

The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum, and the Hamilton Field History Museum



Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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Marin French Cheese Factory

By Mike Read

Legend has it that if it hadn't been for a pretty young girl sitting in a wagon train heading West in 1852, there wouldn't be a Camembert cheese factory this side of the Mississippi.

So, credit for "The Cheese Factory" west of Novato, goes to Matilda Farley, in the historical sense at least. She was the daughter of the wagon master.

Young Jefferson A. Thompson (1827-1897), father of Jeff Thompson, (1872-1944), was caulking the wagons for crossing the river when he saw the young beauty, Matilda Farley. They were both 17 years old. So he jumped on the back of her wagon and came west.

As in a western movie, the two were married. They made their first home in Petaluma, where young Jefferson worked on dairy farms, turning down offers to work in Virginia City mines. He thought men should work on top of the ground, not under it.

The Thompsons saved their money and bought a 700-acre ranch the end of Novato Boulevard.

Today it's a 699-acre ranch known to San Francisco as a popular picnic place, where you can buy cheese.

The one lost acre is the site of the Lincoln school, a one-room grammar school attended today by Thompson's heirs. If and when the site is no longer used for school purposes, it must be deeded back to the family.

Shortly after buying the ranch in 1865, Jefferson Thompson set up a cheese factory in what was "the first basement," an important part of making "Rough et Noir" cheese today.

Facts of the Thompson Ranch

The 1850's Federal Census shows that the senior Jefferson Thompson was living in Massac, Illinois, at the age of 21. His father was Benajah Thompson age 56, a farmer with 120-acres.

Francis Farley age 26, farmer, was living in Page County, Iowa, with four kids: Catherine (Kate) age 9, Matilda age 6, Jane age 2 and William age 0.

Kate's granddaughter wrote a book in 1939 called "Kate Farley, Pioneer." The Farleys would leave Page County



Early cheese factory—This painting depicts the property around 1880, including the herd of Ayrshires which the family owned until 1927. Most of the original buildings exist today, and the cheese is still aged in the 160-year-old cellar built by Thompson.

in late May of 1852 with fifteen other Page County families. All looking for the gold in California.

In her story, she talks about the "wheelbarrow man."

"Long ago, on the Missouri, the little man had been pointed out by her father. "He's so bent on gold seeking," Father said, "that he has all of his goods in a wheelbarrow and is heading west alone."

During the next weeks, Plucky, (I think this is Jefferson) for such they had named him, had traveled along near them, but when Francis Farley had dropped back from the cholera-stricken wagon, Plucky had pushed ahead."

Plucky would be with them off and on through out the trip. When they reached Hangtown (Placerville), they heard that Plucky had reached there before them and traded his wheelbarrow for a shovel and rocker and made for the hills.

That day the Farleys saw gold being washed for the first time, just a little color in the bottom of a pan. Francis Farley watched the process a long time and then turning to his wife, he said: "Flour is selling for a dollar a pound, Mother. There's real gold in flour. Will you mind much if we don't meddle with this dirt? I guess I like the tidiness of planted acres."

Marin French Cheese Factory



Jefferson A. Thompson

They would end up living in Sonoma and Marin County.

Francis Farley Dies

Francis Farley would die in 1891. His obituary would read: "Francis H. Farley, an old-time resident of Marin County, died at the residence of his grandson, Robert Brown, in Hicks Valley. He came to the Golden State in 1852 and located in Vallejo township (Sonoma), but afterward, became a dairyman in Marin County. The funeral took place at the residence of his daughter, Mrs. J. (Kate) MacBrown of Petaluma."

1860 Federal census showed Jefferson Thompson in the town of Sonoma as a dairyman with one laborer, Robert Glenn. The Farleys would be in Vallejo, Sonoma, (General Vallejo's adobe home in Petaluma) with eight kids including Kate, now 18, and Matilda 14. The Farleys moved to the adobe in 1859. Francis' wife Elizabeth would die in 1865, leaving Francis Farley with ten children, all alive at his death in 1891.

