

# The Milk Haul



JESSE HASKELL GRIPS the steering wheel loosely in the palm of his left hand, rests his muscular forearms on his thighs, and stares at the gray road ahead. He drives from Palermo, Maine, down I-95, past Portland, over the Piscataqua River, and into New Hampshire. The drive from his family's farm to Stonyfield Farm yogurt factory is 179 miles. On the CB, drivers call it "a long haul" and "a straight shot over the river." The long haul bores Jesse, and most of what would crackle over the CB annoys him—"bad weather" one day, "wicked backache" the next. Jesse keeps the CB volume low and blasts Pearl Jam over his truck's tiny speakers. He bounces the heavy heel of his work boot behind the accelerator and taps his right knee. He taps the steering wheel. He taps the stick shift. On the "big road,"

*Above: Jesse Haskell in the cab of a milk truck during a delivery to Oakhurst Dairy in Portland, Maine.*

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drivers call his trailer, a shiny 6,500-gallon cylindrical tank, an "FPU," a farm pickup unit. At seventy-five miles per hour, he passes in a flash of silver.

Five days a week, Jesse drives. He drives between farms and milk processing plants. He drives trailer loads of organic and conventional milk. He drives cream and a wastewater product he calls "slop." When he's not on the road, Jesse throws hay, repairs timing belts, and milks one hundred of his father's cows. On his day off, Jesse goes out with buddies and tries to meet a lady who won't think he's a dirty trucker or a dirty farmer, a woman who won't dig



his family's gold, a woman who wants to live on his family's farm. Jesse is twenty-four, and he's still looking for a place to settle down.

The photograph on his driver's license shows him with boyish black bangs, rosy cheeks, and a wide jaw. According to the Department of Transportation, he's six feet, seven inches. At bars, height distinguishes him; among milk haulers, it's manure on his boots. At Stonyfield Farm he meets long-haul truckers who deliver milk from Wisconsin. They drive processed nonfat milk east and kosher cranberry juice west. They do only one thing: they drive. When they go to sleep, they sleep in their truck cabs, and they've probably never touched an udder, Jesse says.

Fifty years ago, when Jesse's grandfather began hauling milk, milk haulers tended to keep cows. Fourteen regional dairies in Maine processed milk and delivered it in glass bottles to customers; dairy farmers often delivered their cows' milk to the regional dairy processor. As the industry expanded and specialized, dairies moved farther away from farms. Simultaneously, farmers expanded herds. Haulers took on more routes.

By hauling milk and milking cows, Jesse holds a unique position in the modern dairy industry. When he goes out with friends, he tries to make the best of his work. He came up with title Milk Extraction Professional. It suits his work, and his sense of humor. "I know how to extract milk from cows," he says. "I know how to extract it from various tanks around the state. That makes my title sound much more prestigious—rather than truck-driver-slash-titty-yanker."

In the valley formed by the narrow Sheepscoot River, an old grain mill, a volunteer fire department, and a town office line the main street of Palermo, Maine. The street loops off of Route 3, the connecting road between I-95 in Augusta and Route 1 in coastal Belfast. Near Tobey's General Store, a narrow road winds past the town center, over Parameter Hill, and onto Western Ridge Road where the Haskell farm. A gravel drive abuts a cement bunker of corn silage covered with black plastic and truck tires. Milk trucks face a pair of red wooden barns and a long, red truck garage.

Inside, Jesse's father, Pete, works in torn jeans, a grease-stained sweatshirt, and a black M.A. Haskell and Sons hat. His breast pocket contains his "bible," a book of handwritten telephone numbers for farmers, dairies, and mechanics. Pete is fifty-six, and like his sons, he started hauling milk for his father when he turned twenty. Jesse likes to drive but Pete says, "I used to rather do the cows."

**Left:** *Jesse Haskell empties milk from a bulk tank at a dairy farm in Monroe, Maine.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA THOMAS/SALT INSTITUTE FOR DOCUMENTARY STUDIES ©2006

Pete feeds the milking herd, spreads manure on his fields, and coordinates the largest milk-hauling business in the state. When I visited him in 2006, sixteen milk trucks were picking up milk from nearly half of Maine's 357 dairy farms. When Pete's father bought the first Haskell milk truck in the 1950s to haul cans of milk to regional dairies, the Haskells had fifty cows, and Maine had about 1,100 dairy farms. In 2000, when Pete inherited three milk trucks and one hundred cows, about four hundred farms sold to the four remaining dairies. "Everything's bigger," Pete says, "supposedly better."

