

# No milksop

## The Milkweed Marks 40 Years as Dairy Industry Watch Dog

By Mark Eisen

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**Pete Hardin - Milkweed Editor  
A Consummate Watchdog**

Pete Hardin doesn't envision anyone taking over the paper. "I don't think The Milkweed is sellable. It's too personalized a product."

Forty years into defending the nation's dairy farmers, Pete Hardin is still raising hell.

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." —that famous Muhammad Ali aphorism sits atop page one of his monthly dairy report as a fair warning to all that The Milkweed is no milksop.

Year after year, Hardin has been a hard-edge voice challenging exploitative food processors, errant farm cooperatives, bullying seed companies and self-serving agricultural groups that he feels habitually abuse farmers who enrich them.

"Most of the organizations that allege to support dairy farmers suffer from mission failure," Hardin says, sounding very much like a seen-it-all judge gaveling a verdict.

The politicians and bureaucrats, both state and national, are often clueless if not hostile to the men and women minding the Guernseys and Holsteins, he adds.

Hardin runs his insurgency from his modest ranch home on 40 acres of farmland about 22 miles south of Capitol Square outside the village of Brooklyn. After four bruising decades, Hardin is a long-burning star of Wisconsin journalism.

His reporting is intensely fact-based, assiduously sourced to the small-print revelations hiding in annual

Geiger, managing editor of Hoard's Dairyman, an establishment dairy publication (headquartered down the road in Fort Atkinson), who emails me with a shrug: "I have not read The Milkweed in Years."

Hardin's voice is more important than ever. I was tempted to add "in the dairy world" but that would sell him short. With dizzying decline of newspapers as a general news source, The Milkweed is essential reading for anyone - citizen, professor, activist, politician - who wants to understand the under-reported dairy crisis.

Awash in excess supply and declining consumer demand for milk, dairy farmers are more than four years into equity-destroying, soul-crushing recession. Wisconsin as the nation's top dairy state has been slammed hard. An average of two dairy farms a day have been shutting down since Jan. 1, according to state data. By June 1, the remaining 7,722 Wisconsin dairy farms represented a 25 percent decline from June 1, 2014, figure of 10,296. Just 10 years ago, Wisconsin had twice the number of dairy farms as it does today.

Hardin, who's 70, is a Jersey boy who knows cow manure. Sussex County, where he was raised, was a hotbed of dairy farming. Long ago, New Jersey was called "The Garden State" because it trucked and trained a cornucopia of produce and fresh milk to the bustling New York boroughs. (Continued On pg. 7)

reports, non-profit disclosure statements, court cases, and federal and state crop information.

He is a go-to source for other reporters, myself included. His observations on the dairy industry periodically are featured in national reports in The Washington Post, The New York Times, Bloomberg News, and such international outlets as Canadian and Japanese public television. He was also the subject of a 1984 cover story in Isthmus.

Rick Barrett, whose own deeply sourced reporting on the dairy crisis is receiving featured play in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel points out Hardin's unique position in the dairy world.

"The farmers I meet on a day-to-day basis have a huge amount of respect for him," Barrett says. "Pete Hardin is an icon in this state. There is no question about it. Even the people who disagree with him, or who don't like his style of reporting, respect him."

Organic farming advocate Mark Kastel calls Hardin "a consummate watchdog" and a "pathological truth teller." Contrast that with Corey

The Hardin family farm dated to the 1750s. He says his great-grandfather led a three-week milk strike in 1916 that shut off the supply to New York City and ended with the farmers winning a 50 percent pay hike and his great grandpa beating an indictment for price fixing.

Hardin credits Earlham College, "a darn good Quaker liberal arts school" in Richmond, Indiana, for teaching him "to see the world as whole and to be a critical thinker." His first job after college was editing a newsletter for a financially troubled farm cooperative and that was an education in itself. "The farmers got screwed, the workers got screwed and the managers lied," he says with characteristic asperity.

Hardin came to Madison in 1976 to pursue a UW master's degree in agricultural journalism. He met and married Rachel Brickner. His wife directs the Oregon Area Senior Center. Their son, Louis, is in sales in Minneapolis. Daughter Emma Leah will be a senior in American University in Washington D.C. Neither wants to carry on dad's work. This is not unusual in farm families.

The 1984 Isthmus piece tells a doozy of a story of how Hardin, in the second year of publishing The Milkweed, got sued for a heart-stopping \$40 million for reporting how his old Co-op secured a federally insured loan to buy two Mafia-linked mozzarella cheese plants.

The Co-op cited 11 different examples of defamation. Hardin, who had based the story on documents secured through a federal Freedom of Information Act request, spent eight stress-heavy months with his lawyer marshalling his reply, while simultaneously putting out The Milkweed. In July 1982, a federal

judge upheld his attorney's motion for summary dismissal of every single count.

The case - held up as a pernicious example of how big businesses uses the courts to silence critics - drew national attention in The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Columbia Journalism Review. Hardin took a financial hit, but that hard edge of his reporting was now indelible

Years ahead of the national press, The Milkweed broke the story in 1991 of how Kraft General Foods drove down the price of cheese and milk by manipulating the National Cheese Exchange in Green Bay, a tiny market with outsized influence because it set the benchmark price for virtually all private cheese sales.

The Milkweed's most memorable reporting involved repeated exposes on recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), also known as bovine somatotrophin (bST). Developed by drug-giant Monsanto, this synthetic hormone is injected into cows to boost milk production. The Milkweed questioned its safety for humans and cows. Among the revelations based on American Cancer Society data, was detailing the correlation between rBGH's introduction and a five-year spike in milk-duct cancer in women. The ACS says the evidence is inconclusive. But health concerns about Posilac, as it is known in the marketplace, led to its banning in Canada, Europe and Australia. It is still sold to U.S. farmers.

If you sense a pattern here - that Hardin "punches up" and challenges the powerful - you've got it right. This is what separates The Milkweed from Hoard's Dairyman and other farm pubs. Hardin isn't

dependent on advertising from seed companies, implement manufacturers, chemical outlets, farm groups and the like. The Milkweed takes no advertising. Subscriptions (about 3,000 down from 5,000) pay the freight at \$80 a year.

"Pete's not beholden to the forces that other publications are," says Jan Shepel, a veteran farm reporter who writes for The Milkweed. "He takes to task people who have gotten too big for their britches. You don't see a lot of that in farm publications."

For example, the Dairy Farmers of America, the largest dairy coop in the nation, regularly draws his barbs. Hardin highlights DFA financial decisions that he feels hurts its 14,000 plus member-owners, including a recent \$950 million purchase of a processing plant that produces plant drinks that compete directly with DFA's milk business.

"I'm still trying to figure out how buying a plant-based beverage company that calls its soy, oat and almond products 'milk' helps its dairy farmers," he says. (DFA declined to comment).

Hardin is filled with tough questions like this. After 40 years covering the dairy business, he feels The Milkweed has never been better, but he is coolly realistic about the future. "I don't have an end game," he says.

Hardin pauses for a moment, then adds: "What can I say? I'll do it as long as the cash flow, my health and intellectual acuity permit it. I love what I do, and I want to see three good years for the farmers before I retire."