

# Uncovering the Working Experience at the North Pacific Cannery: The Canning Line

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*Abstract:*

Despite the success of the North Pacific Cannery compared to other canneries in the area, the people that worked in the canning line at NPC were faced with racial and gender inequality. By looking into previous work done on this subject, and looking at the resources at the UBC archives, I was able to find proof of this inequality through differences in pay amounts, different hiring techniques, and other sources proving inequality in the canning line. I analyzed multiple secondary sources, and particularly looked at the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company Fonds at the UBC archives. What I learnt was that there was discrimination on the Chinese workers at the NPC, and I also noticed that the women that did work at the cannery were mainly Chinese, and only worked inside the cannery. I was able to get an understanding of what the living and working conditions were like for the workers, mainly through secondary sources I read. Through this paper, the inequality of the workers at the NPC canning line are brought forward, in hopes of understanding what it was like to work at the canning line for the different races and genders involved.

The North Pacific Cannery is one of the oldest canneries along the Pacific Coast located on the Skeena River in Port Edward. It was a functioning cannery for almost 100 years. Today the North Pacific Cannery has been refurbished to be a museum and designated a National Historic Site by Parks Canada, retelling the stories and lives of those that once lived and worked in this cannery. There is a lot of history which can be told through a location like this. Through my work, I hope that some history is uncovered,

understanding gender and race in the canning line, along with understanding the working conditions one encountered at the North Pacific Cannery.

The North Pacific Cannery used a canning line in trying to process and preserve the salmon which they caught. They used a preservation process using heat/pressure and cans to preserve the salmon so that it could be transported off to other locations, and would last much longer than a salmon's "fresh" life. The use of a canning line at the cannery was the most efficient way of putting the salmon into cans for produce. There are a number of steps which I will go through in the process of canning the salmon. The first step in the canning process was the actually catching and bringing of salmon to the cannery. The fish used at the North Pacific Cannery were usually caught using large fishing boats and seine nets, and then transported to the cannery. Next was the unloading of the catch, and the sorting and weighing. This process had to be done as quickly as possible for the spoilage of fish does not take very long, and for maximum production, the workers were to move fast. This was followed by the butchering and washing of this fish, which was where the head was removed, along with the fins and tail of the salmon. At the North Pacific Cannery this was all done by hand for the most part. As mechanization began to arrive in North America, the north pacific cannery still used the manual hands, for this was more reliable work, and also didn't have to deal with machines breaking down, or having to wait for mechanical parts. By actually having people doing the work, it was more precise and better quality which was what the North Pacific Cannery strived for, for their product was usually sent abroad to high-end salmon lovers. They sent not only to location in B.C, but also to locations such as England and other countries overseas. The next step in the canning process was the cutting and filling. In the early years of the cannery, this too was also done by hand. This was the filling of the empty cans, getting them ready for the next step of the process which was the weighing and patching. This was after the cans had been filled with the salmon; each can was weighed and adjusted to meet the requirements of the cannery. Also in the canning line, it was the employee's job to close and seam the lids onto the cans allowing for no leaks

and vacuum-sealed cans. They did this through a heating process using steam to enclose the cans, and preserve the salmon. The canning line was also responsible for the labeling and checking to make sure every can was the best quality, for only the acceptable quality were able to enter into commercial trade.

The fishing industry was a very multicultural industry, requiring many different skills and trades from the different ethnic backgrounds. The men and women that worked in the canning line were not always the most skilled workers, but they were cheap and trained by those that were skilled. The race that knew a great deal about fishing and preserving salmon prior to coming to the canneries were the Native Indians. As canneries began to realize the usefulness of the Indian tribes they “drew mainly upon Indian labour and by the late 1880’s Indian fishermen and cannery workers were already drawn from long distances...to the major cannery regions” (Knight, 80). The Indians were the ones who fished the land and preserved salmon prior to the invasion of the Europeans and the canneries. The canning line was not a standard 9am to 5pm type of job, but rather was very dependent of when the fishermen would bring the fish into the wharf. Since salmon only has a very short period before is no longer considered to be fresh, this canning process much be done as quickly as possible. This even included waking up in the middle of the night sometimes by the sound of a whistle to come and start the canning process as the fishing boats would come into the wharf. They would work random hours allowing for best preservation for the salmon.

