

Ethnic and Social Divides Within the BC Salmon Canning Industry:

A Study of the North Pacific Cannery

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Abstract:

British Columbia's fishing industry rose to great success over the course of the twentieth century, but in spite of its overall achievement, the industry's workers faced massive differences in access to opportunity and economic provisions. This essay examines the employment characteristics of BC's fishing industry, by conducting a case study of the North Pacific Cannery, to reveal how ethnic and social divides at once separated workers while unifying and strengthening the industry as a whole. An examination of the differing Native, Chinese, Japanese, White and Female groups will serve to demonstrate how each group was assigned a role within the cannery as the product of individual historical and social experiences. Each group was subject to differing adversities that ultimately contributed to their overall success or lack thereof, but ultimately, the sum of these differences helped create the fishing industry as it came to be. The specific combination of roles and duties assigned to each group is ultimately deemed to be an integral player in creating the behemoth that the BC fishing industry came to be.

Introduction

Throughout much of its history, Canada has relied on a variety of staple resources to connect itself to the rest of the world, and in British Columbia, fishing has emerged as a major player in the provincial resource economy. It developed in the late 18th century as a byproduct of interest in some of the province's other natural resources. Men flooded into BC hoping to establish their fortunes in the fur, gold and timber trades, and they took notice of the area's abundant fish supply. Realizing the economic potential that a fishing industry could provide, many began setting up a series of canneries along the Pacific Coast. Exploding in size and value, British Columbian fisheries eventually emerged as one of the province's most profitable industries, and became a place where people from all walks of life could find a stable job. It is here that this essay will take its base, examining the employment characteristics of BC's fishing industry, by conducting a case study of the North Pacific Cannery, a once booming cannery located in northern BC.

While many people found employment within the BC fishing industry, it is apparent when looking at individual's positions within the cannery, that many of the labor divides coincide with ethnic and social differences. This essay will examine how general job designations across the industry were experienced and divided within an individual cannery, in this case, the North Pacific Cannery. Ultimately, this research will try to determine the factors that reinforced the divide and which allowed it to become so prevalent over the course of the cannery's lifetime.

History of the BC Fishing Industry

In the hundreds of years before and after European contact, West Coast natives were avid fishermen, as the region's rugged landscape contained few large game animals,

and of the land based animals that did exist, most were difficult to capture.¹ As a result, the surrounding rivers and oceans became the area's most prized possession, providing every person with thousands of pounds of fish with which they could preserve, consume and trade.² The Europeans developed an affinity for local salmon, and a provisional market developed³, beginning British Columbia's earliest commercial fishing industry.

In the 1860's, BC began opening its first salmon canneries, participating in a commercial process less than 50 years old, which required large amounts of labor and equity. Such circumstances resulted in the early industry being led by the white men who were best able to afford participation. In the earliest years, most of the lower level workers were native as they had a familiarity with the processes required to fish and pack, but following construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, large groups of Chinese contractors began to appear in the area, looking for work.⁴ Taking advantage of the relatively numerous and affordable Chinese workers, canneries hired these men on set term contracts to work within the canneries assisting in fish processing. As the industry grew and became more accessible, Japanese immigrants and lower class whites began to appear in greater numbers, typically joining Natives on the water as fishermen.

From this point forward, I will detail the relationship that each of these groups had with the fishing industry, beginning with a short excerpt of notes from secondary sources followed by the results of my own primary research. Ultimately, these groupings will provide a clearer picture of life within the cannery.

¹ H.W. McKervill,. *The Salmon People: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Vancouver, 1992, 9.

²Ibid, 12.

³ D. Newell, *The Development of the Pacific Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, Montreal and Kingston, 1989, 3.

⁴ C. Lyons, *Salmon, Our Heritage: The Story of a Province and an Industry*, Vancouver, 1969, 181.

The Original Fishermen – Native Experience in the North Pacific Cannery

British Columbia's native populations were essential in establishing the base from which the mighty fishing industry rose, for they brought the experience and knowledge that allowed salmon catches to demonstrate their appeal. The native groups had resided on the Pacific coast for thousands of years, and their lifestyle depended on the resources that the ocean provided. In the years prior to the canning boom, it is estimated that Native families "used approximately 1000 sockeye salmon every winter",⁵ for both food and economic purposes. While salmon provided obvious benefits through its nutritional value, it was also a great trading supplement, an effective resource in bartering for goods with other Native and European groups.⁶ This familiarity proved extremely valuable when canneries first began, as natives were almost exclusively employed as fishermen; in fact, of the 3000 plus fishermen in the province in 1883, "almost all of them [were] Indians".⁷

Although Native fishermen were an important tool when forming fishing's industrial base, it appears as though the cannery's industrial culture largely glazed over their value. Within the North Pacific Cannery, payroll sheets were often sorted according to ethnicity; and this process did not forget native groups, as one of the earliest available payrolls listed payments to Native workers through the "Indian Boss".⁸ The fact that Natives were paid through a single person is negligible of their overall participation in both the fishing and packing aspects of the cannery's operations. A 1923 worker count indicates that 56 of 128

⁵McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 11.

⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷ Ibid, 148.

⁸ UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (hereafter UBC RBSC), Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company (hereafter ABC PC) fonds, Box 62, Anglo British Columbia Packing Company Payroll, May 1922.

canning line workers, and 42 of 110 fishermen or boat pullers, were labeled as “Indians”.⁹ While native persons made up forty per cent of the North Pacific’s workforce, most of the company’s records ignored this.

Aside from the few worker counts provided in the ABC Packing Company funds, and payroll sheets that indicate an “Indian Boss”, native records are either omitted, or grouped together with white workers. In spite of all the contributions that would indicate native importance, they have been largely tucked away as a forgotten piece of fishing’s industrial base.

The Contract Labour Force – Chinese Workers Within the Cannery

Chinese workers, in a manner very similar to native groups, were often treated as a group rather than as individuals, although much of this can be attributed to the contract system that was used to employ them to the cannery. Utilizing a contract labour system initially developed during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, canneries would enlist workers for their operation from overseas at a very low cost, through the use of a Chinese agent. This broker would be paid a lump sum covering the entirety of the workers wages, plus a fee for himself, and in return, he provided the cannery with a steady workforce that would meet their employer’s high demands or risk losing wages.

In a 1918 contract between Charlie Chue and the ABC Packing Company, an agreement is made whereby Chue agrees to supply the North Pacific with the labor force that will pack and store fish, as well as make the cans that they will be stored in.¹⁰ Chue agreed to provide enough employees to fulfill the company’s demand of 90,000 packed

⁹ Ibid. Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

For full worker count, please see Appendix.

¹⁰ Ibid. Box 61, File 1, Contract between Charlie Chue and the ABC Packing Company, 1918.

cans per day at a rate of 5 cents per case of 48 cans. If the Chinese workers failed to fulfill these goals, Chue would have to pay 80 dollars a day until the shipment was completed. The terms of this contract, and the numerous others like it, encouraged “China Bosses” to demand the most from their workers. Chue agreed to pay his men 30 cents an hour for the duration of their work, but if they failed to meet the demand, he could take away their reimbursement through other means.

A 1902 commission had established the head tax on Chinese workers to be 500 dollars per person, a hefty fee for workers making a few dollars a day, and as a result, the Chinese contractors often paid the fee in order to get workers to migrate to Canada. Once contracted out to a cannery, this tax, as well any other costs against the contractor would be deducted from a worker’s wage¹¹. Furthermore, these workers were often competing against each other for their own job security; Chinese laborers were entirely employed on the canning line¹², and as a result, their jobs were at risk from any major technological change. The development of the “Iron Chink”, a machine that saved time and resources in cutting and cleaning fish, was responsible for the loss of six canning line workers per machine.¹³ Through these mechanisms, contracted labour became a form of indentured servitude, where Chinese workers were no longer working for their own benefit, but for that of their China Boss and the cannery that employed them.

The contract system turned Chinese workers into a series of cogs in a machine, meant to turn a profit, at the expense of any true comfort. Of the 246 workers listed in the North Pacific Cannery worker count, 47 of them are Chinese, and all of them are male,

¹¹ McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 104.

¹² UBC RBSC ABC PC fonds, Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

¹³ McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 73.

unlike any other ethnicity participating within the cannery.¹⁴ These were men brought over for the sole purpose of work, and any domestic comforts were to be left at home. Women were expensive to bring over, and offered little value to contractors, so they remained in China, resulting in a system where workers in Canada failed to integrate with the society evolving around them. Brought over by the boatload, Chinese men worked together in the cannery all day, and spent the rest of their free time together within the “China House”. As their room and board was a typically part of their contract, they never really needed to venture outside of their own sphere. As a result of this group’s isolation, they appear to be little more than “units of energy” meant to process fish and generate income for their superiors.¹⁵

The Outsiders – Relationship between the Cannery and its Japanese Workers

While the previous two groups have experienced some form of isolation from the rest of the canning industry, with native contributions to the industry largely overlooked, and Chinese workers looked at as simply a part of the industrial machine, neither group faced outright persecution to the same degree as the Japanese. These workers emerged following the Gold Rush, and quickly found themselves a home within British Columbia’s fishing industry, for Japan, as an island nation, had developed similar practices in catching fish over the years. Japanese people became abundant along the BC coast, with estimations of nearly 4000 participating in the industry in some capacity by the year 1900.¹⁶

Over the course of their interaction with the industry, Japanese workers developed a successful reputation on the waters, proving to be very effective fishermen. The year

¹⁴ UBC RBSC ABC PC fonds, Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

¹⁵ McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 43.

