



**The Story
of Elsie
The Borden Cow**

The Birth of Elsie. In the 1930's as now, the dairy industry had its share of public relations and consumer problems. Well-publicized "milk wars" that were raging between farmers and dairy processors caused the big dairies in particular to be pictured frequently as evil moneymakers off both the farmers and the public. This kind of public opinion is difficult to change even with high pressure advertising or denials, however logical, and Borden concluded the best approach was a friendly one and hopefully one that would cause people to laugh with us, or at least smile a little. It has served us well and made many friends for us over the years.

The most difficult of all proving-grounds was selected as a test for this new kind of advertising: the then extremely dignified medical journals. In 1936 we launched the medical advertising series that was to result in the creation of Elsie the Borden Cow. These were by no means "Elsie ads"; they were ads featuring a variety of cartoon cows with a variety of names, including Mrs. Blossom, Bessie, Clara... and Elsie. A typical ad showed a cow and calf talking in a milking barn:

Calf: "Mama, I think I see a germ!"

Cow: "Mercy, child — run quick for the Borden Inspector."

Another pictured a group of young heifers hanging on the words of a rather lazy and unimpressive-looking cow:

Heifers: "And now tell us about the time you got kicked out by Borden's."

Doctors loved the ads and swamped the company with requests for reprints to hang in office waiting rooms. While the medical campaign continued, Borden also began testing it in a few New York area newspapers. But it was in 1938 that Elsie came to real life coast to

coast in both the U.S. and Canada. Borden was then sponsoring a network news commentator named Rush Hughes. A radio copywriter, intrigued by one of the medical journal ads, prepared a commercial that so delighted Hughes he read it himself. It made reference to the following letter:

Dear Mama:

I'm so excited I can hardly chew. We girls are sending our milk to Borden's now!

Love,
Elsie

That commercial so amused Hughes' listeners that fan mail began coming in addressed not to him but to Elsie. Elsie became the spokesperson for Borden ever after.

The Birth of the Live Elsie. By 1939 Elsie had made her debut in national consumer magazines and had been quickly adopted by all the company's milk plants as a feature of local community promotional programs. She had even made an appearance on a bottle cap. And on the air she and Rush Hughes continued their regular correspondence. Borden was then preparing to open a very fancy, scientifically-important exhibit at the New York World's Fair, and it seemed only natural to include a few cartoons of Elsie at the exhibit. However, she was not to be the focal point. That was a new "rotolactor", a kind of merry-go-round where cows were automatically milked on a 360° cycle. It was all very agricultural and very futuristic. Seven young hostesses had been trained to answer every scientific question and were instructed to keep logs of the questions most often asked. At the first month's end the tally was:

20% about the rotolactor

20% about the location of the rest rooms

60% about which of the 150 cows was Elsie.

Elsie's popularity was confirmed, and it was obvious Borden was going to disappoint a lot of friends if it couldn't produce a real Elsie, and fast. Of all the cows in the exhibit, the most beautiful was a seven-year-old blueblooded Jersey from Brookfield, Massachusetts, whose registered name was "You'll Do, Lobelia" — a name which would come back to haunt Borden some twenty years later. For the rest of the season, this particular Elsie, dressed in a beautifully-embroidered green blanket, was put all alone on the rotolactor twice each day for all to see, and millions did. This was a time when Borden advertising people learned something else: most cows are natural hams if given the opportunity, and Lobelia was among the hammiest. She didn't just smile at the crowds; she gave every impression of counting the house. The public took her to their hearts. And that is how the live Elsie was born.

Following the close of the Fair's first season, Elsie was scheduled to return to Massachusetts but first, at the Roosevelt Hotel, she paused to give an appreciation party for all the press who had been so kind to her. That sparked more press coverage and invitations to more goings on in New York, and she never did get home that winter. She went from party to party along the east coast including a "Bovine Ball" sponsored by New York's socially-elite Seventh Regiment where she outshone two bands and a hundred beautiful debutantes. She dined at the Stork Club and at "21" and eventually came to know every freight elevator of every exclusive hotel in the east. The majority of her appearances tied into charity causes, including considerable World War II relief work.

The Birth of the Boudoir. There had been no time to design a special setting for Elsie in

the Fair's first season, but for 1940 Borden decided to make Elsie the focal point of the entire exhibit with a specially-designed "Barn Colonial" boudoir. The room featured as many whimsical props as the advertising department could think up: churns used as tables, milk bottles for lamps, a wheelbarrow for a chaise lounge, and oil paintings of Elsie's ancestors, among them Great Aunt Bess in her bridal gown and Uncle Bosworth, the noted Spanish-American War Admiral. The first boudoir set the decorating scheme for most of them to follow, not only on the road but in the magazine ads which began portraying Elsie against a similar Barn Colonial home environment.

