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Historical narrative of the canning industry in British Columbia's southern interior

Introduction

British Columbia's southern interior boasts fertile soil and a wonderful climate that facilitates the growth of fruit. Thus the region was ripe for the development of an agricultural sector. The development of the agricultural sector owed much to the stereotypical 'pioneer' character that many of the interior's early settlers demonstrated. These people were hardworking, resourceful and able to adapt to their surroundings. Furthermore, it logically follows that where successful business endeavours operate other associated industries will develop too. With reference to the British Columbian interior this can refer to the tobacco industry, packing houses, canneries, transportation companies, refrigeration companies, amongst other ventures that have all blossomed at one point in time.

This narrative is not intended to be completely comprehensive; however it is intended to give a clear historical overview of what actually happened. I have outlined where most of the interior's canneries operated, in what years, under what ownership and under what terms they ultimately folded. In this endeavor I am immeasurably indebted to the late Ian F. Greenwood who did much of the initial research that allowed me to go in and have an excellent and solid base from which to begin. I am also indebted to those at the Kelowna Public Archives notably Tara Hurley, Donna Johnson and Executive Director Wayne Wilson. I am also greatly indebted to my instructor for this course, Dr. James Hull. I also provide a short description on how the interior's canning industry worked; with reference given to the complex relationship between the canners, growers, marketers and equipment sellers.

The canning industry in the Okanagan can be seen to have existed for about one hundred years. This period can be bookended by two significant events. The first significant event occurred in 1892 and this is where the story of the canning industry in the Okanagan begins. The first cannery, Vernon Canning and Jam Co., was established when Lord and Lady Aberdeen purchased property at Coldstream Ranch in that year. The second significant event occurred when Beaven Canning filed for bankruptcy in 1992. It was the last commercial cannery in the Okanagan. The intervening one hundred years were hugely significant however, and I hope I have done them and Ian's research and undoubted passion for this subject a measure of justice.



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Source: <http://www.jnweb.com/british-columbia/map-bc.html>

The above map shows most of the places in the interior that will be covered within this narrative. In addition to the above I've also included the map below. It shows the Okanagan valley in greater detail. This is useful for acquainting oneself with areas such as Wood Lake that are at times central to the narrative. I found it helpful to acquaint myself with the geography as I tracked the history of the industry.



Source: http://www.okanagan-now.com/images/okanagan_map.gif

The Canneries – a Narrative

In this section I have outlined information for almost every cannery that has ever existed in the Okanagan. I've ordered this chronologically. It should be noted that the information on which this narrative is based comes principally from the Ian F.

Greenwood collection at the Kelowna Public Archives.

The story of the canning industry in the Okanagan begins in 1892. The first cannery, Vernon Canning and Jam Co., was established when Lord and Lady Aberdeen purchased property at Coldstream Ranch. The Okanagan's first cannery was established to produce jam, but never entered production commercially. It was in independent operation until 1912/13. In 1913, Dominion Cannery purchased the building. The entity that would ultimately become the Dominion Cannery housed in Lord and Lady Aberdeen's former property in Coldstream; was established in 1906 as the Southern Okanagan Cannery Ltd. The company initially canned tomatoes under the Alymer brand, but later canned just fruit. There was a terrible fire at the site in 1919 and operations ceased in 1922.

Established in 1908 the Wood Lake Canning Company Ltd. began canning operations in 1909. The operation canned many goods, mostly tomatoes, but also canned peaches, corn, beans and pickles. John K. Ollis was the first President with Egbert Trask as Managing Director and Ed Todd installed, briefly, as manager. Despite its variety the operation almost went into liquidation in 1912. However, the Vernon Fruit Company stepped in and operated the plant for the 1912 season. There were no operations in 1913

or 1914. In 1914 the operation went into liquidation. After the First World War Thomas

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Bulman purchased the company's machinery and transported it to his farm at Ellison. The old Wood Lake Canning Company building was then demolished in 1920.

