

THE GREAT SYOSSET PICKLE BOOM

1880-1914

by Tom Montalbano



Left to right outside the Alart & McGuire Syosset Pickle Factory c. 1910 are George Vincent, Henry Smith Jr. (superintendent), two unidentified workers from New York City, and James DeMilt.

Before the potato was king in Syosset, farmers discovered that the soil here, treated with enough horse and cow manure, could produce a very hearty cucumber crop. The demand for “cukes” was driven by a post-Civil War influx of German immigrants, who brought with them an insatiable appetite for pickles.

By the early 1880s, north shore farmers were shipping two thousand barrels of cucumbers into New York City for pickling every day. For their efforts, local farmers received compensation of between \$1.00 and \$4.00 per thousand cucumbers, depending on supply and demand at any given time.



Syosset farmers were quick to take advantage of this lucrative opportunity. By 1883, virtually every farmer in Syosset had converted at least one large parcel of land to be used exclusively for growing cucumbers, and five to six railroad cars filled with cukes were being shipped to pickling facilities from the Syosset train station each day. In a single season, the average farmer

with five or six acres could produce roughly half-a-million cukes, worth about \$2,000 at peak prices. During this era, many of Syosset's farmers were able to expand their land holdings several times over by devoting one or two growing seasons to planting nothing but cucumbers, selling the crop to factories in Brooklyn, Manhattan, or Suffolk County, and buying up 75-100 acre plots with the profits.

Eventually, given the increased profit potential of eliminating Long Island Rail Road shipping fees, farmers from this area began to consider the prospect of building a pickling factory right here on the north shore.

Within a decade, a solution came along via Peter Alart & James McGuire, New York City pickle pioneers who had already established a major pickling operation in Greenlawn. Alart & McGuire set out to find available real estate adjacent to LIRR depots so that they could build and operate pickling facilities with easy access to shipping. One of the first Long Island communities they chose was Syosset, due to its easy accessibility from surrounding farming communities and the availability of a 2 3/4-acre plot directly beside the railroad station.

Farmers Attention!

Messrs. Alart & McGuire are now ready to make contracts with farmers for pickles. .

Contracts can be made with Merritt Horner at Syosset factory, or at DeVine Bros.' store.



Late 1940s photo showing the original factory building to the left of the railroad tracks.

Completed in 1890, the Alart & McGuire Pickle Factory consisted of a small management office fronting Jackson Avenue on the immediate southeast side of the railroad tracks and a narrow wooden factory that ran 350 feet along what is now the eastbound station platform.

Several rows of "tanks" filled with a brine solution of water, salt, vinegar, dill, and garlic occupied the factory floor, while stacks of wooden barrels lined the walls, waiting to be stuffed with finished pickles. As a water supply, the factory had its own forty-four foot well.



Once the pickle operation was up and running, local farmers began carting wagonloads of cucumbers to the factory each day. Growers from out of town sent their cukes by train to the Syosset station. From the station platform, workers would unload the cukes, cart them into the factory, and dump them into the large tanks.

The pickling process, which could take four to six weeks, required that the tanks be left uncovered at all times. Additionally, the shop managers constantly needed to leave the doors open, as the strong stench of the factory could be intolerable for the often hung-over workers. These practices likely attracted vermin and insects, as it did at pickle factories in neighboring communities. Surely, downtown Syosset continually stank of garlic and pickle brine!

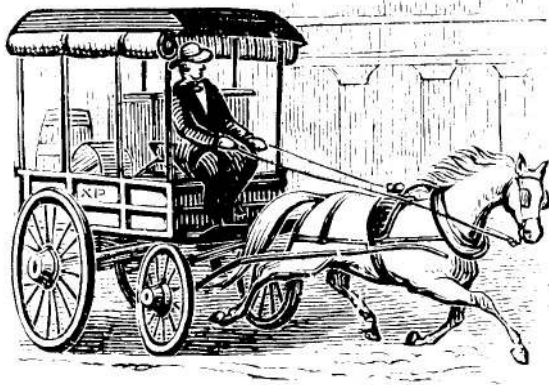
The pickle factory also gave rise to offshoot businesses, as Syosset farmers packed the local newspapers with advertisements touting their miracle pickle fertilizer concoctions and their superior pickle seeds.

PICKLE SEED
Quantity of Very Fine Sprayed
Pickle Seed.
ALBERT CHESHIRE,
Syosset, L. I.