¹⁶ Ibid. 63.

over year averages from 1918-1920 indicate that Japanese fishermen completely out caught their white and Native counterparts, in spite of having fewer boats than natives and similar amounts to whites.¹⁷ Furthermore, of the 22 Japanese fishermen employed by the North Pacific Cannery in 1923, 10 owned their own fishing nets, compared to 7 whites and 1 native fisherman who owned their own.¹⁸ Japanese success on the water carried over to their social sphere as well, where they became known as “industrious, clean, law abiding citizens”,¹⁹ who engaged with the community around them. Unlike Chinese workers, Japanese groups were largely in BC on their own accord, and as such, they were able to bring family over, or establish new families via “picture brides”, and became quickly integrated into society.

However, for all of the success that Japanese fishermen enjoyed, they frequently faced discrimination from an envious white population. The government implemented numerous measures to slow, or even outright stop the Japanese from fishing in the region. Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the Canadian and US governments cooperated to prevent Asian migrants from crossing the border in between countries, effectively ensuring that any Japanese seeking to expand into Canadian waters from outside of the country would not be allowed.²⁰ Furthermore, the provincial government passed a resolution via the Duff Commission of 1922 essentially stating that the Japanese population should be removed from the industry “in the shortest possible time without

¹⁷ UBC RBSC ABC PC fonds, Box 64, Catch Totals By Ethnicity, 1924-1930.

¹⁸ Ibid. North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

¹⁹ McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 63.

²⁰ Chang, Kornel. "Enforcing Transnational White Solidarity: Asian Migration and the Formation of the U.S.-Canadian Boundary." *American Quarterly* 60.3 (2008): 671-96. Web.

[causing disruption]”.²¹ In order to put this resolution into effect, the government began removing fishing and boat pulling licenses of Japanese workers, and imposing quotas on the total number that would be allowed in the industry, with only 250 Japanese allowed to remain on the Skeena River.²² The North Pacific Cannery was very aware of these impositions, and prepared itself for the coming changes; in a letter from H Bell Irving to JE Lord, Irving encourages the NPC to have its best Japanese fishermen submit fishing applications early, so that the most successful providers remain on the water.²³ One of the largest blows to Japanese success came with the lifting of the ban on gas-powered boats for white and Indian fishermen in 1924, essentially providing these fishermen with a much wider accessibility to fish than the Japanese could hope for in a row boat. All of these resolutions seem to work together to explain how whites quickly surpassed the Japanese catch amounts during the 1930’s. In a list of catches by ethnicity during the week of July 15, 1932, 9 Japanese boats caught an average of 1864 kilograms of spring salmon each, while the 4 white boats were able to catch 2686 kilograms each, a drastic change compared to the typical Japanese dominance of the early 1920’s.²⁴

The discrimination against Japanese fishermen came to its ultimate conclusion with the descent into World War II, where the province’s “sixteen hundred Japanese-Canadian fishermen were [...] legally robbed of their boats and property, their homes and their hopes” prior to being sent to internment camps in the interior.²⁵ Although this persecution was unlike any discriminatory practice before it, it should not come as a shock considering

²¹ Newell, *The Development of the Pacific Canning Industry*, 162.

²² McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 154.

²³ UBC RBSC ABC PC fonds, Box 62, Letter from H Bell Irving to JE Lord Addressing the Reduction of Japanese Fishing Licences. August 21, 1922.

²⁴ Ibid. List of Boats and Catches by Ethnicity, ending week of July 15, 1932.

²⁵ McKervill, *The Salmon People*, 155.

the overall measures that the provincial government had taken to remove Japanese success from the fishing industry.

The Overlooked – Female Cannery Workers’ Contributions

While much of this essay has covered the role of men in the BC fishing industry, women played an important role as well. The 1923 employee count indicates that similar numbers of both men and women were employed on the canning line at the time, but women were absent from work on the waters.²⁶ Furthermore, this count indicates that the majority of women employed in this sector of the cannery were of native heritage. Of the 60 women working in the North Pacific Cannery, 48 were native, followed by 9 Japanese and 3 whites. A 1949 Net Worker’s supplement list provided a record of jobs held within the cannery, and outlined their wages by gender.²⁷ An examination of this list reveals that women tend to work different jobs from men, typically those considered to be less “difficult”, and the wages that they receive reflect this perception. Even when men and women are working the same job, and a woman is in a senior role, male wages’ remain higher. Women faced with a much smaller selection of jobs, and the ones that they were able to enter come at a lower pay rate.

