

FROM YOUR STATE REPRESENTATIVE

The Great Oleomargarine Debate and Citizen Initiative Petitions



By: State Representative, STEVE HAMBLEY

What color should the oleomargarine we buy at the store be? For those of us born after World War II, "yellow" is the first if not seemingly indisputable response. Nevertheless, back in 1949, Ohio voters had to answer that question at the ballot box. It was important enough to result in a citizen initiative petition to enact a state law that the Ohio General Assembly refused to act upon. The General Assembly, as the Akron Beacon Journal argued at the time, had refused twice to alter an archaic law to ensure free competition between butter and margarine because of potent dairy interests. Praising the citizens, the Journal editorial pointed out that they had rightly demanded reconsideration of the issue through the initiative petition.

On Election Day, the proposed state statute permitting the manufacture and sale of colored oleomargarine passed with 62% in favor. Despite

statewide approval, the colored oleomargarine referendum failed in Medina County with 53% opposed—largely due to the rural vote. Medina Village and Wadsworth were decisively in favor with 62% and 66% respectively, but the opposition of the farmer vote in the rural townships outweighed the townspeople. Challenging the farmers' perspective, the Medina Gazette editorial opinioned before the vote, "Waving aside all the ballyhoo propounded by both sides, it appears to us that it all boils down to the question of whether or not the dairy industry is to have exclusive right to butter's traditional yellow color."

Was it really about the color yellow or was it something else more significant? Essentially the oleomargarine referendum issue repealed a state statute dating back to 1890 that protected the dairy industry, who argued in favor of consumer protection against



Steve Hambley

"counterfeit butter." Ohio's approach was to require that oleomargarine be sold without coloring, thereby reducing its visual appeal. Oleo manufacturers compensated by including a yellow coloring agent to be mixed into the white mass of lard at home before consumption. Yum!

Ohio was not the only place that the great oleomargarine debate occurred. Invented in France around 1869, the new product found favor from

Chicago meat-packers in the 1870s eager to capitalize on harvesting excess animal fat that had earlier been discarded. It became popular among millions of consumers who couldn't afford real butter during a persistent economic recession, but was an obvious threat to the dairy industry. Congress took action in 1886 to arguably safeguard consumers, as well as protect dairy interests, by imposing a tax. The oleo tax remained, although occasionally raised or challenged depending on the political whims of national politics, until 1950 when it was finally repealed.

Some historians have pointed out that changes in the manufacturing process and the inclusion of more farm crops into the ingredients of oleomargarine weakened the monolithic viewpoint of the dairy industry. Others have said that the inevitable political power of the urban working class likewise doomed the dominance of rural interests in both Washington and Columbus. Despite the federal taxes and the inconvenience of mixing a coloring agent

in the white lard, margarine sales grew because of consumer demand for a cheaper substitute for butter. Because of Ohio's Constitutional right for citizens to initiate petitions at the state level, the question was finally put to rest in the 1949 general election.

There is an old saying that one should always know which side your bread is buttered on. Maybe the lesson to be learned from the great oleomargarine debate is despite which side you think your own bread is buttered on, our system of state government is designed so the voters will and should eventually prevail in answering those kinds of questions. In the end, some would offer, it's the "bread and butter" issues – regardless how you color it – that really matter the most and in which the people will have their say at the ballot box.

Steve Hambley is the Representative for the 69th district of the Ohio House of Representatives

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

SINCE 1943

Bauer FUNERAL HOME

Pre-Planning | Traditional Services | Cremation | Urns & Caskets

2089 Columbia Road, Valley City
330-483-3300
 BauerFuneralHome1943.com

Mary Ann Bauer, Funeral Director



Steve Hambley
 State Representative
 House District 69

77 South High Street, 11th Floor
 Columbus, Ohio 43215

(614) 466-8140
 Rep69@ohiohouse.gov