Milk in the Land: Ballad of an American Drink
Produced and directed by Ariana Gerstein and Monteith McCollum
Cinematography and film animation by Monteith McCollum; digital animation by Ariana Gerstein. Written and edited by Ariana Gerstein. Original music soundtrack by Monteith McCollum; select songs with Marc Hadsell. Produced by Latent Films. 2007, 75 minutes
$35.00 ($150.00 institutional)
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I could dance ‘til the cows come home. On second thought, I’d rather dance with the cows ‘til you come home.
—Groucho Marx

And dance they do, in this new documentary by Ariana Gerstein and Monteith McCollum. One of the truly captivating components of the film is the clever use of stop-motion animation and time-lapse photography to waltz cows, comics, and curious characters across the screen. Haunting music composed by McCollum accompanies montages of newspaper clippings and vintage cartoons, as well as archival footage of World War II propaganda promising “The more milk you put into a soldier, the more fight you get out of him.” Even more surprising are the reported uses of milk by the New York Times, beginning in 1859. These include intravenous milk injections to prolong life, anti-bleeding remedies, experiments to synthesize wool from milk, dried milk as a coal replacement (one train reportedly hauled five cars over twenty miles on this novel fuel), and the production of “F-sharp milk” to promote digestion (the milk was passed over steel humming at an F-sharp pitch to gain special properties).

The film features lactose-intolerant socialites and dancing strongmen who have dutifully imbibed the magical white elixir. Gerstein and McCollum have enlisted a cast of experts and historians to tell a tale that mingles the outrageous with the factual, documenting just how milk weaves its way through American politics and culture. The reformer Robert Hartley, for one, preached that salvation could be achieved by partaking of wholesome, rural milk from a sacramental country cow. His influence on the status of milk in American society was profound. In 1882 Hartley claims to have received a vision from an angel, which he described in his “Essay on Milk,” using biblical references to justify the drink’s sacred nature. He states that God loved Abel more than Cain because Abel was a cow herder. In this way Hartley positions milk as an almost “heavenly food.”

He went on to crusade against the brewers who produced swill milk by feeding the byproducts of beer to dairy cows housed in crowded, filthy pens near the factories. As one might imagine, their milk was not fit for consumption, and its use resulted in sick, malnourished children. Fresh milk from the country seemed heavenly indeed compared to the thin swill they were fed in the city. The history of milk as a cure-all is replete with irony and disaster. Infants from wealthy families who were fed cow’s milk from bottles with long, tubular nipples died by the droves from Salmonella and other food-borne pathogens, while breast-fed infants thrived.

The seventy-five-minute film makes some interesting connections between American politics and the milk industry. For instance, milk producers gave two million dollars to help reelect Richard Nixon, so it’s no surprise that Nixon later extolled the virtues of milk at a convention of the National Dairymen’s Association, and that milk prices rose dramatically during his presidency. Newspaper clippings creatively employed in the film show Nixon (and, later, J.F.K.) toasting milk with milk for political gain. Other politicians focused on the price per gallon. In a 1992 debate President George H.W. Bush failed the test when he could not recall the cost of a gallon of milk, leading Bill Clinton to accuse him of being out of touch with the American
people. And during his 1996 presidential campaign, Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee emphatically stated, “I need to know the price of a gallon of milk and a dozen eggs. I need to know right now!”

We further learn that ever since the Dairy Support Program was initiated in 1949, the United States government has subsidized the storage of powdered milk and cheese, which costs taxpayers millions of dollars. Yet in the 1980s the government sanctioned the slaughter of thousands of cows due to overproduction. Robin Mather Jenkins, author of *A Garden of Unearthly Delights: Bioengineering and the Future of Food*, asks, “Wasn’t there another way to solve the problem?” That, in fact, is the question I kept coming back to throughout this film. Isn’t there a better way to relieve the economic and health problems facing America other than promoting milk?

Punctuating the film’s interviews, documentation, and pastoral shots of grazing cows are mesmerizing animated sequences and old-fashioned placards announcing the next section of the documentary, as in silent films. One of my favorites reads: “Do you know, they got a bigger markup in legit fresh milk than we could ever get away with in booze? Honest to God, boys, we been in the wrong racket all along. —Al Capone.” This patchwork film, tied together with threads of historical data and testimonials of the evils as well as the virtues of milk, does not always hold together perfectly. Yet it does make clear that nature’s perfect food is inextricably bound to the social history of America.

*Above: Still from Milk in the Land illustrating the replacement of breast milk in the early twentieth century with Carnation evaporated milk.*

*Ariana Gerstein and Monteith McCollum © 2007*