My ideas about milk production and manufacturing have always been akin to what I read out of Laura Ingalls Wilder books. I expected a picturesque scenario with Sukey gently milked by Pa, little girls holding barn kittens nearby, and Ma watching lovingly from the homestead window. Milk was natural, and went straight from the pail to consumer’s “tummies.” Milk doesn’t hold that idyllic scene anymore. Milk isn’t as fresh and natural as I imagined. Milk is pasteurized and homogenized. Vitamins are taken out; vitamins are added back in. Milk is sealed and shipped hundreds of miles from the cows it came from.

In all honesty, milk is my beverage of choice and I drink over a gallon a week. After nineteen years of ignorant drinking, I felt I should at least understand what I’m putting into my body. Like most kids of the younger generation, I’m starting to have a healthy appreciation for detoxing and keeping my body pure. People are looking for healthy and local. Organic products are fitting the bill. Organic milk is making a rise, and “natural” and “clean” products are more popular. People care more about animal treatment, rbGH and hormone free products, and purifying our bodies. America is asking, “What are we putting in our mouths?” But, as America slowly makes its way back to “natural,” to “clean,” to wholesome, and to organic, why doesn’t it go all the way back? Why isn’t raw milk leading the alternative “natural” way? Why isn’t the most natural, the most pure, the straight-from-the-udder product not the most popular? To find out, I analyzed two local raw milk dairies, Swan Brothers Incorporated and HLA Country Farm Raw Milk Dairy, and two national organic companies, Horizon Organic and Organic Valley. I decided to take milk back to its roots—or udders. I wanted to see the ideal of milk, before it became so industrialized, and discover whether or not raw milk should be the leader in natural milk production.

Andrea Wiley, a professor from Indiana, writes that the “production of cows milk dates back to the colonial period, although it remained a small-scale domestic enterprise until well into the nineteenth century” (Wiley 668). She believes that only recently has milk become a global commodity, and is a good that can be found in both developed and developing countries alike. But with globalization comes a decline in dairies and number of cows per dairy. Wiley writes in “Transforming Milk in a Global Economy” that local family-owned dairies have all but vanished, and that milk companies have become increasingly consolidated (Wiley 668). A farm is considered any place that $1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced or sold, and in the last fifty years the number of farms has fallen 69%, with milk farms decreasing even more rapidly (Blayney 2). Keeping these small milk farms afloat isn’t as difficult as it would seem, because larger companies will buy the “rights” to these farms and add them to their total production. Several large organic companies do this to stay localized (Organic Valley).

Starting in the 1920s, milk became regulated, and this brought the milk-borne outbreaks down from 25% to 1% (Weisbecker 62).
Because of these regulations, the popularity of raw milk fell. In fact, the FDA required that all milk products become pasteurized and in the 1980s “began drafting a proposed regulation to ban all interstate sales of raw milk and raw-milk products” (Weisbecker 63). This ban didn’t affect raw milk certified by the USDA. Today, selling raw milk is prohibited in one-third of states nationwide, but it can still be found elsewhere. The states that do allow its sale are in charge of regulating it (Spiegel). Raw milk sellers believe pasteurization is an outdated process that destroys the vitamins and nutrients raw milk naturally contains (Spiegel). Even so, every year there are at least seventy cases of raw-dairy food poisoning (Johnson).

Could this be the beginning of raw milk’s end? Is fear of contamination keeping its numbers low? Food borne illnesses are the cause of many commodities’ low consumption rates. The recent tomato recall kept the delicious fruit out of restaurants, grocery stores, and dinner tables. A few weeks later when the outbreak was over, tomatoes bounced back. Raw milk, on the other hand, was never a part of every day diet. When another case of dairy food poisoning is listed, it adds to the already hopeless case against raw milk.

Perhaps in an effort to allay fears of disease and contamination, the government certifies select raw milk dairies, meaning that they are tested for bacteria and health standards. Raw milk dairies must follow twenty conditions ranging from cow health practices, providing all-natural feed, packaging milk at certain temperatures, complying with monthly tests, and being “rooted in social and environmental awareness” (Raw USA).

HLA Country Farm Raw Milk Dairy is a local dairy in Talala, Oklahoma. “Hard Luck Acres,” as it is affectionately called, is owned by Judy Calvert and her husband. Calvert is a newcomer in the dairy world, and has only been selling cow milk for a few years. “I started selling goat milk and I had a customer tell me that if I bought a cow, he’d buy the milk. Since then he’s bought three gallons” (Calvert). But overall it was a good idea. During our interview, several cars traveled out to her small farm. She doesn’t deliver, but has had pick-up orders from as far as New Mexico.