Wisconsin has haulers with two hundred trucks and farmers with twenty-two thousand cows. Organic farms in Texas and Colorado milk five thousand cows. The Haskells have an average-size farm in Maine. Outside New England it's miniscule. "Small farms are going out," Pete says. "Organic saved some of them."

Fluid milk sales have declined since World War II, but consumers who do drink milk often buy into the idea that milk, the maternal stuff of life, represents everything that is whole, natural, and pure about food. For farmers, the "white stuff" is money. Dairy farming is a business, and for many New England dairy farmers, an unprofitable one. Cheap interstate transportation enabled farms in grain-growing regions to produce large amounts of inexpensive protein-rich feed; cheap feed translates into cheap milk ready to be hauled across the country. Like most bulk agricultural commodities, milk sells in one-hundred-pound increments, or hundredweights, and about twelve gallons of Holstein milk equals a hundredweight. By one estimate, it costs an average Maine farmer \$22.81 to produce a hundredweight; a Wisconsin farmer can make the same amount for half the cost. Consequently, about 4 percent of farms in the United States account for half the nation's milk.

Throughout the 1990s, the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact supported small farmers in the Northeast by artificially inflating the minimum price paid per hundredweight, but when the legislation expired in 2001, milk prices fell to \$11.00 a hundredweight—half the cost of production. While a state milk commission continues to set price minimums based on complex algorithms generated from the price of Wisconsin cheese, the payouts for fluid milk have not kept pace with the rising costs of fertilizer, land, and labor. Prices fluctuate monthly, and in March 2006 dairies paid Maine farmers at least \$15.75 a hundredweight.

Such economics results in a story about the dairy farm found more often in small-town newspapers and not on the milk carton: farmers sell out at auctions, and farms become strip malls, split-level colonials, or self-storage

units. Some farmers heed the maxim of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz and “get big or get out,” especially since larger farms generally command a greater proportion of federal subsidies. Enterprising small farmers have had to diversify. Some began selling milk alongside Christmas trees, firewood, compost, gravel, ice cream, cow embryos, bull semen, and, at one Maine farm, a service called Rent-A-Farmer. The Haskells have stayed in business for two reasons: hauling milk is lucrative, and in 2002 they began selling milk to a stable market, an organic one.

In 2006 organic processors paid around \$26.00 for a hundredweight of milk, the rough equivalent of production costs. Seventy of Maine’s 357 farms produce milk organically, accounting for the highest percentage of farms producing organic milk in the United States. “I wouldn’t go back conventionally,” Pete Haskell says. “I’d get done before I did. The conventional guys, the price is dropping off. But their price of operating isn’t dropping off so they have to eat that. There’s no way of getting that back. Like the organic, it’s a base. You get the same amount, year-round. So far.”

As the sky blues over Marden Hill and a driver starts up a diesel cab for an early morning milk run, Darrell and Kevin Haskell drive into the farmyard. Darrell is eighteen; Kevin is twenty. Both are redheaded and tall. At 5:00 A.M. they walk down a hill between their two gambrel-roofed barns to a long aluminum-sided barn, where they open a metal gate and herd 105 Holsteins with baggy pink udders uphill to the milking parlor.

“Come on,” Darrell says. “Let’s go.” The cows are in no rush. At 4:00 P.M. they milk again. Kevin slaps a cow’s flank, and shouts, “Get!”

The Haskells still milk in a herringbone parlor, pasture their cows in the summer, and feed them grain indoors in the winter. They transitioned to organic dairying in 2004 when USDA organic standards required that cows be fed organic grain for three months before their milk could be sold as organic. A 2007 rule change extended the feeding period to a year. Before this more stringent rule went into effect, a flood of dairy farmers converted to organic production; few have made the change since. Organic feed, hauled in from Canada, is two to three times as costly as domestic feed produced with pesticides and chemical fertilizers, although a recent spike in ethanol production has driven up the costs of conventional feeds, too. Another deterrent to organic dairying is land. Rules require ruminant animals to have “access to pasture.” The rocky, hilly land around the Haskells’ farm is not suited for the plow, and pasture grazing offsets some of the cost of grain. But all winter, the cows end up indoors, eating organic grain and homegrown hay.

On some large organic farms, herds reportedly stay indoors year-round, prompting questions about USDA organic rules.