Birth of Elmer and Beulah. Elsie's husband and their first daughter, Beulah, were born only weeks apart in the summer of 1940. The wide national attention given to Elsie had sufficiently intrigued RKO Pictures to offer her a co-starring role with Jack Oakie and Kay Francis in "Little Men." Elsie was to play the role of a cow named Buttercup. Borden wired back to RKO that the idea sounded great but Elsie was in an interesting condition just then and what was Borden to do about the World Fair exhibit? RKO promised the best of pre-calf and post-calf care and suggested forget the Fair. Borden finally agreed to let Elsie go west in a private railway car accompanied by both a herdsman and a veterinarian, but the fabulously successful World's Fair exhibit could hardly be left without its star. So Elmer, Elsie's husband, was suddenly invented. Borden selected a fortunately very meek bull, previously named Sybil's Dreaming Royalist. The boudoir was disarranged overnight with red underwear hanging over Uncle Bosworth's portrait, a limp towel hanging from the four-poster, copies of the Police Gazette and Esquire and every

conceivable prop to suggest a series of nightly poker parties. Everyone had smiled at Elsie in the boudoir; they guffawed at Elmer in his summer bachelor role.

While Elmer was getting laughs in New York, Elsie was an overnight celebrity in Hollywood. Jack Oakie met her at the train and kissed her. She was whisked to a reception at the Ambassador Hotel and then to a cocktail party at Ciro's, where she was presented with a bouquet of orchids, which she ate. She also took a two-day side trip to attend the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco before going into brief Hollywood retirement to await the much-publicized birth of Beulah.

Upon return to the New York Fair that September, Elsie was accompanied by her latest offspring. In the now-spotless boudoir there awaited a calvie coop, a hand-knitted four-legged sweater in baby pink, a clothesline full of diapers and booties in sets of four. Elsie with baby Beulah became an even bigger hit of the Fair. During the 1940 season Elsie outdrew in attendance every other World's Fair exhibit including the multi-million dollar General Motors Futurama, which had been in first place the year before.

The Birth of the Traveling Boudoir. Following the Fair's closing in October of 1940 Elsie, usually accompanied by Beulah but never by Elmer, took up traveling in a serious way, and a monstrous boudoir was designed to accompany her. The two cows and the boudoir required an entire railway freight car. After a brief shopping visit at New York's Bonwit Teller to get Beulah ready for school, both Elsie and Beulah went to Philadelphia where they met 228,000 fans over a three-week period at Gimbels and pushed Santa Claus clear into the rug department. She came back to New York

to hostess a party at Madison Square Garden in support of War Defense Bonds.

Lobelia/Elsie met an unfortunate end in a truck accident in late 1940, and was mourned but soon replaced by a new Jersey named Noble Aim Standard. And a third Elsie was cast in Canada. In the Canadian Elsie's first appearance, sponsored by the Toronto Evening Telegram, the donations she accepted bought nearly ¼ million pounds of powdered milk for shipment to British war victims. Between the end of the New York World's Fair and the end of 1941, Elsie appeared live before 3 million fans, a healthy supplement to the 14 million who had seen her at the Fair.

In the ultimate tribute, American servicemen took Elsie to war with them. She was a popular pin-up girl in many a Navy locker, and a B-25 dubbed "The Milk Run" was decorated with a painting of Elsie delivering the milk.

Elsie Stands Up. While the exact date is lost, it was about 1941 that in magazine and newspaper ads the cartoon Elsie gave up all pretense of being just an extraordinary four-legged cow. Since she could already talk, she might as well stand up to do it and the same for Beulah and Elmer. In the process her bosom rose by about three feet, and that completed the humanization. She had become a happy mixture of cow and your average young housewife, or typical consumer of Borden products. Her children did what "people" children did; her husband had the same habits that "people" husbands had; and "mothers" and Elsie became confidantes on all the subjects facing them, from living with wartime rationing to the problem of how big the children's allowances should be. The Elsie magazine ads got more readers than the editorial content.