The scene from her living room was as idyllic as my Laura Ingalls fantasy. Chickens wander next to your feet as cows and goats graze peacefully in the background. Every day Calvert and her husband milk their six jersey cows in the small milking house. Though not so idyllic that they milk by hand, the bright red barn in the background offsets the milking machine in the front. Each cow can produce six gallons a day. After “the girls” do their job, the milk is transported ten feet into Calvert’s pantry. She places the milk into steel containers and immediately starts “packaging” into glass containers. “Raw milk isn’t homogenized or pasteurized,” she told me in her cheese cooling room. I told her about my readings of the health risks raw milk poses. “When there was no sanitation, pasteurization was necessary. Babies kept dying after drinking contaminated milk. Pasteurization was helpful because the heat took everything out of the milk.” Vitamins too? I asked. “Yes. All the vitamins were removed and had to be re-inserted for the milk to have any nutritional value.” Calvert and other raw dairiers believe that raw milk is better to consume. “Most lactose-intolerant people can drink my milk,” says Calvert, “and have no adverse affects.”

I asked Calvert why she didn’t try for organic or government certification. The land could be certified as organic, she said, but the cows couldn’t. The cows are fed an all-natural diet that she buys from the local elevator, but it isn’t economical to order organic feed. And as for certification, Calvert said she would love to be governmentally certified as “Grade A” raw
milk because it could multiply milk sales. However, non-certified raw dairies are only allowed to sell one hundred gallons each month. The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture pressures her to stay small because it doesn’t have the manpower to test every certified dairy. Luckily for Calvert, since non-certified raw dairies aren’t required to keep or give any records to the government, she can quietly sell more than her allotted one hundred gallons.

The Swan Brothers Dairy, Incorporated began in 1923 in Claremore with only one cow. Today, the herd has grown to one hundred and fifteen. I spoke to a young woman working the register at their dairy about the manufacturing process, but a handy pamphlet told me most of what I wanted to know. Each cow spends the majority of her day outside on the several hundred thousand acre pasture. They eat a mixture of soy, grain, grass, hull, sodium bicarbonate, and other flavorings. When milking time comes, the cows enter preparation stalls where their udders are cleaned by a solution. They then move to the milking station where they eat and their udders are hand-washed. After milking, “the girls” are sprayed with iodine and led back outside. The milk is brought into a large tank cooler (one than can be seen from the “lobby”). After cooling, milk is packaged in plastic bottles and placed in a cold storage room. Swan is a certified Grade A raw milk dairy, but my helper couldn’t tell me what this entailed. The dairy is tested monthly, she said, but that’s all she really knew about it. The Swan brothers have made quite a lucrative business, and sell over three thousand gallons of milk per week.

Though Swan Brothers and HLA are small, they have quite a fan base. And both companies don’t even market their milk; they let it speak for itself. The only publicity Judy Calvert received was in the starting years of her company. A reporter from the Tulsa World traveled out to Talala, Oklahoma, and wrote an article on the new dairy. That’s when things really started picking up, she said. The article painted Calvert and her cows in the positive light they deserved, calling her dairy quite “acclaimed” (Parrish D1). According to the article, Calvert has never had to advertise after placing one small ad in the local paper. Her success is due to her devoted customers (Parrish D1).

The Swan Brothers Dairy, Inc. is in the same boat. It has no advertisements except for one humble sign on I-44 near Grand Lake. Their customers are so loyal, one even created the website that led me to them. “We don’t even own a computer,” said the saleswoman, “some customer decided to do that for us.” Both Swan and HLA seem like good dairies—they have safe practices, a small but loyal fan base, and quality milk. But they still drown in the “sink or swim” world of dairy production.

On the other side, organic milk is certainly swimming. As raw milk continues to take the “bad rap” for all milk, organic seems to take all the profit. The market for organic dairy continues to be growing. Right now it takes up 3% of all milk sold, and is continually increasing. In the United States, there are 74,435 certified organic cows (Roberts 50). To be an organic dairy, the land must be free of pesticide for three years. The cows must have been free of antibiotics for one year, and the feed must be certifiably organic and free of any unnatural ingredients (Horizon). The USDA has three levels for labeling organic products. Goods with completely certified organic ingredients are “100% organic,” goods with 95% or more certified organic ingredients can be called “organic,” and products with 70-95% certified organic ingredients can be labeled as “made with organic ingredients” (Roberts 50).

