

Milking the Show

One of the many innovations at the new Sydney Showground at Sydney Olympic Park was a purpose-built milking parlour. Before then, exhibitors made their own milking arrangements, and demonstrations for the public were provided by two maverick sisters from the back of a trailer.

WORDS VICKI HASTRICH



Picture this. An early autumn morning, misty. In the cattle sheds at Moore Park Showground, people are beginning to stir. The sound of a broom. The random bellow of a cow. Someone banging a rake on a wheelbarrow as they muck out the stalls. In the alleyways between sheds, the shadowy figures of boys briefly appear, swinging billy cans, dodging puddles. They're Paddington boys. They've slipped in under fences and by secret ways Paddington boys are born to know: they've come for milk.

For decades and decades these daily visitors were part of the living ecosystem of the Show, and unofficially welcome. Dairy cattle exhibitors, who must continue to milk their cows during Showtime, were glad to give milk away, rather than see it poured down the drain. Campers on the ground came with empty bottles and buckets. Pig exhibitors also called by for a share – for their pigs. But waste was still inevitable, and in post-war times increasingly so. Eventually, when metropolitan milk processing and distribution improved

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and we all got wealthier, the Paddington boys stopped coming.

Within living memory, exhibitors hand-milked their cows, but as portable milking machines became available, people brought them along, setting them up in their own stalls.

As with many other sectors, the dairy industry regrouped after WWII to go through a rapid phase of modernisation. In New South Wales, the organising body of the industry was the NSW Milk Board. Along with the government, it encouraged improvements to breed stock and yields through the establishment of an experimental AI stock breeding centre at Graham Park in Berry, the first of its kind in Australia.

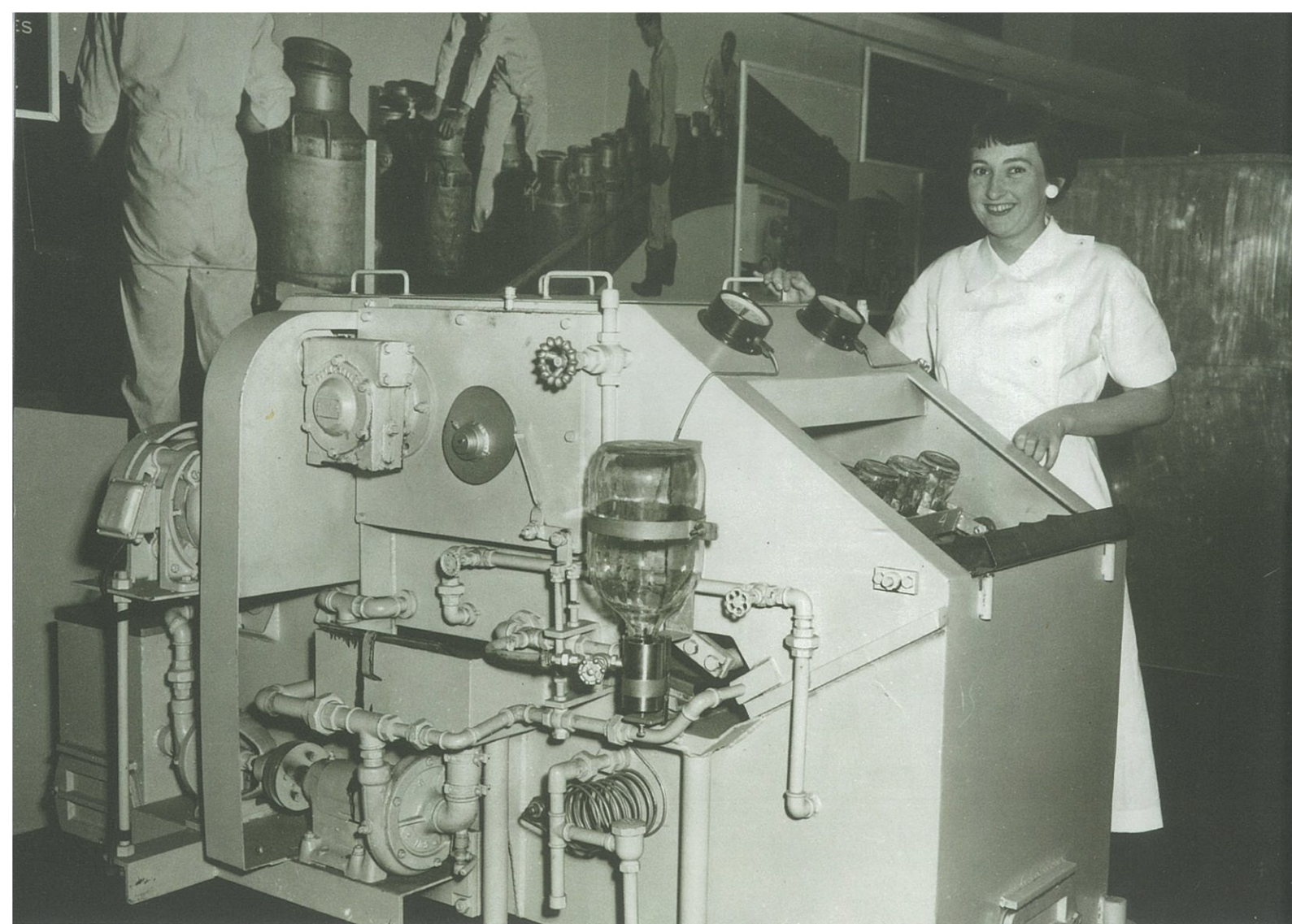
Thanks to a post-war population explosion, demand for milk continually escalated and the Milk Board was flat out, seeing to the expansion of distribution networks, in the regions, as

well as Sydney's growing suburbs.