The Fabulous Forties. As the decade progressed, the thrust of the Elsie ads began to change subtly. They had already humanized Borden to the consumer. Now they were being used for other purposes, too. During wartime shortages they served to keep the Borden name alive and also promoted patriotic causes. Then at the end of the war they helped knit together the growing line of Borden products. Early ads had dealt strictly with milk. But now Elsie began to talk about mincemeat, cheese, ice cream, Eagle Brand Condensed Milk, plus new products such as instant coffee. About this time the young Chemical Division of Borden asked to use Elsie for its new white glue product. The thought of Elsie as a possible source of the glue was too much for the advertising department (even though the glue was made from milk, and not animals) so as a compromise Elmer was loaned to Chemical as their very own spokesman, and he has been working there ever since. In the 1940's, magazines were still Borden's number-one advertising medium, beautifully suited to personalize Elsie. They provided good color reproduction and a situation in which the reader could take all the time in the world to savor detail and imagine Elsie's voice any way he wanted it to sound. Attempts were made to move Elsie into the new medium of television, but were given up. So Elsie kept right on appearing monthly in about every mass circulation magazine on the scene: *Life*, *Post*, *Look*, *Colliers*, *Liberty*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *McCalls*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*. Occasionally when Elsie undertook to publicize Borden's annual report, she added *Time* and *Newsweek* to her list.

Meanwhile there was no stopping the live Elsie. In the early Forties she took credit for selling

\$10,000,000 in U.S. War Bonds on her personal appearance tours, prompting a thank-you note from the Secretary of the Treasury and a personal thank-you visit from Admiral Chester Nimitz. Once she nibbled at the bustle of the Texas beauty queen with whom she was sharing a stage, and when she and Hedda Hopper traded hats, she ate Hedda's. She earned such honorary degrees from Universities as Doctor of Bovinity, Doctor of Human Kindness and Doctor of Ecownomics. In Wisconsin, which had long had its reigning Dairy Princesses, Elsie was named Queen of Dairyland. The Seneca Indian tribe named her an honorary chief, and the City of Bridgeport, Connecticut, presented her with their P. T. Barnum Award of Showmanship.

In 1947 both the live and the cartoon Elsie took on a new family member. Beulah's Hollywood birth had proved such excellent publicity that with wartime shortages over, another offspring seemed a worthy promotional idea. That July a boy calf was born behind modest temporary draperies in the window of Macy's Department Store, and most of the country seemed as excited as Borden. A contest to name the baby brought in a *million* entries, an all-time record for an advertising contest at that time. The name the judges picked was Beauregard, in honor of General Beauregard's association with the Battle of Bull Run. It was also just preposterous enough to fit right in with the family whimsey – in a way that Bob or Bill never could. From then on Beauregard replaced Beulah as Mama's traveling companion and Beulah was free to pursue her teenage interest in cheer-leading and collecting Perry Como records.

Elsie's first decade was brought to an elaborate finale in 1950 with a birthday party with

200 other celebrities at New York's Roosevelt Hotel. Jack Benny gave her a pocketbook with the 39c price tag still showing. From Lana Turner came bath salts. Ray Milland sent a jar of pickled beets. Frank Sinatra sent a barrel of molasses. Bette Davis saluted her by wire as "First Lady of Cowdom", and Guy Lombardo said she was the sweetest cow this side of heaven. It was the end of a great era.

Facing Up to the Fifties. Two advertising factors contributed to problems for Elsie in the 1950's. Magazines were ceasing to be the ideal national advertising medium for Borden or anyone else, because television was taking over. Neither Borden nor its advertising agencies had been at all successful in developing a "TV Elsie". Early attempts at animation just did not work, possibly because Elsie had assumed such personal dimensions that no moving, talking-out-loud cow could ever fully please her originators. As Borden's advertising emphasis switched to television Elsie was left behind. In truth a major purpose of the old ads had been accomplished; the name Borden was well known and generally well respected and new Borden products had been enhanced with the family image. Advertising trends were now tending toward harder sell, and hard sell just didn't sound right coming from friendly old Elsie. Even while Borden continued to run magazine ads, Elsie slowly disappeared from them, except for the "Elsie-Daisy" trademark which had been developed for Borden in 1951. However, her personal appearance tours continued with very little fall-off in attendance. This prompted one of several attempts to "revive" Elsie in magazines. 1957 was Borden's Centennial year. Beulah's birth had sparked national headlines. So had Beauregard's. For a Centennial Year encore the obvious thing was

twins. After a several-month teaser campaign in virtually all major magazines, Elsie did indeed give birth to twins in January of 1957, and the biggest advertising contest in history was launched. This time 3,000,000 people sent in entries accompanied by "a label or facsimile" and again a contest record was set. While there was no denying the twins caught the public fancy, the fact of twins had a depressing effect upon the originality of entries. Everyone seemed to think of the naturals: Romeo & Juliet, Jack and Jill, and — remember the year — Harry & Bess, Eddie & Debbie and Grace and Rainier. The final selection was Larabee & Lobelia. Borden loved the coincidence of Lobelia, which was the first live Elsie's name, and to name a pretty little calf after a pretty little old-fashioned flower seemed totally appropriate. However, the millions of disappointed contest entrants lost little time rushing to dictionaries to find out what was so good about Lobelia, and they discovered that the Lobelia flower has a most interesting history in folk medicine — as an antidote to poison — and its derivative Lobelline is today a prime ingredient in many antismoking prescriptions. From then on Borden referred to the new progeny only as "the twins" and never by name.