Horizon Organic is “the largest fresh organic milk producer” and “is credited with
making organic milk available nationally” (Burros). In fact, Horizon can be bought at most grocery store chains. Horizon gets 80% of its milk from 353 family farms. The farmers are educated and converted to organic by the Horizon Organic Producer Education (Horizon). These family farms have less than 500 cows each and follow eating and grazing habits dictated by Horizon, ensuring that each cow eats only organic feed and spends enough time outdoors. Horizon actually published its own “Standards of Care,” a set of procedures for family farms to abide by (Phillips 33). Horizon wants to “be a part of a larger organic community that fosters the highest possible standards for animal welfare, environmental stewardship, and agricultural sustainability” (Phillips 33). And they seem to be doing it, as they are also front-lining a movement to change USDA standards from letting cows graze a minimum of 45 days to 120 days (Horizon). The other 20% of milk is split between their 4,000-cow Idaho dairy, and their 500-cow Kennedyville, Maryland dairy. The Idaho dairy has roughly 30,000 acres for company cows to graze on. Cows from eighty nearby family farms also use that land (Horizon). But to Horizon, this doesn’t seem “organic-enough,” so they are investing money to add more space and split the dairy into two.

Though Horizon is based in Boulder, Colorado, it is a nationwide company. I spoke to a consumer hotline representative in El Paso, Texas. Jeremy didn’t know a lot about the company, but he was very courteous and tried to help me as best he could. After ten minutes on the phone, I had been placed on hold three times and learned very little. The only thing he could tell me about the manufacturing process was that “after it leaves the farm, it goes to one of our plants where we process it.” After processing, Horizon milk is packaged in “earth friendly, recyclable opaque cardboard.” He then promised to email me the answers to my other questions, and swiftly got off the phone.

A week later, I received a standard business email from Jeremy and Dean Foods, the parent company of Horizon Organic. The email: “Thank you for your recent telephone call to Horizon Organic. We appreciate your interest …”

Organic Valley is a nationwide milk producer that focuses on localizing product, which means it specializes in regional milk. Because of this, when consumers go to the whole-food stores that sell Organic Valley, they know their milk hasn’t spent most of its life on the road. There are 1205 farmers at 700 organically certified farms that supply the company’s milk (Horizon). The farmers are part of the milk cooperative: Cooperative Regions of Organic Producer Pools, CROPP. This is in effect to “promote[s] regional farming diversity and economic stability by the means of organic agricultural methods and the sale of fortified organic products” (Organic Valley). This co-op has 1205 farmers and 700 organically certified farms (Organic Valley). Though the number of cows varies by farm, each cow eats the same type of feed—a mixture of organic grass, hay silage, and grains that are pesticide-free (Organic Valley). Organic Valley specializes in regional milk and its products never travel too far from the cow. I spoke to Kayla, a farm cooperative helpline representative about the travel time and manufacturing. Talking to Kayla was completely different than my interview with the Horizon Organic representative. Kayla’s office was located at headquarters, and all farm and consumer calls come to the small town of Le Farge, Wisconsin. Kayla explained that all milk is picked up by haulers from the area and taken to the closest centrally located milk facility in that region. Before unloading, the milk is tested for safety and cleanliness. After the pasteurization and homogenization process, the milk is packaged and put on a refrigerated freight truck that transports it to a
distribution center. United Natural Foods, Kayla said, was one of the larger distribution center Organic Valley uses, but other centers are also on the list. From that point on, it is the retailer’s job to get the milk to their store, either by working directly with the center (for larger chains), or going through another retailer (for small stores).

Horizon Organic and Organic Valley are different beasts altogether, which shows that not all organic milk is created equally. Because they are national, they both have a marketing staff and a publicity budget. Both companies use their web pages, displays, signs, coupons, and even their milk cartons to continue advertising their product (Horizon, Organic Valley). In fact, both milk cartons contain a pantheon of knowledge. Both cartons list what their definition of organic is, and boast that their milk is produced without “antibiotics, hormones, and pesticides.” Both cartons display a pleasant representation of their family farms. Horizon then goes the more emotional route, detailing its farm assistance programs, its organic leadership, and its participation in wind energy (Horizon).

So far, the differences in organic corporation milk and raw independent milk seem purely mechanical. It makes sense that a large company would spend more money on marketing and would have drawn-out processes to ensure the success of its product. Disregarding these differences, how do the milks stack up against each other?