Organic farming blends tradition with imprecise science. The Haskells breed their cows the old-fashioned way, with a bull. After nine months, the cows calve and begin lactating for another seven months. Bull calves end up as veal or hot dogs, and heifers move to a barn and are eventually integrated into the milking herd.

In the milking parlor, Kevin and Darrell attach vacuum-powered milking equipment. Cows have numbered ear tags, and the Haskell brothers remember cows with health problems. During the milking they treat mastitis, a common bacterial udder infection, with a piney-smelling topical cream and crystal whey. This kind of hands-on treatment is hard to manage with a larger herd. A cow with low production tends toward the Haskells’ freezers. “You can’t get too sentimental with them,” Pete says. “They ain’t pets.”

The herd’s milk flows from the milking parlor, across the barn, into a milk room with washable glass-board walls and a cylindrical stainless-steel bulk tank with a 1,500-gallon capacity. Jesse Haskell says, “We’re making ninety-three every other day”—ninety-three hundredweight. Lactating cows can’t stop producing, and because bulk tanks can hold only so much raw milk for so long, frequent pickups are necessary.

Shane Pomelow’s first stop is the Haskell farm; his second is the Frontier Village Market for a cup of organic coffee with a splash of conventional cream. Shane is a veteran driver, and he drives a Haskell truck on an organic run. He picks up milk at seven organic farms. Half of Maine’s organic dairy farmers sell through CROPP, a Wisconsin-based cooperative, to Stonyfield Farm. The yogurt maker, owned by its founder Gary Hirshberg and the French food conglomerate Groupe Danone, paid CROPP farmers roughly \$26.00 a hundredweight in 2006, or around \$2.24 a gallon, for raw organic milk. Milk reemerges from Stonyfield’s New Hampshire factory in shrink-wrapped pallets of ten-ounce low-fat strawberry smoothies “For a Healthy Planet”; these single-serving yogurt products retail for about \$30.00 a gallon. By comparison, in 2006 Organic Valley’s fluid milk retailed for about \$5.00 a gallon, and conventional milk sold for around \$3.00 a gallon.

Stonyfield Farm has expanded with the increasing popularity of organic foods. But in 2006, when a wastewater treatment facility was under construction, excess wastewater was trucked back to Maine. Jesse drove down twice a week to pick up the “slop.” He and Shane would meet up in the parking lot and drive their rigs and trailers home in tandem.

On the way out, Shane radios Jesse on the CB to say that he thinks slop is leaking out of his trailer. Jesse radios

back. “I can just imagine the phone calls,” he says. His voice becomes high pitched as he mimics a caller. “Hi, I got some toxic waste spilling on my car.”

Shane laughs. Slop might be ugly on the windshield but it’s relatively harmless.

Jesse drives past a parking lot. “Never been in the mall here,” he says. “Imagine there’s some good scenery.”

A minute later, some good scenery passes the trucks: a slim brunette. Jesse radios Shane: “There’s something I’d like to take home.”

Three hours, two chili cheese dogs, and two hundred dollars’ worth of diesel later, in Clinton, Maine, Jesse backs his trailer up to a manure pit as big as two Olympic-size swimming pools. The pit is partially filled with urine, clumpy heifer manure, and fermented yogurt-processing byproduct. Jesse empties a steady stream of sweet-smelling slop into the pit. The added liquid loosens the manure so that it can be spread as fertilizer onto cornfields, something larger organic and conventional farmers do to add cheap fertility to their land. It also adds profit: the disposal fee is split between the farmer and the hauler.

The farm where Jesse empties the slop is one of five in Clinton. Each grows thousands of acres of corn on flat, loamy river-bottom land between the Sebasticook and Kennebec Rivers, which is as close as Maine gets to the Midwest. Dairy cows far outnumber residents, and modern science governs the farm. When heifers move into milk production, via premium Holstein semen and a breeder’s long arm, hired hands attach computerized milking equipment that milks, monitors production, and automatically detaches from the udder. Farmers treat mastitis with antibiotics, and chemical herbicides and pesticides treat field pests. Between milkings, hundreds of Holstein cows stand indoors on sawdust-covered cement floors. Herds rarely, if ever, pasture outdoors where there are flies, so their tails are often “docked” or cut off because they get in the way of efficient milking. Manure ends up in giant pits.

