



The 1930s were brutally lean years in Tennessee, just like everywhere else in the country. Employment was scarce, and most folks were left to scratch the dirt of their own homesteads — if they were lucky enough to still own any land — in an attempt to grow enough food for their families.

So in retrospect, it seems almost absurd that the daily survival of hundreds of Middle Tennesseans hinged upon the retail success of a candy bar.

Absurd, but true.



In 1923, the Milky Way candy bar was just a good idea for Frank Mars, a down-on-his-luck candy-maker from Tacoma, Wash. Although the virtually unknown Mars had failed many times

in his attempts to create a commercially popular product, the Milky Way became an overwhelming success and brought its creator both fame and fortune.

When he concocted his clever combination of chocolate and malted milk, it's doubtful that Mars envisioned himself piecing together a 2,800-acre livestock farm named after his confection. Even more unlikely was the notion that he would locate this enormous operation in the sloping hills of Giles County, Tenn., and employ hundreds of eager workers, single-handedly and quite literally throwing them a lifeline during the depths of a nationwide Depression. But seven years and millions of 5-cent candy bars later, Mars and his wife, Ethel, headed south to create an agricultural empire.

"Milky Way Farms was the biggest thing ever to happen to Giles County and probably Middle Tennessee in general," says Dean Dickey, a retired businessman who was born on the farm in 1933, the son of the Mars family's personal chauffeur. "Most people today have no idea what it was, but in those days, Milky Way was known as the 'Showplace of the South.'"

It's not often that a single farm can be credited for improving the lives of so many, but Mars' steadfast vision required mas-

sive manpower and spared no expense. Sam Collins III, son of Sam Jr., Milky Way's bookkeeper, farm manager, and resident agent, says the sheer scope of the farm's operations was almost beyond comprehension.

"Even though I know it to be true, it's hard to believe that Mr. Mars brought his vision to life," says Collins, a retired teacher and school superintendent who was born on the farm. "There were five separate livestock enterprises — beef-breeding, commercial beef production, thoroughbred horse-breeding and racing, dairy production, and commercial sheep production. At one point, there were more than 8,000 animals on the place."

Now more than 60 years since the enterprise was closed and the property sold, Milky Way Farms is largely forgotten among the "younger" generation of Middle Tennesseans — those under 70 years of age. Most of the 38 state-of-the-art livestock barns built in the 1930s have succumbed to fire or neglect, the stone walls of a few rising out of thistle and poison ivy like ancient Greek ruins. An extensive, 20-mile network of gravel roads, once crowded with livestock and delivery trucks, has largely faded back into pasture, traveled mainly by grazing deer and wild turkey.

It's almost as if the whole thing never existed but for the stacks of paper and photo evidence rescued by Sam Jr. when the farm shut its doors in 1945 and the vibrant memories of those who experienced Milky Way's glorious 15 years firsthand.

"I was very young at the time, but I can remember the camaraderie of the people who lived and worked there," says Dickey, older brother of Larry Dickey, manager of Giles Farmers Cooperative's Lynnville location. "It was almost like a little town, and everybody

was active in helping it operate. Milky Way required so much electricity and water that it had its own substation and pipeline network. Heck, the farm even had its own basketball team!"

Although Larry was not yet born when Milky Way was in operation, he grew up hearing the stories and recollections of his parents and neighbors.

"Folks always talk about the Milky Way days," he says reverently. "I've often heard my mama say that if it wasn't for Mr. Mars, a lot of people around here might have starved."

Legend has it that in 1929, Mars was on his way from Chicago to Florida, where the longtime cattle and walking horse enthusiast planned to use his newly acquired wealth to establish a farming operation. He made a fateful swing through Giles County at the suggestion of a business acquaintance whose wife was originally from the area. Mars was so taken with the landscape and natural resources — perfect for livestock production — that he immediately scrapped his Florida plans and shifted his thinking to Middle Tennessee.

After acquiring a cluster of eight farms located roughly eight miles north of Pulaski and three miles southwest of Lynnville on Highway 31, Mars hired more than 800 local residents to build barns, quarry stone, dig stumps, construct miles of fence, and rake hundreds of acres of pasture by hand.

The candy-maker (who would soon debut his next sensation: the Snickers bar, named after one of his favorite horses) often organized his employees into specialized crews. For example, one crew had the specific task of painting the 35 miles of wooden, three-plank fencing. Another group was charged with constructing some 60 cottages to house many of the full-time employees, providing them with



Current Milky Way Farms owner Billie May, seated right, visits with area residents who have family ties to the historic property. From left are Larry Dickey, manager of Giles Farmers Co-op's Lynnville store; Johnny Phelps, sports editor of the Pulaski Citizen; retired school superintendent Sam Collins III; and area businessman Dean Dickey. Behind the group in the dining room of the Marses' palatial "Clubhouse" is a 12-by-28-foot table custom-built by Johnny's grandfather, Weakley Phelps, in the early 1930s.