Dominion Cannery began production in the Okanagan valley under that name at Peachland in 1909. They took the decision to move to Kelowna in 1910 and became engaged with a company by the name of Western Cannery which went into liquidation in 1914. During the Great War Dominion Cannery took over operations, and by 1918 had full control of the former Western Cannery operation. Operations ceased in 1960.

In 1909, two brothers, George and Oscar Fox, established the Kootenay Jam Co. As the name suggests they were producing jam. They sold the property in 1911 and moved to Mission. The original Kootenay Jam Co. building still stands and is a well-preserved heritage building. Meanwhile in Nelson, also in 1909, Jim MacDonald, aka "Long Jim" due to his towering 6' 7" frame, established the MacDonald Jam Plant. Again, this cannery produced jam and operations continued under the original name until 1953. The company was sold to the National Fruit Company in 1955.

In Summerland in 1910 the Smith Cannery was established by Mr. T.J. Smith. The Cannery produced canned tomatoes and peaches. It was taken over by Dominion Cannery in 1913 who operated the plant until 1915. Also in 1910, the Okanagan Cannery Co. was established at Okanagan Centre. At this cannery tomatoes, pumpkin and apples were preserved. Operations ceased in 1918.

In 1914 a cannery was established in Cawston. This cannery had an extremely checkered history. The plant had more than four owners and had a number of years where it was not in operation. The plant was initially established by the Orser Bros. and was named the Eastern Cannery Co. In 1918 Sutherland and Ritchie of Kelowna began

operating the plant. This arrangement continued for a number of years; yet the plant also remained idle for a number of years too. In 1923 the community of Cawston sold shares and operated it with S.R. Manery in charge. This arrangement continued until 1933 when fierce competition from Dominion Cannery forced the plant to close. The cannery remained inactive until 1944. In 1944 Larry Kelly, owner of the Rowcliffe Canning Company in Kelowna, obtained the plant. The original cannery canned only tomatoes, but Kelly continued with not only tomatoes, but asparagus and fruits too. The operation closed in 1959. Also in 1914 Leopold Hayes established the Occidental Cannery in Kelowna. This cannery profited from the misfortune of another cannery: the Okanagan Centre Canning Company. The Okanagan Centre Canning Company had declared bankruptcy and Hayes stepped in and purchased their machinery. Tomatoes and apples were canned at this location, and pumpkin pie filling was also produced. The preserved products were sold to a Winnipeg, Manitoba company by the name of Macdonald's Consolidated Ltd. Macdonald's were very happy with the quality of the product and entered a contract with Occidental. This facilitated the need for mechanic and spatial operational expansion. As mentioned, the relationship between canners, growers, marketers and equipment sellers was a complex one. Part of this complex relationship is evidenced with this cannery as the growers and Macdonald's slowly purchased the operation over a number of years. In 1929, Safeway entered the western Canadian market and purchased Macdonald's to be the sole supplier, as wholesaler, to their stores. This was a problem for Occidental. In the year leading up to the purchase Occidental processed 200,000 cases of fruit and vegetables. Ultimately, Occidental decided to sell to

Canadian Cannery, a company from Hamilton, Ontario. This decision was taken as a result of Safeway's entry into the market. The cannery was in operation until 1960.

1914 was a very busy year for cannery start ups. A year later in 1915 another cannery by the name of R.J. Graham Company was established in Vernon in the old Dominion Cannery plant. The cannery canned vegetables (onions, carrots and potatoes) and apples. In 1926 Thomas Bulman bought the company's evaporator and operations ceased that year too.

For obvious reasons that I need not labour here cannery start-ups were rare post 1914 and throughout the First World War. However, the war did increase demand for preserved products that could be sent to troops on the front line.

In 1918 Pure Foods Products established a cannery in Keremeos. They processed corn and tomatoes for two years before selling the operation to the ubiquitous Dominion Cannery in 1920. Dominion operated the plant until 1929, the year of the great depression.

