

**IF YOU WANT THE BUTTER TO COME,
YOU HAVE TO MOVE THE DASHER**

By Robert “Bob” Chaffin

If you want the butter to come, you have to move the dasher. It sits down by the furnace in my basement and seldom sees the light of day unless someone looks into that particular utility closet. It has not been used in years and will never likely be used again, but aside from the fact it has value as an antique. I could never bring myself to throw it away. It is cracked a little around one of the handles and I doubt if it ever was a thing of great cost, although it was of enormous value.



The wooden top sits slightly askew and is more than a little dusty – but I’ll get around to dusting it up one day. The wooden handle has been up and down so many times that its one-time $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thickness is now worn to less than a half inch where it has moved up and down within the circular hole in the top. It is made of clay pottery, with a grey glaze on the outside and a brown glaze on the inside, so it is not a thing of great intrinsic beauty, but there is something in the symmetry of the lines put there by the potter’s fingers as he threw it on the wheel that gives a pleasing line to the eye.

There is something poetic about its place by the furnace, since from my earliest memory it sat by the open fireplace in our home. It was filled with cream that had been skimmed from the raw milk (my northern cousins called it “cows milk”?) which had been left in a wide mouth gallon jug for a night or two in the spring or ice box to allow the cream to separate from the milk. The yellow cream, filled with butter fat, floated to the top and the white milk settled to the bottom.

Ma Ma Mayberry took a wooden spoon and skimmed the cream off the top leaving the milk at the bottom – thus the term “skimmed milk” since the butter fat had been removed. In Ma Ma Mayberry’s case she left a half inch of cream on the top of the milk settled to the bottom to stir up with it, thus making it fit for human consumption. If the cream was all skimmed off, what was left was “blue John” and fit only for feeding to the hogs. Today we purchase it at the grocery as “skimmed milk.”

The cream having been skimmed from the milk was then set out to “clabber” or turn slightly sour and tangy (Note: don’t try this with pasteurized milk since it will simply turn into the disgustingly smelly stuff that sour milk is associated with today.) Even then, if the raw cream was left too long it would “blink” which was Ma Ma Maberry’s word for going bad and turning rancid as opposed to clabbering and being ready to churn.

Once the whole thing was ready and had clabbered without blinking, it was poured into the churn and some young boy or girl, usually a girl if one was available, but young boys were also fair game, was set to churning.

Although the time varied dependant upon the temperature of the cream and the fat in the cream, my memory is that it generally took about an hour to churn. As one churned, moving the dasher up and down, we were taught to say “come butter,” “come butter,” “come butter,” in a rhythm that was guaranteed by our mothers and grandmothers to make the chore end faster. It was probably true because the chant created a rhythm which may have aided the dramatic turning of cream into “un-worked” butter.

Suddenly it was over and the churn was now filled with raw un-worked butter and a milky only slightly sour substance that looked like milk but in it still had chunks of butter still floating. That was “churned buttermilk” and had little in common with the “cultured buttermilk” one can buy today in a supermarket. The old fashioned buttermilk was poured out and used for drinking and baking and was a totally pleasing and soothing substance having had the lactose in the liquid turned to lactic acid and becoming generally tolerable to the lactose intolerant. It was often given to those who were recovering from stomach ailments since it seemed to be tolerated well.

The raw un-worked butter was spooned into a large bowl and “worked” or kneaded like dough until the additional water was worked out of the pale fluffy un-worked mixture causing it to become a deeper yellow color and become stiffer in texture. It was lightly salted during the working process and spooned and pressed into molds. The molds were about four inches in diameter with an outer shell and a press top with a handle attached.

Once the press had been filled with butter it was set on the butter board and the press pushed downward to compress the butter patty and put a design into the top. Ma Ma Maberry removed the mold leaving an approximately one pound mold of butter to be sold to the peddler or folks who lived in town and ordered butter and eggs from her regularly. It was how she got her spending money and farm wives in the Upper Cumberland commonly referred to it as “butter and egg money.”

As I think back it seems that the old high cream raw milk which we drank with relish is much like many things we gaze upon in life. They are pleasant to look at, and exciting to contemplate, but they will bring us no good outcome in the end. I suppose our excuse is we were unaware of the damage it could cause and in some way this makes us less culpable, it does not however make the impact on us less damaging. Many of the things we look upon, knowing they are damaging for us, knowing they bring us no joy, and knowing they bring God no glory, yet we choose to indulge in them regardless.

So, although the ole churn will likely never serve its intended purpose again, I think I will keep it; if only because of the pleasant memories and valuable lessons it brings to mind when I see it here next to the furnace.

Acts 17:30 tells us that, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

*Read more about Robert Rogers Chaffin in the Chaffin files and read more Writer’s Corner stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