Clockwise from far left: The "Chandelier Horse Barn," which housed many thoroughbred champions in the 1930s and '40s, is one of only a few of the original Milky Way Farms barns still intact. Among the champions housed there was 1940 Kentucky Derby Winner Gallahadion; The famous "Crooked Sheep Barn," once featured in "Ripley's Believe it or Not," was built over the contour of a hill and housed the largest herd of Hampshire sheep in Tennessee; Sharp-edged rocks mortared into the windowsills of the sheep barn, supposedly kept predators out of the open windows. The stone walls of the barn are all that remain today; Milky Way's dairy facility boasted the first electric, underground milking system in the nation; Henry Davis, a 30-year Mars employee, cleans up "Larry Domino," one of the farm's award-winning Hereford sires; Owner Frank Mars takes a spin around one of his 5/8 mile regulation racing tracks.
— Vintage photos courtesy of Johnny Phelps and Sam Collins III

electricity and indoor plumbing — a novelty at the time. There were rock removal crews, grass-cutting crews, and thistle-cutting crews (normally reserved for the resident children). Always busy were those workers responsible for lumber, hay-baling, and road-grading duties.

Yet another crew installed the nation's very first underground, electric milking system in the newly-built dairy barn. The facility normally accommodated around 50 Holstein-Friesian cows daily. Despite its cutting-edge innovations, the dairy operation was, by comparison, one of the more modest agricultural ventures on the place, says Sam.

"The beef-breeding program was Mr. Mars' personal favorite, and Milky Way had one of the most important Hereford operations in the country," explains Sam. "At one time the herd numbered more than 1,000 head and was considered the South's finest. Those bulls won blue ribbons in some of the most prestigious livestock competitions in the country."

The beef operation featured carefully selected Hereford cattle fed for months on corn, cottonseed meal, and lespedeza hay, says Collins. As many as 20,000 choice head were slaughtered for market.

"To supplement the beef operation, Mr. Mars put together the finest Hampshire sheep herd in the state," Collins says. "Milky Way lambed more than 1,500 ewes in a season and had the largest flock in Tennessee."

The flock was housed and fed in what became one of the best-known structures of its time: the famous Crooked Sheep Barn. At the insistence of Frank Mars himself, the massive stone structure was built following the lines of a curved hill, resulting in an enormous U-shaped barn, the walls of

which still remain today. So unusual was the facility, it was featured in several of "Ripley's Believe it or Not" publications, creating interest and tourist traffic from across the country.

Milky Way also boasted a competitive thoroughbred-racing program, says Collins, and produced many winners — including 1940 Kentucky Derby champion Gallahadion and 1935 2-year-old champ Forever Yours — that were trained on two 5/8-mile race tracks.

"The stable was the country's leading money-winner one year and was second another," says Collins. "That's pretty impressive for a program that was still new. Mr. Mars didn't do anything half way."

Work on the farm began in 1930, and in all, it took hundreds of men nearly six years — during the worst financial period of America's history — to complete the monumental undertaking. At one time, Milky Way was recognized as the largest farm employer in the United States, and it's no wonder. Because he paid his employees so well, Mars was forced to cut wages due to the complaints of disgruntled local businessmen who couldn't compete. Farmers who grudgingly sold their land to the candy magnate were quickly hired and offered new accommodations for themselves and their families, enjoying amenities they might never have experienced otherwise, not to mention three "squares" daily. After the farm was completed, the Mars family employed 100 men year round and continued to trade with dozens of area farmers and businesses for hay, livestock, and supplies.

Sadly, Frank Mars was never able to fully enjoy the fruits of his labor. When he died of cancer on April 8, 1934, he was only 55, and the farm was just hitting its stride. Estimates



place more than 3,000 mourners at the funeral five days later, with hundreds of workers lining the route between the Marses' palatial home and the beloved candy-maker's hillside grave to pay their respects. Although operations continued for another 11 years, the driving force was gone, and in 1945, Ethel Mars sold the farm and returned to the family's Chicago headquarters.

In subsequent years, several individuals and groups have owned the land that most local residents still refer to as Milky Way. In 1995, the property was purchased by Buddy and Billie May, retired schoolteachers from Athens, Ala., and the two set about regaining some of the original acreage (only 232 of the 2,800 remained intact when they bought it) as well as restoring some of the surviving structures, including the majestic, Tudor-style home known as "The Clubhouse." In the late '90s, the Mays began offering the facilities as a corporate and church retreat and meeting center. Although Buddy died in 2002, Billie still makes regular visits to the property to meet with sightseers and check on things. The May family has even celebrated several Christmases at the farm and consider it an

important — albeit, recent — part of their family history.

"I just love the place," says Billie as she expertly navigates the now 900-acre farm in her four-wheel-drive vehicle. "Looking over these views, you can really understand what first captivated Frank Mars. And to think, it was all paid for a nickel at a time! It's a shame that most of us will never know what it was really like in its heyday."

But some, like Dean Dickey, do know. His favorite memory places him back on the spectacular, bustling Milky Way Farms in the early 1940s, just a boy, but proud to be residing within the boundaries of the bright, white, three-plank fences.

"On Saturdays and Sundays, I would clean up, slick my hair down, put on the best I had, and greet out-of-town visitors as they drove in," he recalls with a grin. "I'd say, 'Show you over the farm?' Well, they'd stop, and I'd end up touring them all over to these places. They'd give me a quarter, 50 cents, or maybe even a dollar, and nobody ever ran off with me!"

"That's the way I like to remember Milky Way Farms."

The Cooperator is grateful to George Rieves for his invaluable contributions to this article. For a copy of Johnny Phelps' comprehensive, 144-page history of Milky Way Farms, send \$20 to: Pulaski Publishing, 308 W. College St., Pulaski, TN 38478. You may also order by phone by calling (931) 363-3544. The book, called "Milky Way Farms," contains hundreds of photos, articles, and interviews related to the property. The fourth printing of the book will be available June 1.