History of the Pacific Coast Salmon Industry.

Written by H.D. and read to the Canadian Fisheries Convention June 1920

It is not generally known that the first canning of Pacific Coast salmon was on the Fraser river in 1863 when a Mr. Annandale put up a few cases at New Westminster. His efforts were on a very limited scale but were extensive enough to convince him there was a profitable field in this industry for someone with a more intimate knowledge of salmon fishing than he possessed. That winter, when on a visit to his old home in Scotland, he persuaded Mr. Alexander Ewen to come to British Columbia and engage in the enterprise. Mr. Ewen arrived in 1864, and from then until his death in 1907 was the recognized leader in the salmon industry in this province. It is largely to his energy, foresight, and the assistance he extended others to engage in salmon canning that eventually made the Fraser river the premier salmon river of the world.

The first salmon canning on what we might term the commercial scale occurred however on the Sacfamento river in California in 1864; the enterprise being founded by Mr. William Hume. Like Mr. Ewen he had been born and brought up in the salmon fisheries and like him also was a man of sterling qualities of mind and heart. The first pack consisted of 2,000 cases, the cans being all soldered by hand and the tools and methods of packing employed being of the crudest sort. The product sold for $16. per case, but the high costs involved, and the subsequent rejects for defective tins precluded any profit being made. The results of the season's operations however convinced Mr. Hume that money was to be made in the business, and learning that salmon were more plentiful, and the season longer, on the Columbia, he transferred his activities to the latter river in 1866. Mr. Hume was the pioneer on the Columbia as he had been on the Sacramento, and he lived to see the pack in that district increase from 4,000 cases the first season to 656,000 cases in 1884, which was the banner year.

After Mr. Hume withdrew from the Sacramento there were no canneries on that river until 1874, when one plant was established Other shortly followed until in 1882 there were sixteen canneries operating, and over 200,000 cases were packed. Placer mining however covered the spawning beds with a mass of debris which destroyed their usefulness and practically annihilated the salmon, so that by 1892 the number of canneries had dropped back to one, and the total pack for that season was but 2,281 cases. Through artificial propagation the Sacramento to-day enjoys a run of salmon equal to its old time records, but the demands of mild curers and the fresh fish market have been so great that the canning industry has never been re-established to any extent.

By 1883 the number of canneries operating on the Columbia had increased to 39, but vast as the supply had been it was unequal to the demands made upon it. After 1884 a steady decline set in. By 1902 the pack of the quinnat species had declined to about one third of the banner year, and the number of plants in operation had declined to 14. Since then artificial propagation has restored the aggregate quantity of quinnat salmon in the Columbia, but many of the tributary streams are without stock to-day since the original runs were fished out and no efforts are being made to restore them

by means of artificial propagation!

Commercial canning on the Fraser river in 1876 was represented by three plants and the combined pack was 9,847 cases. By 1901 the number of canneries had increased to 48, to which must be added 25 operating on the American side in Puget Sound waters, so that 73 canneries were depending on this one stream for their fish supply that year. The principal pack in those early days were of the sockeye species, and in the pinnacle year of the Fraser sockeye industry over 2,400,000 cases, of 48 lbs. to the case, were packed. This represented 30% of the entire world's production of canned salmon that year. At to-day's selling values the pack of Fraser river sockeye salmon for that one season would represent seven times the entire purchase price for which the United States secured Alaska from the Russians.

How the Fraser has declined has been often told, but that it can be restored I fully believe. Let us hope it will not be long delayed. Now that an international treaty to deal with this probelm has finally been concluded steps should be taken at once, and the best and most experienced men engaged to re-establish by artificial propagation this King amongst Kings of salmon rivers.

1877 saw the commencement of canning operations on Skeena river, on Puget Sound, and on several of the coastal streams of Oregon and Washington. The industry on Skeena river grew and prospered until to-day, with the Fraser temporally eliminated, it is the principal salmon river of British Columbia. Puget Sound developed from 5,500 cases in 1877 to 2,500,000 cases in 1913, and while the Fraser failure has affected Puget Sound materially it is still one of the most important sections of canning operations to-day.

In 1878 Alaska entered the salmon canning field, two companies, one of which, the North Pacific Trading & Packing Co., is still operating, beginning that year. Their combined pack was 8,159 cases. Their banner year was 1918 when 134 canneries packed 6,678,000 cases. Fishing in Alaska however has been too strenuous and so alarming has the situation become that drastic changes in regulations are necessary and it is proposed to vest the control of their fisheries in an administrative board whose knowledge of local conditions will enable them to deal intelligently with the matter.

By 1891 the combined salmon pack of the Pacific Coast canneries totalled 1,592,975 cases, which was a greater quantity than the markets of the world could then absorb. As a result packing operations had to be curtailed, and this was accomplished by a pooling arrangement between packers. Out of this pool was created the Alaska Packers Association, the largest company engaged in the business to-day. Through intelligent marketing and advertising efforts a demand for canned salmon was created; others followed the lead of the Alaska Packers Association; and to-day the world absorbs an annual pack approximately 8 to 10 million cases.

In the beginning only the quinnat, or spring, salmon was saleable, but as the markets extended, and the fisheries of the Sacramento and Columbia declined, the sockeye species secured the premier position, which it holds unquestionsd to-day. Its pre-eminence is due to its rich oil and red coloured flesh. From sockeye the market grades down through Springs, Alaska Red, Cohoe, and Pinks to Chums, each, in the order named, being a step farther away from the sockeye in colour and richness. It does not mean however that this implies inferior food value, for as a matter of fact the Chum species contains more nutrition than the more spectacular sockeye possesses.

To-day the Pacific Coast salmon canning industry comprises over 500 canning establishments with a capital investment of well over $50,000,000. The value of the annual output exceeds $100,000,000., and it directly gives and indirectly gives employment a vast army of workers. In buildings, plant and machinery, and methods of packing, salmon canneries are models of cleanliness and up to date methods. In no industry are greater pains taken to ensure the production of a well packed and wholesome food product. New ideas are quickly seized upon and applied to salmon cannery requirements, and the packers are justly proud of both their plants and their achievements.

And as our past history has been, so also can we expect its future. Ups and downs we had, and doubtless will have again, but the industry in 56 years has expanded from 1 to 303 canneries and from 2,000 to 10,000,000 cases of an annual pack, and with such a firm foundation established we have nothing to fear, for the years to come. To-day the Pacific Coast salmon canning industry is far and away the greatest fishery enterprise the world possesses, and if we conserve and build up the salmon runs as they are capable of being built up, the day will come when the wise men from the far east will stop wasting their time on the toy fisheries of the Great Lakes and the Atlantic seaboard, and will come west where they can splash in a real puddle, and take their part in a full grown man's game.