

Wisconsin Milk Strike

Lita Kurth

I remember 1933, the winter of frozen potatoes. We brought them up from the cellar, boiled them in a big blue canning kettle to feed fourteen mouths, choked them down day after day without butter or even lard. Looking over the snowy fields, we farmers searched for the gods of corncrib and cowbarn, the superheroes of skinny cattle and hungry hens. We forked down the last hay from the haymow, fed it to the cows, and prayed. Where were the Omnipotent Ones, who'd arrive on wings and make a dozen eggs worth more than a cent?

We carried the silver milk pail from cowbarn to the milkhouse. We strained the milk through cheesecloth and into the big milk cans. For what? The price kept going down. Morning and evening, we begged for answers. Neighbors talked by the light of kerosene lanterns.

Relieved to escape the worries of near-empty silos and too-small haystacks, we drove our sputtering Model A's and Chevrolet pick-ups to town while the roads were still good. After the poor harvest and the morning milking, we walked the broken sidewalks, looking for work, but who'd pay more than a dollar a day? We chugged home again. Gas money spent for nothing.

Some of us stopped waiting. We sat on stools in the barn and made a plan. We formed a co-op. But the cheese factories, the sausage factories, the bigshots in town--would they buy from a co-op? No.

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We formed another plan. In the February dark, I ate my breakfast of lard bread and Karo syrup. The kids would have lard bread too. The bony cows would keep on bawling for hay we didn't have. My wife poured reboiled coffee into a thermos and said nothing except, "Good luck," when I got the shotgun off the wall.

I hitched old Pat to the sledge. The roads were too icy for cars now. With the help of my oldest, I pried, shoved, and wrestled boulders onto the sledge. Pat gave a strong pull and set the sledge in motion. We plodded down the black-ice road to the main junction of the township: County O and Maple Way.

The sky was turning grey when I caught sight of Singler, Pokala, and Glutchek waiting at the crossroads, their wagons turned sideways. The horses greeted each other. We let them stand together for warmth.

We unloaded the boulders to block the road. The snow was so cold and dry it squeaked.

Then we huddled behind a wagon, away from the biting wind. Everybody in three townships knew about the milk strike. They'd all gotten a letter or been told in person. I prayed we wouldn't hear the sound of a truck with better tires than ours or horse and sledge trying to sneak milk into town, driven by a man willing to sell at starvation prices. Or worse, the sheriff, come to take the side of the bigshots.

Double wool socks didn't protect my toe under the hole in my boot. My feet stung. I stamped and swung my arms to keep warm.

Long before we saw it, we heard the groan of a motor in the frigid silence.

"Ready?" Pokala said in a low voice. I cocked my shotgun. A raven cawed from a snowy pine tree. We all stood up behind our barricade. A pickup chugged into view pulling a wagon full of milk cans.

"That's Schmidt," I said. God damn, why couldn't he stay home?

"Turn around," Singler muttered to himself.

Schmidt kept on coming.

We walked forward in a row. I held my shotgun.

Schmidt cranked down the window and growled through his full beard, "Move those God damn rocks and wagons."

"Don't do it, Schmidt," Pokala said. "We can win. Just wait."

"Go to hell. I'll get the district attorney after you." Schmidt rolled up the window and gunned his engine.

I looked at Glutchek. "He's going to go around."

"No, you don't, Schmidt!" Glutchek shouted. He, Pokala, and Singler ran to Schmidt's wagon. I followed with the gun. Schmidt was backing up. Maybe he'd try another crossroads. Pokala ran up and pushed one milk can off the wagon. It rolled and sank in the snowy ditch.

Schmidt stopped the car. Before he could reach for anything, I pointed my shotgun. "Hold it, Schmidt!"

My three comrades pushed off the rest of the cans, banged the side of the lids to loosen them, then tipped them into the snow. Beautiful cream-topped milk spilled out and formed a fan of white that quickly turned to ice. I couldn't help feeling sorry. At home, they could have drunk that or fed it to the calves. Schmidt sat in his car cursing.

I handed my shotgun to Pokala and hauled the empty cans back onto Schmidt's wagon. They banged like bells. He rolled down his window and spat onto the snow, his face as hard as the rock-hard ice.

When he was gone down the road, Singler said grimly, "That's the first one turned back."

"How about a nip?" Gluthek was always the first one to polka at any wedding, the last to leave. He passed around a flask of moonshine. We poured it into our mouths without letting the metal touch our lips and stick there. I felt cold, fired up, determined. Something had to be done. We couldn't let our kids go without shoes.

We stayed until noon when the next set of farmers took over. Shift after unpaid shift, we held the line all through the freezing days. Sometimes we sang. Sometimes we talked. Which god, which hero should we pray to? Conan's in it for himself, the Shadow's in league with the police, and the Lone Ranger fights for the killing law. They're all in town. Their clothes are clean. It's never against the law to starve someone. It's only illegal to turn the rules around, to insist on living.

The sheriff sent out vigilantes, town folks and cops for hire who threw rocks and horseshoes at us, broke Singler's jaw and sent Gluthek to the hospital—another bill he couldn't pay. They smashed the wagons, moved the boulders, and a guarded convoy moved past us bringing the milk to town to be sold for pennies. The cheese factory cut the price lower, less than it cost to feed a cow.

A bomb went off at that factory. And I didn't say a word. Turns out, it's just us, our shotguns, hoarse voices, numb fingers.

Author Bio:

Longtime WCSA member Lita Kurth (B.A. M.A.+ M.A., MFA) is the author of *One Creative Writing Prompt a Day...* (Callisto Press) and has a book on writing flash memoir (title TBA) coming out from Thinking Ink Press. She has received multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations for fiction and creative nonfiction. She teaches at De Anza College and has taught ages 8 to 80, jail residents to professionals.

She is the co-founder of San Jose's literary reading series Flash Fiction Forum; winner of the Diana Woods Memorial Award from *Lunchticket* and recipient of several creative writing fellowships. Sample publications: *Cherry Tree*, *The Millions*, *Atticus Review*, *Lunchticket*, *Brain,Child*, *Main Street Rag*, *Wordrunner*, *Oyedrum*, *Chicago Literati*, *Rappahannock Review*, *NewVerseNews*. <https://litakurth.substack.com/>