Also in Keremeos in the early 1920s was a company by the name of Keremeos Packing Company. The cannery canned tomatoes and some fruit products.

In 1920 the Okanagan United Growers Fruit Products Company was established in Vernon. The company operated for two years, producing evaporated apples and cider. However, the local growers became unhappy and operations ceased in 1922. The equipment was sold to Thomas Bulman.

In Kelowna, in 1923, Larry Kelly established Rowcliffe Canning. This cannery packed tomatoes, fruits and was an early front runner in the production of apple juice. The plant eventually closed in 1964.

In Summerland in 1924 the Milne family established the Milne cannery. This cannery packed asparagus, cherries, apricots, peaches, pears, plums and tomatoes. This company was very successful even spreading into the U.K. market. The cannery was sold to the Bandeens in 1964. In 1924 Dominion Canners began operations at an Oliver site under the ownership of Frank Eraut. The plant processed tomatoes and changed its name to Canadian Canners in 1931. Operations ceased and the plant closed in 1960.

In 1928 Rutland Canners was established by E.L. Cross. This cannery processed tomatoes, vegetables and produced some juice. Unfortunately the plant was destroyed by fire in 1938. Also in 1928 Bulman's was established in Vernon under the ownership of Thomas Bulman.

As with the First World War, another major global event, the Great Depression, facilitated a lull in cannery start-ups in the valley.

In 1932, Sunoka Fruit Products Ltd. was established at Summerland. In 1934 Regal Fruit was established eventually taking over Sunoka. Ultimately, Regal went out of business and was taken over by the grower owned B.C. Fruit Processors, what later became Sun Rype. The plant was destroyed by fire in 1947. It was never rebuilt.

In Oliver in 1936 Cyril Huntley established the Huntley Bros. Cannery with the help of Jim Stowell. The cannery processed tomatoes and was operated by the family through to the end of the Second World War. Oliver also saw the establishment of Stowell Canning Co. Ltd. in 1936 by Jim Stowell. It came about as the Huntley Bros. looked to move into canned fruit and expand operations. Stowell managed this area of production. Candied fruit and glace cherries were processed. Operations ceased in 1960.

In 1937 the Kelowna based Modern Foods was established. The plant processed dehydrated apples, concentrate, juice and vinegar. The Sun Rype brand was established in 1939. The plant was sold to B.C. Fruit Processors (which later became Sun Rype) in 1946.

In 1938 Osoyoos Evaporator was established in Osoyoos. The company was established by H.P. Mahler and M. Huxley. The plant produced dried apples. Unfortunately, the plant burnt down in 1944 and was never rebuilt. At Oliver, also in 1938, Louis Deighton established the L. Deighton cannery where apricots, peaches, pears, apples, prunes, cherries and candied fruit were processed. The plant was sold by Deighton in 1952. Again in 1938 the Vernon Fruit Union was established at Woodsdale. The plant processed apple juice under the O.K. brand before being purchased by B.C. Fruit Processors in 1946.

In 1939 Barkwill's Cannery was established in Summerland. The plant processed apricots, peaches, pears and apples under the AMB and Royal City labels. The company was a champion of innovation and continued operations much longer than many of its counterparts, eventually closing in 1980.

In Kelowna in the early 1940s Bill Deighton, brother of Louis, established a cannery with his wife Elga. It was named Deighton Cannery and they processed fruits and vegetables grown on their property. They ceased operations in the early 1950s.

Blair Underwood established Garnet Valley Cannery in Summerland in 1942. Along with producing potato chips and popcorn; it also processed tomatoes, cherries, prunes, apricots and peaches. Larry Kelly of the aforementioned Rowcliffe Cannery in

Kelowna purchased the cannery in 1946 and operated it until 1960 at which time it closed.