Jesse isn’t a purist. Before his family went organic, they sprayed atrazine on their corn. “That’s what was popular,” he shrugs. When he returns home, he meets his father in their truck garage. Some nights, he repairs brakes, milks for one of his brothers, or plays basketball at the YMCA. Other nights, he calls an ex-girlfriend, watches reruns of the Dave Chappelle show, and eats a frozen pizza in his grandfather’s old house before falling asleep.

A winter’s worth of sand swirls behind the eighteen-wheeler as Jesse bumps along rural back roads. From inside his cab, the landscape jostles—trees shake and abandoned chicken barns vibrate. Jesse drives the speed limit until his

head hits the padded red ceiling. *Thunk*. He slows to forty-five. He comments on everything he passes: a Bangor & Aroostook boxcar (“Hard to find help with a full set of teeth around here”); a dead skunk (“That’s a fresh one”); Liberty, Maine (“Pretty trashy little town”); a woman in an Eclipse (“She’s smokin”); and a sign for an animal acupuncturist (“Whoever heard of that?”).

On a narrow dirt road in Unity, Maine, Jesse backs his trailer to the door of a small cinderblock milk room attached to a red barn. He warms his hands over the cab’s defroster before hopping down with a metal clipboard. Inside the milk room a cylindrical stainless-steel bulk tank stands six inches off a cement floor. Jesse opens the tank’s hatch, pulls out a long metal dipstick, and, using a calibration chart on the wall, converts the depth of the milk from inches into pounds. Twenty-four and one-32nd inches equals 5,186 pounds. He records this information in his notebook and on a farm receipt. On the back page of his notepad he adds up the day’s first three stops—one large farm and two smaller ones.

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2 4 1 6 1
  4 0 2 1
2 8 1 8 2
  5 1 8 6
3 3 3 6 8
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Precision counts. Dairies pay the farmer for his milk based on these measurements. Farmers pay the Haskells a percentage for hauling. Totaling the amount prevents milk from overflowing his trailer and shooting out the top. Jesse unravels a white hose from his trailer, feeds it through a small door, and attaches it to the bulk tank. He takes two milk samples and flips on his trailer pump.

As milk transfers into his trailer, Jesse ducks his head under a doorway and walks into a low-ceilinged barn, where a long line of Jerseys is tied in stanchion stalls. A boy whose ears stick out scrapes manure into a cement gutter.

“You must be the cousin,” Jesse says.

“Yup.”

“You still seeing a Wright girl?”

“Not anymore,” the cousin says. “I was seeing her for a while.”

The cousin tells Jesse he likes running farm equipment but has no interest in hauling milk. Then, he pulls a cow’s tail to make her stand up so that he can rake manure out of her stall. He stops suddenly, looks at Jesse, and asks, “You guys still organic?”

“Yeah,” Jesse says. “My dad likes it.”

The cousin smirks. “You can’t use any medicines, right?”

“No antibiotics. No commercial fertilizers on the fields, either,” Jesse says. “I don’t know. I don’t see what he’s paying for grain. I don’t see the paychecks either.”

The cousin nods. Manure falls on cement. Jesse hears the milk room echo with the sound of milk being sucked out of an empty bulk tank and the two go back to work.

During farm pickup runs, Jesse inevitably runs into someone who knows something or wants to know something. He hears about “organic” farmers feeding their herd conventional grain and farmers cheating dairies with skewed calibration charts. A farmer will never say he’s getting paid enough for his milk. Dairies have found water in milk. Conventional farmers say that dairies should pay hauling fees. Jesse bridges the mutual mistrusts. He works both sides of the industry. Some farmers spill their guts to him about family problems, subsidies, debt, and hauling fees. Jesse sometimes wishes he didn’t hear what he hears. His father pays him to work, not to inspect farms or write a gossip column.

Back on the interstate, a blond in a shiny Isuzu appears in Jesse’s jiggling spot mirror. He floors the accelerator, pulling a trailer with seven farms’ worth of milk down I-95. The seventy thousand pounds slosh back and forth, and his truck accelerates uphill in spurts. The blond driver eludes him. Jesse’s eyes dart over the median. He watches trucks with Maine lumber, a maroon cab that might be his dad’s cousin, Dusty Haskell, and Sunbury’s canary-yellow trucks. Jesse glances at flashes of silver tanks with gas, propane, and liquid sugar. He double-checks milk haulers. One hauler returns from a drop-off at H.P. Hood in Portland, another from Horizon Organic in New York. Two of his father’s trucks drive back to the farm. Jesse keeps an eye on his mirrors, too, because he never knows what might come along. 🍷