



# PIONEER BUTTER PRODUCTION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Butter was an important commodity for early pioneers in BC. The first known butter production in BC took place in the late 1820's at the Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) Fort Langley. The HBC wanted to reduce their posts' dependence on imported foodstuffs such as grain, pork, and butter. The HBC also had a contract to supply butter and other foods to the Russian America Company in Alaska.

Butter was an important food because it was easy to store and transport and because it was a very concentrated source of energy for the men who worked at the forts and the voyageurs that carried the freight and paddled the canoes. A voyageur paddling a canoe and carrying freight over long portages would burn 5000 calories per day. Butter has 3200 calories per pound. Butter also provided an excellent source of vitamin A, which was lacking in the diet of early pioneers and explorers.

Until butter was available, pemmican had been the staple food for early voyageurs and pioneers. Its preparation was quite labor intensive and inconsistent. Pemmican did contain high calorie fat but this fat had to be rendered from wild animals. Butter production, although labor intensive by today's standards, was much easier to produce, more consistent and reliable than pemmican. Cows would easily produce milk and cream from the grass they grazed in the nearby Fort Langley meadows and pastures. In the winter, the cows continue to produce milk and cream from hay put up in the barns during the summer. With the arrival of dairy cattle, pioneers now had a year round reliable source of nutritious and tasty milk and butter.

The cows were milked by hand morning and evening. Hand milking a cow took up to 10 minutes each so one hand milker could spend up to 4 hours a day to milk 10 or 12 cows. The milk was stored in the wooden pails in shallow setting ditches called pancheons, where the milk was left to cool and the cream allowed to rise to the top of the pail. After about half a day, the cream was skimmed off using wooden or metal skimmers and put into cream pails and kept until churning day. In the warm summer, butter was likely churned twice a week but with the cooler winters, cream kept longer and butter could be churned weekly or every other week.

On churning day, the butter maker would pump the churn handle for 30 to 60 minutes to produce a few pounds of butter. Milk from 10 to 12 cows would produce about 5 lbs. of butter per day. The butter was then stored in butter bags, pails or cans and could be stored for many months and transported long distances.

Butter making took time and energy but needed only simple equipment. The coopers (barrel makers) at Fort Langley likely made the wooden milk pails and cream churns for the dairy farm. The early BC pioneers used simple plunge churns easily made from wood barrel staves.



The base of the churn was a tall narrow barrel with a wooden lid. The lid had a hole in the top for the plunger. The plunger was a long wooden dowel with a wooden cross attached to the end of the dowel. The cross would be put into the barrel with the cream and the dowel would stick up through the hole in the lid.

The butter maker would move the plunger up and down vigorously and the constant mixing would cause the butterfat to separate from the liquid and clump together into clobbs of butter. At the end of the churning, the butter maker would have butter and buttermilk. The buttermilk could be consumed fresh or fed to pigs or just thrown out.

**Dairy Industry Historical Society of BC**