November 1863 - Civil War duty papers would show Jeff A. Thompson in San Antonio, Marin, a dairyman and married.

Jefferson Thompson would marry Farley's daughter Matilda (17) around 1863, they had a daughter, Fannie age 5 in the 1870 census.

The ranch Thompson would buy in 1864 or 1865 was part of the Corte Madera de Novato Rancho.

In 1876 J.A. Thompson would donate one acre of land to the Lincoln School District, along with J. McBrown and L. Pedrazzini, were the Trustees of the school with an average attendance of about sixteen students.

Mrs. John Martin dies

A story in the *Petaluma Argus* dated July 1878 reads: "In this city, died Mrs. Tomasa Martin, widow of John Martin (1861). She died at the advanced age of 85 years. John Martin was an Englishman and a sailor. In early life he landed in the then Mexican State, and not long afterwards received a grant of two leagues of land (about 9,000 acres, Corte Madera de Novato). This grant covered lands now occupied and owned by J. McBrown, Jeff Thompson, Mr. Davidson and others, in Hick's Valley.

Mr. Martin was an enterprising man, and as early as 1842 erected the first flour mill in Marin County. Its site was near the present day residence of Mr. Thompson, and the foundation walls are still visible, though the mill has for many years been in disuse. The adobe that formed its sides now form the walls of two or three dairy houses in the vicinity. Pear trees planted by Mr. Martin on Mr. Thompson's ranch 40 years ago, are the largest and most thrifty in the State."

Mr. Martin would sell to William Hicks in August 1855 for \$5,000 the western part of the Corte Madera de Novato, and Jefferson would buy his land from Hicks.

Jefferson Thompson Dies

March 24, 1897 *Petaluma Daily* – "Petaluma was greatly shocked Wednesday morning when it became known that the well-known pioneer citizen, Jefferson Asbury Thompson, had suddenly passed away at his home just west of Petaluma. His death occurred at 6:15 o'clock, and at the end the dying pioneer was surrounded by all of the members of his family.

Shortly before his death, Mrs. Thompson noticed that her husband was breathing very heavily, and becoming alarmed, summoned the other members of the family. Dr. Beckwith, who resided just across the street, was hurriedly sent for and quickly arrived. He did all in his power to relieve the sufferer but to no avail. In a few mo-

ments Mr. Thompson quietly passed away, without having regained consciousness. Mr. Thompson had been enjoying good health and was in town twice on Tuesday, going home early in the evening.

Jefferson Asbury Thompson was a native of Illinois and was aged sixty-nine years and five months. In 1853 (1852?) he came across the plains with an ox team, settling first in Marysville, after a few years removing to Marin County where he engaged in dairying with great success. He still owned a fine ranch in Marin county at the time of his death."

1900 census would show Jeff Thompson Jr. (28) farmer, living with his mother, sisters Francis (34) and Martha (32) and brother Rudolf (17) farmer, on I Street, Petaluma.

In September 1904 Jefferson and Rudolph Thompson would take over the Thompson ranch in Hicks Valley.

October 1908 Jeff Thompson would join the Elks lodge in Petaluma No. 901, B.P.O.E.

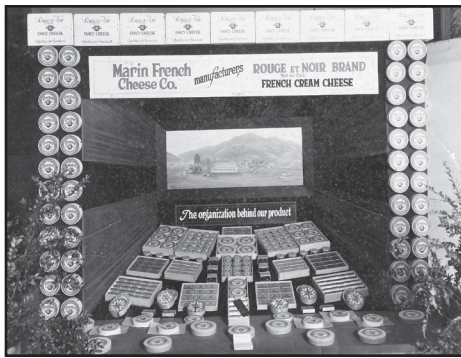
The Petaluma Daily reported on January 9, 1909: "Jeff Thompson has returned from an extended visit in the east. Mr. Thompson greatly enjoyed his visit." He had left for the east November 7, 1908.