I set up a blind taste testing and had several members of my family compare each type of milk. To remind my testers what our ordinary milk tastes like, I included Borden Vitamin D Whole Milk. All testers enjoyed Borden because it is what they were used to; it had a very smooth and flavorful taste. Both Horizon Organic and Organic Valley had a sweeter taste than what non-organic milk drinkers might be used to. It was described as “melted ice-cream,” and seemed to have a creamier and higher fat content than the other milks. HLA raw milk wasn’t quite as sweet. Several testers described it as blander, denser, and more di-
luted in taste than any other milk. It was also the darkest colored milk, the only one from Jersey cows, and wasn’t whitewashed like the other samples. According to the testers, the Swan raw milk was by far the best-tasting milk. They said it tasted almost identical to Borden milk and that, even though it wasn’t homogenized, it held a smooth texture.

In reality, the testers couldn’t distinguish “normal” from “organic” or “raw.” Each milk had its own taste, but wasn’t so different that its type could be pinpointed.

If it is true that all five milks are similar, then why spend so much money on the minute differences? Regular Borden milk is hitting a four-dollar price for a gallon, and is the same price as a gallon of HLA raw milk. Swan raw milk, the winner of the taste test, was the cheapest. It costs three dollars and seventy-five cents for a gallon.

Both organic milks are double the price, as a half-gallon is around four dollars and fifty cents. That’s quite a price to pay for certified organic feed. In fact, organic milk costs so much more because companies need to offset the price of organic feed, spend extra to weed out antibiotic-ridden cows, pay for the certification process, and ship their milk greater distances (Burros).

If organic milk costs more, then why is it rising in popularity? It could be because raw milk is distinguished as unclean. It could also be because, in America’s rush to become “purified,” drinking organic seems healthier. So far, it seems like organic and raw milkers are clashing for the “natural” sale. George Siemen, Organic Valley’s CEO, disagrees. “The whole organic versus local thing is an absurdity. Most locals are organic,” he says. “If you are concerned about the local community you are concerned about not having your local farmers exposed to chemicals. You are also concerned about humane, and fair trade…” (Phillips 35).

The RAW USA organization, a group who created the raw milk guidelines, produced a comparison chart between conventional, organic, and raw milk. Conventional milk seems to be the bad guy because it utilizes artificial breeding and pesticides on pastures, is low in vitamins, and cheaply furthers the milk economy (RAW USA). Organic and raw milk both seem safer, and more healthful. But raw milk seems to be the best choice for animals and humans. Cows always have access to pastures, live in non-artificial environments, and only eat what they might find in nature. Raw milk reduces whole-barn pathogen outbreaks, uses natural science to keep the milk natural, and contains all the vitamins milk was created with (RAW USA). Raw milk is cheaper to make, and should be cheaper to sell (especially since all you have to do is take it from the cow to the cup). And kids who drink raw milk are less likely to develop lactose intolerance and other allergies (Johnson). Even organic milk can’t boast that.

Why isn’t America ready for raw-milk to take over the shelves? Americans have a fear of the unknown and the uncontrollable. It is American fear that keeps us from eating raw beef (steak tartare), raw cake batter and drinking raw milk. Everything in American society is standardized, and not standardizing milk seems heinous. Beef and eggs are regulated by the USDA, while raw milk is left to its own devices.

Raw-milk would be the best decision for the environment, for the animals, and for the consumers. But we American’s can’t get over the fear of the un-regulated and the un-known. Maybe it isn’t the most natural choice we crave, but rather the knowledge of what we consume, no matter how natural it is. We want to know what the heck we are eating. People are becoming more aware of what they put in their bodies. We check ingredients, labels, where it came from. Raw milk has an uncon-
trollable aspect—we can’t see what’s in it, even though we can choose the cow it comes from. Organic milk fits the bill—we can look up the regulations, there are no quality control questions, and it’s still good for us. Raw milk is an enigma, and there is no telling which batch could be contaminated. Consumers are then left with three choices: drinking the most natural, better-for-all-parties-involved, healthful milk that has a small chance of carrying a foodborne illness, or drinking semi-good-for-you-and-the-environment organic milk. The last choice? Sticking with what you know—drinking regular old pasteurized, homogenized, vitamin injected Borden. To this milk drinker, the choice is easy.

Works Cited
Calvert, Judy. Personal Interview. 16 March 2008.