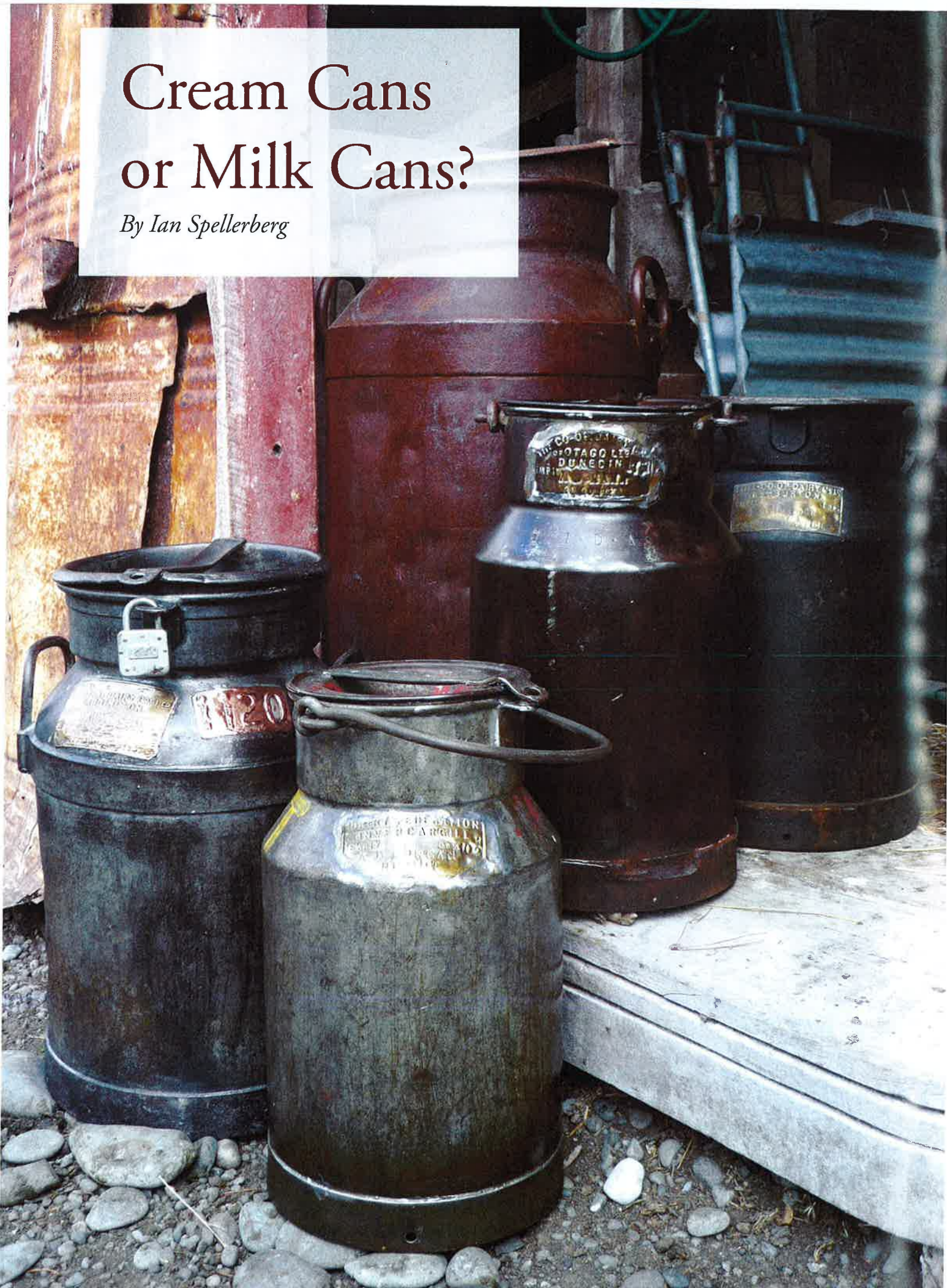


This article was first published in the 'New Zealand Memories' Magazine.
October-November 2011. www.memories.co.nz

Cream Cans or Milk Cans?

By Ian Spellerberg



The clank of metal lid on can, the whine of the separator, and the brisk swipes of the yard brush on wet concrete are all evocative sounds that bring back very happy memories of the farm milking shed. As children in the 1950s we were always present to watch the milking by hand and were given warm, fresh milk straight from the cow. We then watched our Uncle as he leaned on the handle of the separator; winding slowly at first but then faster and faster until thick cream poured slowly into one gleaming can and frothy white milk tumbled into another. The cans were then skilfully reeled out from the separating room and he hoisted them onto his back and took them over to his old Ford truck. Down the long farm drive and the can of cream was deposited on the stand at the farm gate. Later a lorry would come trundling past and deliver the can to the local dairy factory. The same can was later returned and inside would be the pound of butter ordered by our aunt. The factory also included a note on the quality of the cream (of course finest grade was the aim).