The quest to produce the most perfect, most productive pickle plantation sparked many a debate among Syosset farmers regarding the use of fertilizer. At one point,

Nitrate of Soda will make your
Pickle Crop Grow. W. Wilton Wood,
Lumber Yard, Phone 425.—Adv.

The Long Islander declared, **"If our farmers want any more object lessons as to the result of using manure liberally, we call their attention to a field of Devine Bros at Syosset containing by measure 1½ acres. Up to last Monday, this firm had picked over three hundred thousand pickles from this little patch, and they are confident of reaching the four hundred thousand mark."**



With the mix of brine and manure wafting through Syosset at all hours, wagons streamed up and down Jackson Avenue, Cold Spring Road, and Berry Hill Road all day long carrying full loads of cucumbers from Oyster Bay, East Norwich, Cold Spring Harbor, Woodbury, Huntington, Jericho, and other surrounding communities. Even local children cashed in on the

boom, picking weeds from a dill field behind the factory for one or two cents a day.

Unfortunately, the pickle industry brought about quite a sour problem for Syosset. First there was the issue of the dozens of vagrant workers imported from New York City's Bowery district. Upon receiving their \$1.00 a day salary, these workers often headed right to one of Syosset's saloons, got what one townsman described as "helplessly drunk," and proceeded to cause disturbances all over town. During the day, a stern superintendent kept the workers under control with military-like discipline. However, once the work day was through and the men had nowhere to go but the crowded "bunk house" behind the factory, all civility went out the window. The men constantly got into brawls outside the factory, so frequently that a reporter for the *Long Islander* published a mocking article about the entertaining fist fights that riders of the Long Island Rail Road could look forward to any time they passed through the Syosset station.



As much of a problem as the *workers* were, bigger troubles followed the homeless men who made their way from New York City to Syosset with hopes of *finding work* at the factory. These "tramps" would spend their days hanging around the building, waiting for the rare opportunity when the foreman would venture outside in search of a few extra workers. After spending the entire day begging farmers for work and/or money, they would often spend the night hiding in local barns. In an attempt to stay warm, these men would build bonfires that often turned disastrous. Further, they were constantly being arrested breaking into homes and robbing people on the streets of Syosset. At one point, locals began to demand that a constable and a jail be placed in Syosset where these "unfortunate men may be put out of sight of decent people."

Syosset's farmers quickly learned to overlook the inconvenience of the tramps, as the pickle profits continued to pour in.

Ultimately, however, competition and overproduction drove the price paid by the factory down to an average of \$1.50 per thousand cucumbers. But Syosset's "golden era" of pickling was not over yet! In 1893, the HJ Heinz Company, already well-known for its ketchup, introduced its own brand of pickles at the Chicago World's Fair. Suddenly, the world had a new generation of pickle lovers and cucumbers were in greater demand than ever. Unfortunately, many Syosset farmers had not heeded warnings to protect their cucumber fields against an impending blight and were unable to cash in on this second wave of picklemania.

Farmers Before Contracting Elsewhere would do well to call at the

HICKSVILLE PICKLE FACTORY

For full particulars about

PICKLES, TOMATOES, CABBAGES, ETC.

As we are now contracting for 1893.

THE H. J. HEINZ CO.,
HICKSVILLE.

When HJ Heinz opened its own pickle factory at the LIRR station in Hicksville in 1893, the company had no difficulty luring Syosset's remaining cuke farmers with the promise of a better price and a more reliable guarantee of continued revenue.

Business was never the same at the Alart & McGuire pickleworks thereafter. The factory had to close for some time in 1910 for the widening of the train station to accommodate a second set of tracks. In the summer of 1910, it re-opened, this time processing not only pickles, but sauerkraut and pickled tomatoes, as well. By 1914, the pickling plant had completely petered and, shortly afterward, Alart & McGuire moved all its tanks to another plant in Ohio.

The aging building, purchased in 1916 by a prominent local, Rosalie Jones, sat for several years and was almost completely blown apart by a windstorm in January of 1918. It took virtually the entire year to clean up the mess. The plot sat vacant until 1922, when Jones finally sold it to John Young, who began a successful coal yard on the site.

By the early 1920s, several non pickle-friendly insects had invaded the fields of Syosset, rendering them useless for growing cucumbers. However, changes in the soil, brought about by almost forty years of natural and chemical fertilization, made Syosset's farmland ideal for growing potatoes. Thus, for the pickle farmers who had wisely reinvested their earnings, a new agricultural boom was about to begin!



John Young's coal yard, which incorporated the pickle shop's management house and part of the old factory.