As a result of women’s relative seclusion within a small section of the industry, as well as the fact that the majority of these workers were non-white, many of their contributions were overlooked and not taken note of in historical records. Women definitely played a role in the North Pacific Cannery, but their male counterparts overshadowed almost all of their contributions.

²⁶ UBC RBSC ABC PC fonds, Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

²⁷ Ibid. Box 63, Net Workers Supplement, 1949.

The Leaders – White Involvement in the BC Fishing Industry

Up to this point in the essay, numerous ethnic and social groups have been outlined that have faced some form of adversity or another during their interaction with the BC canning industry. However, a final group needs to be discussed, one that has faced no noticeable challenges; the white man. From the industry's earliest years, these men were thrust into a position of power that they seemed to maintain over the course of the cannery's lifespan. When canneries began opening in the late 1800's, much of the capital required to start up such an arduous endeavor had to come from overseas, through brokerage houses that lent to only the most shrewd and savvy businessmen. The need for these connections, as well as the presence of similar industries back home, provided white men the advantageous leadership and organizational roles. White men for the most part lucked into their position, but as a result of their lack of persecution, they were able to keep it to themselves.

The most striking indication of white control is the shown in the North Pacific's Payroll sheets, which demonstrate how the majority of monthly salaries were paid to these men in numbers reaching a 1000 to 1200 dollars a month, a fortune compared to the cannery's other workers making between 65 and 100 dollars a month, or Chinese contract laborers earning 30 cents an hour.²⁸ This isn't to say that all white men were employed in a managerial position, as employee counts indicate over 20 men were working out on the water,²⁹ but many of these men were provided with a clear path to success that prevented other groups' workers from advancing. For those not wealthy enough to have started the

²⁸ Ibid. Box 62, Anglo British Columbia Packing Company Payroll for May 1922.

²⁹ Ibid. Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1923.

cannery operation, managerial positions were achievable, but they required both a familiarity with the overall fishing or canning operation, as well as the ability to manage men, a situation that all other groups were denied from the beginning, as they were subject to another group's rule. As a result of this pairing of luck and lack of discrimination, white men in the fishing industry were the only ones afforded the ability to truly advance their position within the cannery.

Conclusion

As this report has come to show, life within the North Pacific Cannery, and the BC fishing industry as a whole, was a very segregated community. Ethnic and social divides dominated the industrial structure, and often dictated both the field in which one would work and the opportunity for success that an individual would be afforded. While many may point to racist policies or specific structuring as the reason for one group's success compared to another, it is as much a reason for one's accomplishment as historical familiarity or sheer blind luck. British Columbia's canning industry became a successful operation as a result of this specific combination of roles that each group was best able to provide, and there has been little to suggest that a transformation in group structure to provide a more even layout would benefit the industry as a whole more than it would harm it.

It is from this point that further study can be conducted. Now that the industrial structure has largely been revealed, comparative studies could examine how BC's fishing industry compares to other fisheries in different areas. Success has been seen across the world, but how does the rigid structure of British Columbia fare when compared to other areas? Is success here truly a product of rigidity? Or would it have been improved by more

fluid structural outlines? This is one of many questions that can provide insight into our past and which can guide future industrial development.

Furthermore, this paper's study of fisheries can be compared against industrial structures of the province's other major resources like forestry or mining. As a resource based economy, British Columbia has been home to numerous industries that all developed in to major players in Canadian industry, but the ways in which each came about and formed varies immensely. Could a study of other provincial resources provide insight into fisheries' successes and flaws?

Nevertheless, the BC fishing industry contained a rigidly defined social system that in many ways dictated its evolution. The system was by no means fair, but it provided its workers with the strict guidance necessary for the industry to flourish. Because the industrial structure of BC's fishing industry is so intertwined with ethnic and social barriers, further study of either topic should continue to integrate the other into its research.

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Appendix

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Men employed in cannery</i>	<i>Women employed in cannery</i>	<i>Employed in seine boats, tugs, but not including gill net fishermen</i>	<i>Gill net fishermen</i>	<i>Boat pullers</i>	<i>Fishermen who own their own nets</i>
Whites	12	3	3	16	8	7
Indians	8	48		21	21	1
Japanese	1	9	5	22	22	10
Chinese	47					
Total	68	60	8	59	51	18

UBC Rare Books and Special Collections Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company fonds,
 Box 64, North Pacific Cannery Worker Count Prepared for the Department of Marine
 and Fisheries, 1923.