In June 23, 1962, the *Independent Journal* would say – "In 1906 (1908) they decided to make cheese, and sent Jeff Thompson, to Storrs in Connecticut to learn how to make Camembert. At this time there were many other little cheese factories in Marin County." (On March 1896, The Novato French Cheese Factory was formed as a co-partnership with



1904 Yellow Buck label

Marin French Cheese Factory



Marin French Cheese Company products

James Newlander, Jr. Hermann Rudolf and George Prinz.)

At first the Breakfast Cheese was the most important product, being used extensively in the saloons as a free lunch item. When the saloons went out with prohibition, the Camembert came into its own.

About 1904 they started turning out Camembert in the traditional small wooden boxes, each cheese wrapped in metal foil to retain the flavor it had slowly aged in their cellars.

Their early product was marketed in distinctive wooden boxes and carried the brand of "Tocoloma" named for a Marin County region.

Next came the "Yellow Buck" brand, but fellow Elks Club members objected to a picture of a moose on a package of cheese, so a newspaper friend in San Francisco, Jack Donegan, in 1910 dreamed up "Rouge et Noir" (red and black). "Why not a French name?"

he asked one night when he and Jeff Thompson were consuming some of the cheese at a San Francisco after-party.

The Thompsons liked the idea – and "Rouge et Noir" it has been ever since – a French-type cheese made in Marin County by Sonoma County residents of English and Irish ancestry, and named by an Irishman in San Francisco.

French Cheese

Jefferson Thompson lived in a house in Petaluma, where his children could go to school. Their neighbor would be a Frenchman, Louis Cantel (1827-1905), one of the first in the United States to make French cheese as early as 1884.

Cantel purchased lots in Novato in 1888, with the idea of starting a cheese factory in town if he could secure a sufficient supply of milk from the different dairies in town. He bought more lots in 1894, lots 1 and 2 "B" section and lots 3 and 4 in "J" section. It is unclear if Mr. Cantel did or did not build a cheese factory in Novato.

The *Marin Journal* reported on October 1891, "the new factory of the California Creamery Co. near the Novato railroad depot is rapidly approaching completion."

In 1908, Thompson Bros., the well-known ranchers of Red Hill were awarded first prize and a gold medal, together with \$25 for exhibiting the best cheese at the State Fair at Sacramento. First place winners Thompson Bros., of Petaluma scored 96; second place was M.G. Salmins, Cayucos, who scored 95; third place went to Novato Land

Company, Novato scored 94.

Marin Journal, March 9, 1911 - MARIN DAIRYMEN BRANCHING OUT

"Thompson Bros., the well-known dairymen of Hicks Valley west of Petaluma, have ventured on a new departure – the manufacture of fine grades of French cheese. They began this branch several weeks ago and it is proving very successful as San Francisco houses are taking all they can turn out and are asking for more.

Jeff Thomson of the firm, it will be remembered, some time ago went back to New York and took a complete course of instruction in the business and is now in charge of manufacturing. They have adopted an attractive label which is as good as any for the city. They are making a specialty of Camembert cheese.

They are manufacturing under the name of the Marin French Cheese Factory and the brand name is "Rouge et Noir."

May 1911 - H.P. Vogensen commenced work on the big cheese factory which he would build for the Thompson Bros.

An ad in the *Petaluma Argus* September 13, 1912 would read

"THOMPSON BROS. BREAKFAST CHEESE -Include one in your next order – it is home-made and delicious, 5 cents each."

They incorporated the business on July 7, 1913 as the Marin French Cheese Company.



Early picture of the Marin French Cheese Company on the Pt. Reyes - Petaluma Road where it still operates today. It is the oldest continually operating cheese manufacturer in the United States.

Marin French Cheese Factory

On May 8, 1919, the large two-story house on the Jefferson Thompson ranch caught fire and burned to the ground with the contents. A defective flue is alleged to have been the cause.