The national excitement over the twins could be called Elsie's finest hour as a magazine star. Magazine ad effectiveness was continuing to erode and there was an attempt in 1959 to revitalize Elsie ads with an all new look. The advertising agency came up with the idea of figurines of the characters, some ten or twelve inches high, posed with life-size portions of the products. It not only didn't work as a device, it shattered the illusion of Elsie as a talking "human" cow with human ways and dimensions. So did an attempt in the early

Sixties to portray Elsie in television commercials as a ten-inch animated good fairy, and for about the same reasons.

The Sad Sixties. As the costs of mounting a live Elsie show continued to escalate, scenery was simplified and a large van was built for more economical touring. Pull down the side and there was the boudoir. It was easy to set up with less labor but it also made the background more mechanical than the old ground level tent shows had been. It was a little too pat, and her glamour seemed a bit compromised. In the mid-1960's Borden commissioned a noted fashion illustrator to give the cartoon Elsie the chic, with-it look of a best-dressed Connecticut matron. The illustrations were modern and gorgeous, but the fun and the whimsy had departed further than ever. One simply saw a glamorous, white-gloved suburbanite with a cow's head. It made no sense and contributed little to keeping the Elsie legend alive and well. By then she had stopped being a loveable talking cow and had lost her folksiness as the housewife next door. She had been propelled pretty well into limbo, and this is precisely where she ended the Sixties.

As though Elsie didn't have enough problems, Borden management was coming to dislike her. She had accomplished exactly what her originators had hoped for: she had become America's best known and best liked trademark, but she stood unquestionably for milk. She did not stand for Campfire Marshmallows or ReaLemon and she certainly did not stand for the expanding Chemical Division of Borden. Within the board room she was being considered even a threat to the profitable future of Borden, for thanks to Elsie's fame, no one thought of Borden in such roles as the world's

largest producer of formaldehyde. So in the late 1960's the word went out both externally and internally that Elsie the Cow was dead. A new trademark was to be developed and Elsie was to be forcibly retired even by her close associates in the Milk and Ice Cream Division. But then came the results of a nationwide survey undertaken by a research company to help determine the basis for Borden's new corporate image. The survey simply confirmed that Elsie was the best known and loved trademark in the country, followed only at some distance by the Campbell Soup twins. People liked Elsie because she was friendly and cheerful and in most opinions still fun. She had also been a part of growing up in America for everyone who grew up in the Thirties, the Forties and Fifties, and that was a lot of America. Corporate management relented and allowed dairy products to continue using her trademark image only in conjunction with the new corporate logotype which was supposed to connote "conglomerate" to the investing public but which was certainly never intended to connote friendliness to consumers.

Rebirth in the Seventies. Elsie had been almost totally banished from advertising in the later Sixties except for the "Elsie-Daisy" signature in most advertising and on most packages of the Milk & Ice Cream Division. But contrary to cliché, memories are not necessarily short. In a probe of Borden's "image" among typical housewives of the Seventies, Borden undertook a series of interviews with young mothers in Texas, Ohio and Florida. What did they think about Borden? The answers involved a flood of nostalgia. Nearly every woman interviewed had seen Elsie in person at least once if not twice. Each of them had anxiously awaited each issue of her mother's favorite magazine to search

for the latest Elsie ad. Each of them wished that her child could have the same experience of growing up with Elsie that she herself had enjoyed. Once again, it was *people* dictating the birth, or rebirth, of Elsie the Cow as an advertising spokeswoman and as a personal celebrity.

Back to Life. In 1971 an animation film house in California went to work bringing Elsie to life in the first of several television commercials addressed to children. By that time television had one-upped all other media by a considerable "up" Newspapers were no longer a very economical medium for Borden Dairy products, nor could newspaper art reproduction do the most for Elsie and her family. Radio had lost most of its excitement even though it had propelled Elsie to stardom back in 1938. And outdoor media did not lend themselves to the appreciation of the small detail and facial expressions so integral to Elsie situations. Mass circulation magazines were floundering or going out of business. So the vehicle had to be television.

