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VERMONT *Maple* SUGAR MAKERS' ASSOCIATION

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ORIGINS OF THE VT MAPLE CREEMEE

Matthew M. Thomas

There is no question that Vermont maple producers are familiar with the maple creemee and have enjoyed many of the soft-serve ice cream or ice milk treats over the years. However, the origins of the creemee name and the introduction of Vermont's unique maple flavored creemee are less well known. For starters, the spelling of the name itself is somewhat of a mixed bag. While the most common spelling is creemee with two Es and no hyphen, over the years the name has been spelled a variety of ways, ranging from creamie to creamee to cree-mee. As far as the "correct" spelling goes, it seems that as long as it sounds the same, you can spell it any number of ways.

Some have offered the somewhat romantic suggestion that the source for the creemee name came from neighboring French-speaking Québec, where the words for ice cream are *crème glacée*, from which a shortened contraction could get you to cree-mee or creamee. Others have suggested that the creemee name is unique to Vermont. However, a little historical research tells us that the creemee name for soft serve ice cream has been around in many places in the United States, including Vermont, for over 70 years.

Soft-serve machines were invented in the late 1930s and by the early 1940s, there were a handful of soft-serve stands in the mid-west states. Following the end of World War II, soft-serve stands began to appear in much greater numbers, usually as small, seasonal walk-up stands. Interestingly, until the late 1940s, some states and local communities had regulations prohibiting the sale of soft-serve ice milk in individual servings. Some ice cream manufacturers were concerned that lower priced ice milk, with its lower milk-fat content was falsely being sold as ice cream, which by law had to have at least 10% milkfat. To protect their interests, the ice cream lobby promoted rules that required all ice milk to be sold only in clearly labeled packages declaring the contents to be ice milk. As a result, these packaging regulations prevented the sale of ice milk in individual cones or bowls to customers.

Technological improvements in soft-serve machines in the late 1940s fueled a growing interest in opening soft serve stands and led to an elimination of the ice milk rules. In return, a soft-serve explosion began around 1950 and continued for the next couple of years, when a handful of entrepreneurial businessmen promoted the opening of franchised soft-serve stands under names like Dari-Freeze, Tastee Freez, Dairy Queen, and most notably, Cree-Mee. In 1947 there were a few hundred soft serve stands around the country, but by 1955 there were estimated to be over 10,000 stands in operation. The Freez-King Company, also known as the Harlee Manufacturing Company, out of Chicago, Illinois was the first to promote the Cree-Mee name as one of its soft-serve stand brand names, opening its first Cree-Mee franchise in March 1951. By the end of 1955 the company had expanded to 1,425 franchised stands, including several Cree-Mee stands in Vermont.

The first Vermont stands with Cree-Mee in their name opened around June and August of 1951 in Vergennes as the Cree-Mee Custard Store, in Manchester as Bischoff's Cree-Mee Stand, and in Burlington as Cree-Mee of Burlington. By 1952 there was also the Cree-Mee Park-Side Drive In north of Brattleboro, Lovella's Cree-Mee on the Barre-Montpelier Rd., and perhaps a few others.

The origins of the maple flavored creemee, a flavor that is truly unique to Vermont, arrived a bit later in the history of the creemee. The flavors offered in the early years of creemees were limited to vanilla and chocolate. Sometimes pineapple was on the menu as well as a weekly special flavor. However, there is no indication that maple was ever offered as a creemee flavor in Vermont (or anywhere else) until the 1980s. The maple flavored creemee was introduced by the Rutland County Maple Producers (RCMP) at the Vermont State Fair in Rutland in 1981. Research discovered the earliest mention of this event appeared in a September 5, 2007, letter to the editor of the Rutland Daily Herald written by Pam Green, a Rutland County maple producer and member of the International Maple Hall of Fame. When asked where she learned of the date and details of this event, Pam graciously shared that she learned of the RCMP origins of the maple creemee from the late Wilson "Bill" Clark, long-time Rutland County



CONTENTS

ORIGINS OF THE VT MAPLE CREEMEE	1	FOOD ALLERGENS & MAPLE	14
AWARDS RECAP	4	MEET A SUGAR MAKER	16
COUNTY UPDATE	5	RECIPE	19
REMEMBRANCES	6	GRADING KITS ARE READY!	20
ORGANIC CURIOUS?	9	LABELING MAPLE FLAVORED PRODUCTS	23
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE THE BIG E!	10		

...continued from cover

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FREEZER**

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DELICIOUS**

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MALTS - SHAKES
QUARTS - PINTS
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**CREE-MEE
CUSTARD STORE**
Main St. Vergennes

maple producer, past president of the Vermont Maple Sugarmakers Association. Clark told Pam Green how C. Blake Roy, a retired maple marketing specialist for the Vermont Department of Agriculture, suggested in 1981 that the RCMP sell a maple flavored creemee at the Vermont State Fair.

Taking Blake's brainchild to the next step, Clark and RCMP president, Truman Young, brought the idea along with a few gallons of B Grade maple syrup to Tom Seward at Seward's Dairy in Rutland, Vermont who was making vanilla and chocolate creemee mixes for sale to vendors in 2.5 gallon bags. Unfortunately, C. Roy Blake and Bill Clark had passed away, but I was able to get in touch with Tom Seward, who confirmed Pam Green's story. Tom shared that at that time the RCMP had their own creemee machine at their Vermont State Fair stand and Seward's had been providing them with the mix for making their vanilla creemees which were served with maple syrup poured on top.

Tom Seward went on to say, the maple creemee mix was a special product made in small batches, 300 gallons at a time put up into 600 individual ½ gallon containers. Seward's Dairy added the maple syrup at the end of the mixing process when it was all in the pasteurization vat. It was heated to 165 for 30 minutes then cooled in a tank and packaged into paper containers. Because it was pasteurized, it had a 21-day shelf life, long enough to last for the duration of the fair. For the RCMP's maple flavored mix, it was requested that the Dairy put the mix into ½ gallon paper containers which were easier to handle by volunteers at the RCMP stand than the heavier and saggy 2.5-gallon bags. The RCMP's maple creemee was an instant hit. Seward's continued to make this maple mix exclusively for the RCMP until around 1988.

In the end, the history of the creemee is perhaps not as unique or romantic as one might expect. The basic creemee has been around in Vermont and the rest of the United States for over 70 years. Thanks to some creative minds in the Rutland County Maple Producers, the uniquely Vermont maple creemee has been a delight since 1981.

Dr. Matthew Thomas is a historian who researches and writes about all aspects of the maple syrup industry. You can learn more about his books, articles, and other publications at his Maple Syrup History website at www.maplesyruphistory.com. Matt welcomes your questions and is happy to provide advice and assistance where possible. He can be contacted by email at maplesyruphistory@gmail.com.

Left: Advertisement for the Vergennes Cree-Mee Custard Store from a June 1951 issue of the Vergennes newspaper the Enterprise and Vermonter.