Ewart MacNaughton established MacNaughton Canning Co. in Osoyoos in 1946. It processed apricots, peaches, pears, plums, tomatoes, cherries and various other fruits. The operation was forced to close in 1950 because there was a freeze in 1949 that limited the amount of fruit available for canning. At Summerland in 1946 the Summerland Cooperative Growers Cannery was established. The cannery mainly packed peaches. Ultimately, the outfit was purchased by Safeway in 1948 with operations continuing until 1974.

In 1947 Creston Cannery was established in Creston. The cannery processed fruit, vegetables and apple juice. The plant closed in 1958 after it was deemed cheaper to transport the product from elsewhere rather than keep a plant in Creston.

In 1948 Dennis and Bill Edge established the Edge Brothers Cannery in Okanagan Falls. The cannery processed tomatoes and peaches, but the freeze of 1949 put paid to their operation.

In 1951 Mary and Henry Avenarius established the Avenarius Diabetic Cannery. This was a unique operation and was assisted in part by the Summerland Research Station. The operation was run from the Avenarius home. Ultimately the products (fruits and jams with artificial sweeteners) were sold all over the nation until government regulations forced closure in 1955.

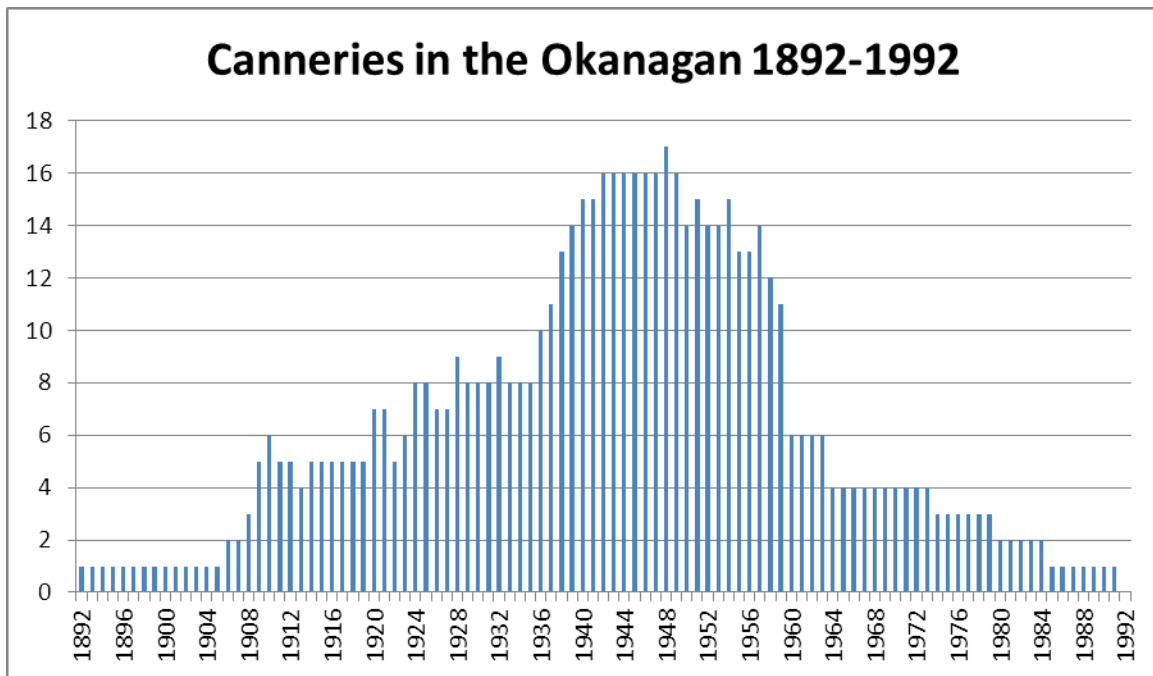
At Osoyoos in 1954 Canada Packers was established. Canada packers purchased the MacNaughton Cannery after its closure. Cherries, apricots, peaches, tomatoes and

pears were canned at this cannery. Confusingly, the name was changed to York Farms in 1956. The company closed in 1958.