While the animators were developing an Elsie for advertising, events in Florida were working toward reactivation of the live Elsie. Walt Disney World was about to open near Orlando, and each major participant was accorded a "Day" for the official opening of his own exhibit, in Borden's case an elaborate turn-of-the-century ice cream parlor. The Disney people had long had rules against any live animal appearing in conjunction with a Disney animal, whether in print or in person. But for Borden Day the rules were waived, and Borden went out quickly to find a new live Elsie.

A few Jersey cows were finally located in Delaware County, Ohio, with the help of Ohio

State University. It seems that sometime while Borden was no longer borrowing cows (Borden has never owned an Elsie) the American Jersey Cattle Club had decided horns were no longer things of beauty and would not count in championship judging. Horns tend to need a great deal of shaping, almost approaching the complexity of straightening children's teeth during adolescence. They also get caught in fences and in other cows when tempers occasionally flare in the pasture. But an Elsie without horns could not be, and fortunately did not have to be, with the discovery of "Cricket" who became the 15th Elsie.

On September 30, 1971 Elsie reborn arrived in Columbus, Ohio, as the last Borden employee to be transferred to the new company headquarters. Borden's president flew out from New York to introduce her to the governor on the steps of the State House and then to accompany her on a well televised walk to City Hall to meet the mayor. Elsie had been reaccepted into the family. Following a day of visits to children's homes and hospitals, a standard habit of Elsie wherever she has traveled, she was then honored with a bon voyage cocktail reception at the airport. The Mayor was there to present a bouquet as her private plane revved up for the flight to Disney World. In truth, Elsie landed at Tampa, gateway to Disney World, at about ten p.m., which is no time to expect local officials or the press to be in very careful attendance. So, being the show-biz type she is, Elsie stayed in the wings till the more presentable hour of ten AM the next morning, or more precisely nine forty-five, the time at which a fork lift hoisted her up to one of the covered airport ramps to await whatever plane came in next. It was an Eastern flight from Atlanta, and as television cameras whirled and

school children cheered, Elsie gave every appearance of being the first passenger off the plane. Businessmen already late for their appointments looked amazed and sometimes annoyed and one can only wonder how, if at all, the plane's pilot had prepared his passengers that they were landing with a cow, which in fact had not come aboard.

Elsie opened the Borden Ice Cream Parlor at Walt Disney World on October 4, 1971 and can now claim the distinction of being the first live animal to come face to face with a Disney animal in the history of Disney animals. Mickey Mouse met her at the main entrance and presented her with a welcoming bouquet. Mickey then personally led a 25-piece marching band in a parade down Main Street to the parlor. Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Winnie the Pooh, Dopey and all the others joined in applause as Elsie cut the ribbon and presented it to Mickey. Mickey was touched as were several hundred youngsters who netted free ice cream cones following the ceremonies.

Touring Again. Despite her several-year absence from the circuit, the Columbus and Florida appearances confirmed that the live Elsie had lost little of her appeal. Parents had greeted her as a long lost friend, and children, many of whom had never seen a real cow, were fascinated, for like every other Elsie in history the new one submitted happily to petting and even hugging. The worrisome discovery during this return engagement was that some young children asked "Who's Elsie?" and could only be answered with "Elmer's wife". Such had become the dominance of Elmer's Glue in American culture and such was the obvious need to revive Elsie in behalf of Borden milk and ice cream.

Cricket, who had played this brief Elsie role, was too much a family pet to go on the road full time, so in the spring of 1972 still another Elsie was selected, this one by general consensus the prettiest Elsie there had ever been. In private life answering to "Goldie", the new Elsie was also the pride of Hetherington Farms, an estate owned by a soap heiress. The only special clause in her rental agreement was that she be hosed off regularly with that soap. This was agreed to and that spring and summer Elsie was off to star in her most successful tour of all time. Opening at the Kentucky Derby, where she was not made a Kentucky Colonel because she already was one, she proceeded to queen it over the Indianapolis 500. She shared her float with the King and Queen at Bridgeport's Barnum Festival. She starred at the Ohio State Fair and stood in a driving rain with the Governor of Wisconsin to open that State Fair, which she did by munching through an alfalfa ribbon.

Her 1974 triumphs included such notable events as leading the Rose Bowl Parade on New Year's Day. And millions of television fans watched the distinguished panelists become completely stumped when Elsie was a silent but dignified guest on "What's My Line"

By the time you read this, Elsie will again have been applauded, lauded and loved by a new generation of millions of people like you. She's proof that the power of imagination will never die, and Borden is proud that we've been able to share that sense of fun and fantasy with the help of such a notable friend as Elsie the Borden Cow.



**If it's Borden
it's got to be good
... we guarantee it!**