. Of his father, Fred Brog said, “Probably the biggest focus other than Swiss cheese in his life was what he did to electrify the Star Valley and Jackson Hole area.” Prior to other electrical access, Ernest had created his own electrical generator by burning coke (a fuel derived from coal) and quaking aspens to produce steam, which would turn a turbine and power his plant.²¹ Ernest had installed individual power plants for each of his cheese factories, but there was a clear economic benefit to be had in providing better access to electricity throughout the community an “urgent need” to provide it for dairy manufacturing and other industries.²² Congress had passed the Rural Electrification Act (REA) in 1937; this act allowed cooperatives to borrow from the government in order to provide rural areas with electricity.²³ Ernest himself traveled to Washington, D.C., and personally negotiated with Senator Joseph O’Mahoney to obtain REA funding for the Star Valley community.²⁴ Without the REA, Star Valley would not have been able to afford to electrify its countryside, due to the high cost of wiring distribution lines across the farms.²⁵ Ernest would later name his youngest daughter Rea, in honor of this national act that would provide so many opportunities for the Star Valley residents.²⁶

²¹ Fred Brog.

²² Papworth, *et al.*, p. 65.

²³ “Ernest & Martha Brog History,” 23.

²⁴ Fred Brog.

²⁵ Fred Brog.

²⁶ Clyde Stock.

Ernest was, therefore, a founding member of Lower Valley Power & Light, Inc., the efforts of which resulted in many rural parts of Star Valley receiving electricity late in 1938.²⁷ Ernest, himself, was given the opportunity to flip the switch of the first electrical light in the Mormon Cultural Hall.²⁸ The Lower Valley cooperative established a program to obtain bids for wiring individual houses for electricity, and opened a store that sold electrical appliances and fixtures.²⁹ By late 1951, access to electricity was almost universal across rural Star Valley, and Lower Valley Power & Light has grown ever since.³⁰ The company still exists today as Lower Valley Energy, and leadership of the group remains in the Brog family, with Ernest's youngest son Fred as chairman.³¹ As stated by the Lower Valley Energy cooperative itself, Ernest and others' early work in electricity "was a major factor in the progress and growth of the valley and its communities, bringing practically an entire new way of life. . . . Residents have felt a keen appreciation for the efforts of Lower Valley Energy."³²

Following the electrification of Star Valley, life was much easier for the community's residents. For one thing, access to electricity allowed Star Valley residents to pump water from aquifers, giving farmers the critical access to water that they needed.³³ Electricity allowed farmers to milk the cows in light or by using electrical pumps; this resulted in a purer product that made better cheese.³⁴ Electricity also allowed farmers to store their milk at cooler temperatures.³⁵ All of these factors allowed Ernest's Swiss cheese business to thrive under the influence of electricity.

²⁷ "History," Lower Valley Energy, Accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.lven-energy.com/about-us/history/>.

²⁸ "Ernest & Martha Brog History," 23.

²⁹ Orval C. Harrison, *History of Star Valley*, (Salt Lake City: Artistic Printing Company, 2015), 107.

³⁰ "History."

³¹ "Board of Directors," Lower Valley Energy, Accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.lvenenergy.com/about-us/board-of-directors/>.

³² "History."

³³ Fred Brog.

³⁴ Fred Brog.

³⁵ Fred Brog.

Ernest Brog himself ensured that the turbines, bought by REA funding, continued to regularly produce electricity. The turbines were turned by the Salt River. However, due to extremely low temperatures in Star Valley in winter months, the river would frequently freeze over. In those parts of the year, Ernest and his daughter Rea would row a rowboat up and down the Salt River to keep the ice broken up so that the farmers could have electricity the next morning.³⁶ This story illustrates not only Ernest's ingenuity, but also his dedication to the community and its needs.

Beyond the grand effect of providing electricity, Ernest had an effect on various other aspects of Star Valley life. One of his strongest desires for the community was the completion of a paved road between the cities of Freedom and Wayan. The last section of oiled road was completed within Ernest's lifetime. It has since become a main thoroughfare for tourists and others traveling to and from the valley.³⁷ Ernest Brog also introduced the hot lunch program in Freedom schools using his strong political contacts.³⁸ His daughter Rea said, "He thought if kids were given at least one good meal a day, they'd be able to learn better," and his son-in-law Clyde believed that Ernest had popularized the program in Washington, D.C.³⁹ Ernest was an active participant in the community, and he often acted as a spokesperson for its needs. His close ties with Kraft and Challenge dairy companies allowed him to increase business within the community, and these connections helped him network with Congress and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This influence is part of the reason Ernest was able to push for initiatives like electricity and the hot lunch program.⁴⁰

Brog also participated in the community in a variety of smaller, yet still significant, ways. For example, in 1937, Ernest purchased the right to brand all Star Valley high school teams; he named them the Cheesemakers, a name that would stick until 1948.⁴¹ Brog made sig-

³⁶ Fred Brog.