Cream cans and milk cans were once commonly found on almost every farm throughout the length and breadth of New Zealand. Most cans are now buried, have gone to scrap metal yards, or are rusty remains in some corner of the farmyard. A few have been lovingly given a new life as flour bins, letter boxes, garden seats, planters, umbrella stands, or even filled with concrete to become garden rollers. Some sit invitingly but overpriced in antique shops. Cream cans have been the subject of paintings (such as *Rest a while* by the Artist Michael Garwood – well-known for delightful scenes of old and tired looking vehicles in farm yards). Other artists have applied their paint to the old cans by way of colourful flowers or strutting roosters. I have conjured up the term 'cream can art' to include these painted cans and paintings of cream cans.

My experience of farm life was limited to many brief and happy holidays on my uncle and aunt's farm. Knowing nothing about the history of dairy farming, I started looking for information (from historical societies, museums, the internet) about cream cans. So far I have found very little. I then started asking local retired farmers and in doing so prompted many memories. I hope the following brief notes will invite comment and correction.

We all know the cream can shape with its unmistakable neck and a tight fitting lid. Some lids could be locked with a padlock. Was this to prevent tampering with the contents or stealing the cream? Perhaps the most common survivors from the early to mid twentieth century are the steel cans ranging from 6 to 10 gallons. Excluding the weight of the can, that's about 24 to 41 kilograms in weight. Other materials included tin, a kind of plastic, galvanised iron, and aluminium.

Earlier designs in the 1880s had straight sides with a lid that could sink into the can. Why was that? A relatively old but common design in the early 1900s was the tall narrow tin can with a simple small tight-fitting tin lid. Were these the earliest designs in New Zealand? There were also cone-shaped cans. Were there any wooden or copper cream cans?

The largest can ever made in New Zealand appears to have been the 25 gallon seamless can by Harvey and Sons Ltd., (Auckland) and said to be the only one of its kind. When full that would have weighed over 100 kilograms (excluding the weight of the can). What skills and strength would have been needed to move such cans around? Other manufacturers were Hardley & Sons, Adcock & Sons, MacEwans, as well as many local tinsmiths and ironmongers. A search of New Zealand patents has revealed several patents for improvements relating to milk cans. According the Ashburton *Guardian* Newspaper of 1910 there were so many creameries being established that there was a shortage of cans.

Here in New Zealand it's not surprising that some farmers appeared to have made their own cans. Some such cans were just modified versions of the old 'billy', but others may have been made locally. Were there ever standards for the manufacturer of cream cans? Some cans do have the volume stamped on the body of the can.

The labels and numbers or letter codes on many of the cans is an area of research in its own right. The farm number or code was either painted on or stamped on a copper or brass label. The same number appeared on the lid. How exactly did these codes work? Then there was often a brass label that showed the farmer's name and the creamery or dairy factory (as they were called). The words 'full' and 'empty' were also used but did that mean that legally the can and contents belonged to the dairy factory and when empty the can legally belonged to the farmer?

In the 1880s, the farm horse and cart took the cans full of un-separated milk to the local dairy factory (of which there were many) where they were hoisted from the carts and weighed. The cream was skimmed and the milk taken home. There is one story about a farmer who was caught adding lead to the base of the cans. Later, many farms had their own separators and by the 1930s the local factories

A cream can trolley and the remains of an old separator; and three cans that have either been modified from billy cans or locally made.





Dargaville photographer Mr D.N. Whitburn is accredited with capturing this collection of cans on camera outside the Northern Wairoa Co-op Dairy Company. Brian McClintock who supplied both the Whitburn photograph and the 'Greetings' postcard below comments, 'I bet the truck was a rattler with those hard tyres'. Readers may be able to identify the men in this undated photograph or those pictured with the horse teams in the Waimamakau Cheese Factory postcard. Below right: The last remains of what used to be the dairy shed. These cans are very early designs.

used horse and carts or lorries to collect cans from the farm gate. But where have all the farm gate cream can stands gone? I remember some white wooden stands, some of stone and I have even heard of one made of a cart wheel mounted on its side so that it served as a turntable! Where are the photographs of these old stands with their cans?

There are many questions to be asked. I would love to collate stories, anecdotes, facts and fiction about cream cans in New Zealand and what role they played in our rural social history. So do you have any memories of cream cans or milk cans? How were cans made, how many different styles were there, who were the local manufacturers, and how were cans transported? Do you have a photograph of someone carrying a full can on their shoulder? I have seen one purpose built cream can trolley. Was this used on the

farm or perhaps it went with the cream can lorry? Then there is the question of when does a cream can become a milk can? Is there really a difference?

Also of interest are New Zealand photographs, postcards or paintings of cream cans or milk cans either on stands at the farm gate or on any form of transportation (from lorries to trolleys). Any unusual examples of cream cans and milk cans would be of relevance, particularly the largest examples, smallest examples, purpose made examples and those made by hand. If sufficient information is forthcoming, this may form the basis for a book (A social history of cream cans and milk cans in New Zealand).

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W. D. Sifton, Photo., Dargaville. **Greetings from Waimamakau** WAIMAMAKAU CHEESE FACTORY