Money was poured into milk promotion, and at the Showground, the Board sponsored a new Dairy Hall, the interiors of which were superbly designed. Sleek 1950s lines dominated, and the milk bar there, which served milkshakes and ice-creams, was a thing to behold. This was the golden age of the milk bar, a time when milk was not just a necessity; it was a fashionable product.

In the Dairy Hall there were informational displays and demonstrations of milk testing and bottle washing, but no provision for any live milking.

As Australia further urbanised, milking was something people needed to see. During the 1960s and '70s, for the first time, generations of children began to grow up not knowing how milk got into bottles. Some schools went on excursions to the Rotolactor, a grand-scale mechanised dairy at Camden Park



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Estate, but the innovative dairy, designed in the round, fell into decline.

Educational information needed to come closer to the people and be more entertaining.

ENTER ELIZABETH AND ANNETTE THOMSON.

The women were Bringelly dairy farmers. When labour was hard to come by during WWII, the two sisters helped out on their family property, and when their father died in 1952, they took full control.

They inherited a 'rainbow' herd, but soon began building a stud herd of Holstein-Friesians. By the late 1950s they were showing their cattle at local shows and in 1964 tried their luck in Sydney. Over time, they hauled in many ribbons, but a bigger show-bug was to bite them.

The Thomsons came from affluence (Lizzie went to finishing school in Paris;

and a cosmopolitan aunt of theirs was Princess Grace's lady-in-waiting), but the sisters were down-to-earth by nature. Everyone loved 'the Girls', as they were universally known, for their enthusiasm and hard work – and their cheeky sense of humour.

When a friend, Lennie Ridge, came to the sisters saying organisers of the 1975 Hawkesbury Show had a space to fill, the three decided to try to replicate a milking display the sisters had seen while travelling in Canada. It was rustic – a circus, they later laughed – with cows tied up to gates and the two women struggling to stop poorly erected milking machines from collapsing. It didn't matter. The concept was a howling success and the institution of the Milky Way was born.

With the approval of the Milk Board, the sisters professionalised the set-up, designing and building a trailer to make

the display fully mobile. Then they took to the road, touring schools and small shows. In 1976, they brought the Milky Way, as it was dubbed, to Sydney for the Show. And they came again. And again. Every year for next two decades. It was an extraordinarily generous gesture and almost a full-time job. They financed the display, trained the young people assisting, and gave the spiel to audiences themselves. Annie did most of the commentary, and was the mastermind behind their Bringelly breeding program, while Lizzie got involved in the administration side of the Holstein Association. She became its first woman president, and in that capacity was the first woman to ever attend the annual Breed Presidents' meeting convened by the RAS of NSW.

To regular Showgoers, the Milky Way trailer was a familiar sight. It was fitted with a four-stand electric milking machine. Assistants prepared the cows, then during milking, milk could be seen flowing through lines to a 150-gallon refrigerated vat – just like on a dairy farm. In its lifetime the Milky Way travelled many miles: to Canberra Show, Melbourne and Adelaide; it



even crossed the Nullarbor when the Girls took it to Perth as part of WA's sesquicentenary celebrations.

Despite being in their late seventies by the time they retired, the hard work of it all never fazed the Thomsons. For years, they stayed in a caravan on the ground during the Show, always ready to participate in whatever fun was going around.

With the relocation of Sydney Showground to Sydney Olympic Park, milking arrangements at the Show were long overdue a rethink. A crucial sponsorship deal was struck with Dairy Farmers to build a state of the art working dairy incorporating the very latest equipment and technology. It would answer everyone's needs. In the dairy, which was capable of handling 300 cows in four and a half hours, all the exhibitors' cattle could be milked. With proper milk storage, and with Dairy Farmers contracted to remove the milk and pay for it, the days of waste were over. Given that some 500 litres are produced during each Show, it was a breakthrough which significantly helped exhibitors.

As part of the deal, the RAS became responsible for running the educational

The 1950s was the golden age of the mik bar and hanging out together enjoying milkshakes and ice-creams... milk was not just a necessity, it was a highly fashionable product

side of things, devising public talks utilising the new facility. At last, Showgoers could see the nearest thing to a commercial operation in action.

At the inaugural 1998 Show, crowds packed in to watch the five daily sessions. It was more popular than expected, causing visibility and congestion issues. These days the tiered seating provides a welcome spot to rest while families learn all about dairying and the processes milk products go through to get to their tables.

For Elizabeth and Annette Thomson, the Milky Way was over. But as ever, their response was positive.

'Well, it was magnificent,' Annie said. 'We would teach people about milking and the cows – they're such splendid beasts, really. But after 20 years, we decided perhaps it was time the dairy industry

went in for a younger image so that it wasn't just old fuddy-duddies like us.'

In 2001 the sisters were made Show Legends, and in 2004 the ultimate gong came their way when both were awarded Order of Australia Medals for their four-decade contribution to the Show movement and the dairy industry. The Thomsons, then octogenarians, were delighted, saying they had no regrets about the many kicks they'd received along the way from their bovine charges.

This year, the milking parlour celebrated its twentieth anniversary. But stay tuned. Some folks in the know suggest it might soon be time to update the facility. The dream is for Sydney to be the first Royal to introduce the public to the next big development – robot milking.

The Paddington boys of yesteryear would surely be gobsmacked. ■