³⁷ "Ernest & Martha Brog History," 24.

³⁸ "Ernest & Martha Brog History," 23.

³⁹ Clyde and Rea Stock (Brog's son-in-law and daughter) in discussion with Adam Galbraith, May 2018.

⁴⁰ Clyde and Rea Stock.

⁴¹ *History of Star Valley*, 393.

nificant financial contributions to the construction of the local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) church building, despite not joining the church himself until much later in his life, when he was 88 years old.⁴² He personally built the fence around the church and ordered the copper steeple, making the church a significant and visibly noticeable aspect of the cityscape.⁴³ Brog also supported the movie theater in Thayne, attending movies at least three times per week on a regular basis.⁴⁴ Additionally, he purportedly often acted as a “water diviner” for free in the community, using a willow rod to determine underground sources of water.⁴⁵ Ernest also frequently transported people to the hospital in his car; this included many women in labor and recent accident victims.⁴⁶ He was a frequent interviewee for the local newspaper, *Star Valley Independent*, which consequently was able to publish several articles on his life and opinions. A quick search of the newspaper’s archives states that “Ernest Brog” has been referenced in 904 of the newspaper’s records. In many ways, the newspaper and the community considered him to be a bit of a local celebrity, featuring him as the “Mystery Personality of the Week” in the local competition.⁴⁷

Ernest’s wife, Martha Kaufman Brog, was a significant member of the community as well. Martha had been born in Midway, Utah, only a few weeks after her parents moved from Switzerland. She too came from a cheese-making family, although her family made Swiss cheese for their own consumption and not for commercial sales.⁴⁸ In Star Valley, Martha ran the local restaurant while her son Frank managed the cheese production. While selling basic food items like hamburgers, Martha was also able to increase the sales of her famous pie and Ernest’s Swiss cheese by providing little samples with the food she served.⁴⁹ Her innovations, therefore, assisted Ernest’s business while

⁴² Fred Brog.

⁴³ Rea Stock.

⁴⁴ Clyde and Rea Stock.

⁴⁵ Clyde and Rea Stock.

⁴⁶ “Ernest & Martha Brog History,” 23.

⁴⁷ “Ernest Brog, MP of the Week, “Made First Swiss Cheese in Star Valley,” *Star Valley Independent* (Afton, WY), Nov. 29, 1962.

⁴⁸ Clyde and Rea Stock.

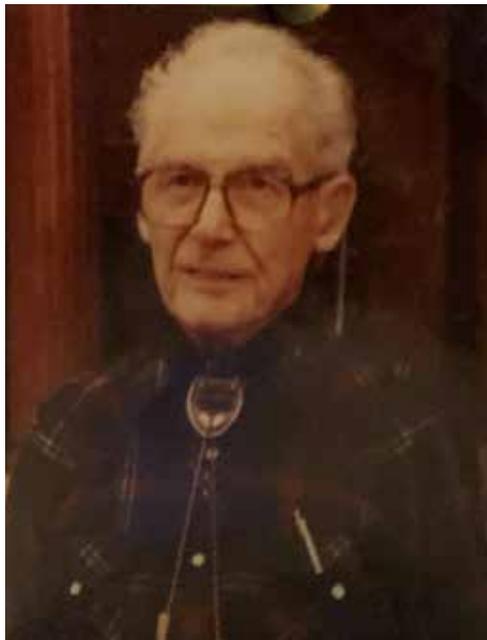
⁴⁹ Clyde and Rea Stock.

providing a warm, friendly environment for customers and the community.

Ernest's descendants argue that everything he did was for the good of the community. His son-in-law, Clyde, contends that Ernest could have been a millionaire "many times over" if he had kept electricity and other business ventures in his own name. By choosing to build the community using co-ops instead of for-profit companies, Ernest was able to spread the benefits of his innovation. As Clyde said, "He was community-minded . . . and financially it was a tremendous mistake. He was a very generous person, he wasn't a greedy individual—a very generous person, very community-minded."⁵⁰ Regardless of Ernest's motives, the fact remains that this innovative Swiss immigrant was able to make remarkable and extensive improvements to the Star Valley community because he was such a strong participant. As the *Star Valley Independent* says, he "undoubtedly brought more fame to Star Valley than any other man."⁵¹

IV. Ernest's Legacy/Conclusion

Ernest's long-reaching legacy within the Star Valley community suggests that inviting the innovative Swiss to help their dairy economy was a significant positive decision for the area. Ernest's cheese business boosted the economy, allowing the dairy farmers to make more money off their milk while encouraging them



⁵⁰ Clyde and Rea Stock.

⁵¹ "Ernest Brog, MP of the Week."

to improve their milk quality. Ernest was also an active member of a wide variety of aspects of the Star Valley community, from movies to church to electricity. Star Valley, Wyoming, is what it is today because of Ernest Brog. He brought his Swiss spirit of hard work and innovation to the valley in order to shape it from a small rural area to a thriving economy and community.

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