The house was the old Thompson homestead and was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph Thompson and family, and Mr. Thompson's sisters Mrs. Fannie Dillon and Miss Martha Thompson. It was elegantly furnished, and the loss was heavy to the owners. The house was erected many years ago by the late Jefferson Thompson. The family saved a few chairs and some papers.

In February 1928, the Thompson Bros. had contractor Everett Robertson make extensive repairs and improvements at the big plant of the Marin French Cheese Factory -- getting ready for electricity to come to the factory. Electricity would not come to them until April 1929.

Jeff Thompson Dies

March 25, 1944: "Jefferson Thompson, for many years operator of the Marin French Cheese Factory in Hicks Valley, near Petaluma, manufacturing one of the best-known products in the nation, which found its way into many world countries, died Thursday morning after a brief illness of pneumonia. For many years he was associated in the business with his brother, Supervisor Rudolph Thompson, of Marin County. He continued in full control of the business until his death.

Jeff Thompson, as he was best known to his friends, was the son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Jeff A. Thompson. In early life he studied for the stage and took a great deal of interest in dramatics. He also had experience in news-



Ed Thompson



Doug Thompson 1956

paper work years ago. In addition to his brother, he is survived by a sister, Martha Thompson, of Hicks Valley, and a son, J. Pierce Thompson, and two grandchildren. He was born in Petaluma and would have been 92 years old in April."

In August 1965, the Marin French Cheese joined the 100-year club.

"Famous for their 'Rouge et Noir' brand of cheese, the Marin French Cheese Company was founded by an Illinois man named Thompson in 1864. He started with a dairy farm, and then went from farm to ranch selling cheese.

He purchased the acreage the company now stands on, and began operations in 1864, developing the brand "Rouge et Noir" Camembert, deemed equal by experts to the famous French "Camembert Veritable" from Normandy.

His sons kept the business going and gave it the name of Thompson Brothers in 1903. The name was changed to its present title in 1913, when the company incorporated.

Pierce Thompson is now manager of the firm, and his cousins Edward and Douglas, are sales manager and production manager respectively. They are grandsons of the original Thompson."

But the Marin French Cheese Factory might never have turned out a cake of Camembert, Pierce disclosed, if his father had not been subject to stage fright. Jeff, it seems, was an actor at the beginning of the century, appearing in a David Belasco play with actress Blanche Bates.

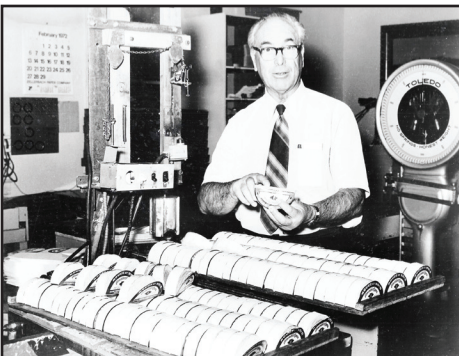
"My father was due to open in San Francisco one night when he was seized with a terrific case of stage fright," Pierce related. "It was then that he decided to go into the family's cheese business."

In 1995 the Cheese Factory was named Novato's Business of the Year.

Marin French Cheese today

Thompson family members were part of Marin French Cheese until 1998 when they sold the company to Jim Boyce, an engaging entrepreneur and cheese champion. Boyce was an organic cattle rancher and developer from Bishop, California, with ranches in California and Nevada, who also put together all the land deals to make up Disney World in Florida. Mr. Boyce passed away in 2010 and, in 2011, Marin French was purchased by Rians, the respected French family of cheese producers that also owns Laura Chenel's Chèvre in neighboring Sonoma County.

Today, over 160 years later, Marin French Cheese operates in the same location, making them the longest continually operating cheese company in America. They welcome visitors from around the world to their Hicks Valley Ranch location in Marin County, known to locals as "The Cheese Factory." Store hours are 8:30-5:00 daily.



Pierce Thompson 1972