

A Maynard Mystery

The Curious Story of The Dairy Cottage and the Man Who Created It

In the Spring of 1938 a flurry of newspaper articles welcomed a new business to Maynard: The Dairy Cottage, located at 50 Acton Street. It advertised itself as a “New and Different Type of Eating Place” with the latest in restaurant equipment and high-quality suppliers. Less than four months later it essentially vanished from the public eye...

Ernest Smith Cooper was born on July 19, 1887 in Winchester, Connecticut. By 1916 he was married to Lottie Smith, a traveling salesman for the Moore Company of Worcester, and living in Brighton, MA. In the 1920 census he was listed as a retail druggist.

Around 1923 he moved to Acton and was employed as a druggist. Shortly after that (or perhaps at the same time) he opened his own drug store, The Acton Drug Company, in West Acton. A 1925 ad for the drugstore foreshadowed his entrepreneurial spirit as it also sold Kodak cameras and camera film, a variety of candies, and ... a popcorn machine.

Around the same time Ernest latched on to the latest technology sweeping the country (and world for that matter): radio. Commercial radio stations started in 1920 and this was quickly followed by consumer radio sets being mass produced by companies such as Atwater-Kent, RCA, and Zenith. Ernest recognized an opportunity and started selling radios in his drugstore.

By 1928 the drugstore part of the Acton Drug Company was barely a footnote (not unlike the floorspace distribution of your local CVS). Advertisements highlighted selling and servicing Atwater-Kent radios, Whitman and Apollo Candies, Mansion House Fro-Joy Ice Cream, a soda fountain, and Kodak cameras and supplies. He even gave a radio out as a prize at a 1928 West Acton fair.

In April 1929 the transition was complete: a full page ad in the Concord Enterprise announced a new Acton Drug Company store that filled drug prescriptions, had a full-fledged “radio department”, a soda fountain for refreshments, ice cream, candy, and a variety of sundries. In 1930 Ernest was attending technical sessions on new Bosch home and automobile radios.

Somewhere in the 1930-1932 timeframe Ernest opened the “Cooper Radio-Electric Company” which focused on, as you might guess, radio sales and service (yes, radios needed service back then - those vacuum tube devices were finicky), and various electric home appliances. Where the company was started is still unknown, but in May of 1933 the store opened in Maynard at 20 Nason Street with over 700 people attending the grand opening and several receiving door prizes such as electric irons, clocks, and toasters. In 1934 the store was operating from 72 Main Street.

In October 1935 the fast-growing company announced it was moving back to Nason Street to a new store on 90 Nason Street, previously occupied by the Byron Lumber Company. The new Cooper Radio-Electric company featured a “radio salon” where it displayed the latest 1936 radio models. A small footnote in this announcement, but key to our story (yes, we’re getting there...) is that this new location would also house a new company “Cooper Coolers, Inc.” under the Cooper Companies umbrella. Cooper Coolers was riding the wave of safe and

affordable home and commercial refrigerators as adoption went from 10% of households to over 50% - despite the impacts of the Great Depression. The Cooper Radio Electric Company showrooms featured Frigidaire refrigerators and Delco heating and air conditioning systems. Advertisements by the company in 1936 focused less on radios and more on these heating and cooling systems/appliances. By 1937 the "Cooper Coolers, Inc." was directly advertising in the newspapers.

On April 27, 1938 the following advertisement appeared in the Maynard Enterprise:

OPENING SOON

50 ACTON ST. MAYNARD

The Dairy Cottage
A New and Different Type of Eating Place.

HOME MADE ICE CREAM - FRIED CLAMS - SODA FOUNTAIN & SANDWICH GRILL

Under management of E. S. Cooper & Oiva O. Helenius

A few days later (Maynard Enterprise, Page 3, May 4th, 1938)

Dairy Cottage
Opens Saturday at
50 Acton Street

Maynard - "Never Sell America Short" seems to be the courageous policy of the Dairy Cottage and Luncheonette proprietors who will open their new modernistic cottage at 50 Acton Street next Saturday.

The new structure of Colonial modernistic type was designed and built by Cooper Coolers, Ernest Cooper, proprietor,

This firm is well known with a wide experience in commercial refrigeration and equipping of roadside stands. The interior is finished in neutral buff and red tile with chromium trim.

The back bar is of stainless steel. with complete set of electric grills and Silex coffee makers. It is an artistic cosy place to stop for some thing good to eat or for some home-made ice cream. Everything is in the latest up-to-the-minute, and of equal importance in that everything served is of the best quality.

Ernest Cooper and Oiva Helenius are proprietors. Mr. Cooper was formerly in the soda and luncheonette business in Boston and more recently was proprietor of the Acton Drug Company which was favorably known for the excellence of its soda fountain service. A modern up to date soda fountain installed In the Dairy Cottage will serve delicious sodas and college ices.