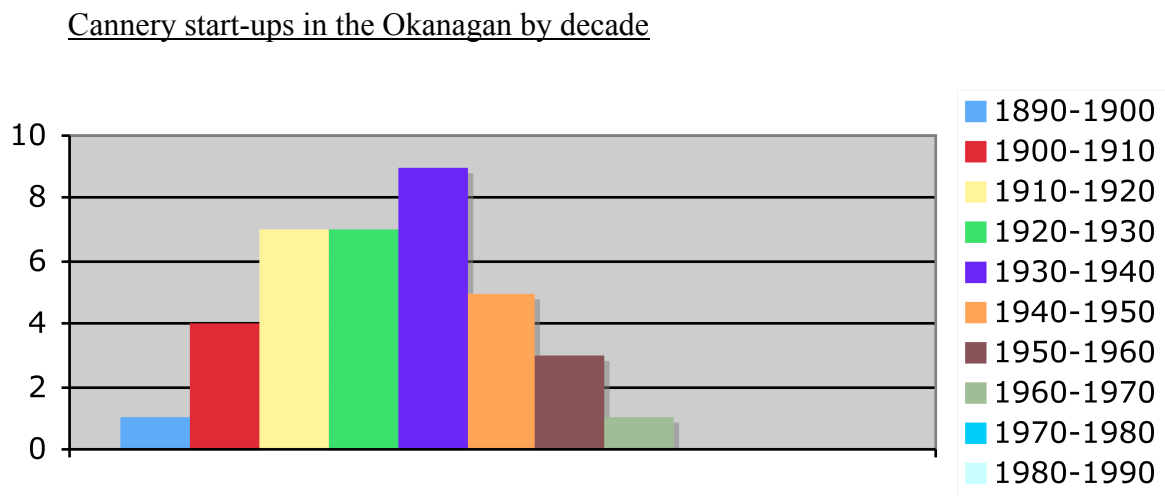
In 1957 Lionel Fudge began operating a custom canning operation under the name of Fudge Canning. The company was purchased in 1970 by John Beaven and the name changed to Beaven Canning. The operation continued to focus on custom canning. After three years worth of poor crops, and the limited work that brought, the company filed for bankruptcy in 1992. This was the last of the Okanagan's commercial canneries.

Analysis

The industry reached its zenith in the 1940s and 50s when there were many independent commercial canneries in the interior (see below chart).



The above chart shows the number of canneries in existence in the Okanagan by year. Thus, if four canneries opened in one year, but four closed in the following year then the chart will show no change. This is intended to show when the largest number of full time canneries were in operation in the Okanagan. The data used is from the information contained within this narrative. It is clear that the zenith of the canning industry was in the late 1940s and early 1950s when there were at least seventeen canneries in independent commercial operation.



The above chart shows cannery start-ups within the Okanagan by decade. Clearly, during the years analyzed, 1930-1940 was the decade when cannery ‘start ups’ were most popular.

The relationship between the canners, growers, marketers and equipment sellers.

A key component in the Okanagan canning industry was the complex relationship between canners, growers, marketers and those selling equipment within the industry.

This relationship was complex as all four parties relied on each other to a varying degree at one time or another. Moreover, one of the major factors contributing to the complexity of this relationship is the fragile nature of fruit that goes to market. Growers were in the position where once their crops were harvested they quickly needed to sell. This was especially so in the early years when refrigeration was not an option. The aim was to ensure that the fruit was still ripe; thus maximizing their return. Yet this was fraught with difficulty. They not only had to market their goods, but also had to transport them. Often they had to sell, in the words of Ian: “wherever a market could be found and at whatever price the orchardists could get.”¹

Naturally, this led to some fairly scandalous prices and practices. This coupled with the ‘see-saw’ nature of agricultural crop returns could spell disaster for some orchardists. Attempts to establish unions to regulate the marketing of goods proved: “unsuccessful and it wasn’t until the early ‘30s... that the BC Fruit Growers Association (BCFGA)... focused its activities on solving the problems of Southern Interior fruit growers.”²

Ultimately these four parties depended on the Okanagan fruit crop and were all interrelated. The creation of BCFGa certainly aided the situation. As irrigation methods and production progressed there were an increasing number of culls. These were items not deemed fit for market. The BCFGa helped secure fair prices for culled apples which were used in the production of apple juice. An example of the power of a unionized industry is evidenced by the price paid for culls. Indeed, “the venture was so successful

¹ Simpson, Sharon J and Greenwood, Ian F. *Deep Roots, Strong Branches*. Manhattan Beach Publishing, Kelowna, B.C. 2006. Page 9.

² *Ibid.* Page 9

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that the initial \$3.00 per ton [paid for culls]... grew to \$22.00 a ton.”³ As with any union organization there were fractious members who wished to have more control and more say over how things were run. Of course, canners and the wider market were not always happy with the prices they had to pay and the BCFGAs often got caught in the middle unable to please either side.

Conclusion

The Okanagan fruit canning industry reached its zenith in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Thereafter the industry fell away and had dwindled significantly by the mid-1960s. From my research it is clear that demand for canned products such as those once produced in the Okanagan has disappeared almost entirely. There exists some small demand, but nothing significant enough to justify a commercial canning operation. The canning industry itself grew and then declined to its present point. However, this is not indicative of the Okanagan fruit/vegetable industry as a whole. The Okanagan fruit/vegetable industry is very adaptable; as the relatively recent shift to wine production demonstrates. The industry has over time grown and consolidated. Sun-Rype is a great example of one of the industry's great consolidators. Indeed, the fruit/vegetable industry itself is at the mercy of many elements such as weather; crop growth; technological innovations; consumer demand to name but a few. This ensures that the industry has to be responsive and it is. This is most clear in the products that have been produced and offered over the years. Initially, many canneries were canning tomatoes, but at times there was much variety from peaches to onions and asparagus. Success or failure

³ *Ibid.* Page 12

depended on a number of factors; with consumer reception being just one such factor. Indeed, a great example of the fruit/vegetable industry adapting can be found in its response to technological changes. Technological changes facilitated a greater amount of culls. This led the industry to produce juice. Such adaptability shows the nature of the industry as a whole. Ultimately, Many different products have been tried and varying factors have contributed to the success or failure of a given product. Juice is by far the most popular 'by-product' the industry has produced. Over time as ventures became less profitable novel ideas were shelved and a shift towards staple items occurred. This is why the Summerland Research Station was so vital as it provided an outlet for creative production. Overall, what is clear is that the canning industry declined and as with any decline there are many varied reasons for the change. However, from my research and significant secondary reading I believe there are several key causes for the decline.

One chief issue is the advancement of transportation and highways. This led to produce being able to travel greater distances. Moreover, this combined with refrigerated trucks allowed produce to be shipped great distances and remain 'fresh' thus making the available markets extremely competitive. Now that products had a much greater chance of reaching market fresh the need for preserved goods dwindled. For instance, it became more cost effective for a company like Safeway to maintain a fleet of refrigerated trucks than to hold and maintain a canning company and its premises. As a result, companies like Safeway no longer needed to use canneries as extensively as before and this significantly harmed the industry. Thus, technological advancements in the second half of the 20th century limited the need and demand for canneries. Furthermore, the 1960s was a period of greater government intervention in the food industry and greater government

centralization of the industry as whole. This led to stricter regulations, such as those that affected the Avenarius Diabetic Cannery, and harsher penalties for infractions. For some canneries the cost of implementing the changes was an issue and this led to companies going out of business. With that said, the government funded Summerland Research Station did much to aid and advance the local industry. Under the stewardship of Ted Atkinson in particular the Station assisted local growers and canneries in testing products for market. Thus, government involvement within the industry should not be cast solely in a negative light. Of course, there are other issues that contributed to the decline of the Okanagan fruit canning industry, but from my extensive research I consider these to be the major factors.

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