The ice cream all home made in the Dairy Cottage will be made of pure, heavy, teeted cream, pasteurized and homogenized. It will be made under a special formula of the United Farmers Cooperative Creamery Association,

with all the popular favors. Fresh fruits in season will be used to flavor the Dairy Cottage ice cream and only the purest of extracts will be used. It will be made under sanitary conditions in a modern freezing room.

Oiva Helenius was formerly in the retail food business in Maynard and Stow, and is an expert on the selection of meats and provisions. Among the specials to be served at the food counter are a special Hamburg steak of unusual quality from selected meat and served on toasted rolls. Fresh Fried Ipswich Clams, delivered dally, is another special. The clams will be cooked in a modern electric fry kettle. Marvelous taste frankfurters and sandwiches of all varieties, plain or toasted, are on the menu.

The milk and cream for the Dairy Cottage will be furnished by The Maplecrest Dairy Farm, the clams fresh daily from Ipswich, frankfurts and cooked meat from the Essem Packing Co, of Lawrence, and fresh meats, fruits and vegetables from the United Co-operative Society of Maynard. The Dairy Cottage will throw its doors open for business and welcome visitors for inspection Saturday, May 7.

Three pages later, a full page advertisement welcomed the Dairy Cottage, highlighting all of the businesses that were part of its creation and ongoing operation:

E. Mariano & Son - Cement Work and Cellar
P. J. Schair - Electric Wiring and Fixtures
United Co-Operative Society - Wishing You Success
Essem Marvel Taste Frankfurts
Maynard & Acton Oil Co. - Fuel Oil for Heating and Hot Water
Cooper Coolers, Inc - Designed-Built-Equipped Complete
Maynard Lumber & Supply - Lumber and Building Material
Maplecrest Cream Top Dairy - Pasteurized Milk and Cream
United Farmers Co-Operative Creamery Association - Ice Cream Mix
Lenox, Inc. - Complete Supplies for Roadside Stands
Delano-Potter Co. - Bunker Hill Coffee & Peaco Tea

The following week (Maynard Enterprise, Page 1, May 11th, 1938)

Dairy Cottage Is Now Open

Maynard. - The Dairy Cottage, 50 Acton Street, Ernest Cooper and Oiva Helenius, proprietors, said they were very pleasantly surprised at the volume of business done the week end. The staff Includes Mary Higgins, Mildred Costello and Richard Howe.

A few weeks later another advertisement (The Maynard News, Page 5, June 9th, 1938)

Have You Visited the
DAIRY COTTAGE
IT'S NEW - IT'S DIFFERENT
FOR GOOD FOOD and REFRESHMENT
A Place Unusual
FRIED CLAMS - FOUNTAIN SERVICE
50 Acton Street
Maynard

The Dairy Cottage even had a sponsor block in the 1938 Maynard High School yearbook, The Screech Owl:

After the Reception, Shows or Anytime
Drop in at the
Dairy Cottage
for Tasty Home-Made
ICE CREAM - FRIED CLAMS or LUNCHES
ACTON STREET MAYNARD

And that, dear reader, is the full extent of our (current) known history of The Dairy Cottage!

The next notice we have on the building was in the Maynard Enterprise, Page 2, April 3rd, 1958:

Mr. and Mrs, Stanley B. Chapman and family, 50 Acton street. visited their daughter, the former Betty Chapman, Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Kohler and Patricia over the weekend in Canton, Ohio.

And property records show that the current owners (July 2026) purchased the house from the Chapman estate in 1998.

What of Ernest Cooper and the Cooper Radio Electric Companies? Not much is currently known. Starting in 1936 Cooper Coolers advertisements were small and mentioned "Milk Coolers". The 1940 census shows Ernest living in Franklin, New Hampshire. At some point Ernest and Lottie retired to Clearwater, Florida. Ernest passed away in 1961 at the age of 74.

Looking at the advertisements for The Dairy Cottage and the accompanying newspaper stories it is clear that it was created as a showcase for Cooper Coolers. In addition to the Dairy Cottage they supplied refrigeration to the United Co-Operative Society and likely other businesses in Central Massachusetts. Plus the Dairy Cottage probably appealed to Ernest's entrepreneurial roots starting a successful soda fountain in the Acton Drug Company two decades earlier. Who knows? Anyone who has started a restaurant business will tell you that they live on a knife's edge for several years and few make it to long-term success. Maybe it was a vanity project or a last gasp attempt to drum up business, but the whole of the Cooper Companies business seemed to evaporate at the same time. There may be more to this story yet to tell.

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