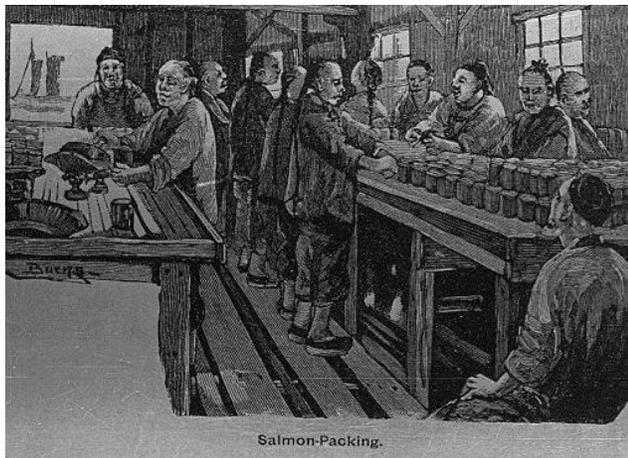
The conditions in which the canners worked were not very appealing. It was often described as being very cold, for not only were the fish kept in ice cold water holding tanks before the canning process began, but also the building which the canning line was built was made out on top of the water, allowing for the cool breeze to come up through the large slits in the floor, off of the water as seen in Figure 1. The men who would reach for the fish in the cold holding tanks would be up to their elbows in icy water before starting the preserving process. There were large slits in the floor of the building for

purpose. This was so that when the fish guts fell onto the floor in the work space, it was easily washed through the flood boards and into the ocean or beach bellow. This made for the working space to also become very smelly, for it was not only the fish guts falling into the shallow tides bellow, but also the toilets were built over the water as well. While the sun shone all day on the water, or depending if the tide was coming in or going out, the stench in the work place was at times unbearable.

Not only where the condition in the cannery unappealing, but so were the sounds. There is a book called *Memories of the Skeena* written by cannery kids (Walter Wicks) who describe the sounds in the cannery during production during the time of some mechanization. He begins by saying how the start of the production line is very quiet, for only the Chinese men are there, beginning to sort and butcher the salmon. As the conveyer belts begin to start running and the machines begin to get turned on, the building soon becomes filled with loud noises. The steamer would be blowing steam, the salmon filler would be making its mechanical noises, and the voices of people talking but the young boys were unable to understand, for it was not in English. Often the sounds of a place like this are not often thought about, but the noises for these cannery workers and cannery kids were engrained in their heads as unpleasant work.

The advantage that the North Pacific Cannery had above other canneries was the ties with the railway which ran right through the cannery. This made for easy transportation and export of goods and people into and out of this location. In order to be a successful cannery, the canneries were responsible for selling the products, and through the railway, this process was made easier and more efficient than shipping or transporting products via other sources of transportation.

The amount of products produced in the fisheries varied greatly from year to year. It all depended on how much salmon there was to be caught that year, how efficient they were at preserving the salmon, and the amount of workers and reliable machines they had at the north Pacific Cannery. It was



very hard to estimate how many fish to expect in a season, for each season was independent from one another, making some seasons very fertile, while others were not. There were some estimations needed in order for production, such as how many supplies and workers were needed. The supplies to make the cans at the cannery were not cheap and therefore it was helpful to have close estimations as to what the salmon season was going to be like for that year. As Dianne Newell states in her book, *Tangled Webs of History*, that “because such materials were expensive, required storage space, and quickly rusted if not used, overestimating the amount needed could prove just as costly as underestimating” (131). Attempting to find trends in salmon stocks per season became a very important job at the cannery.

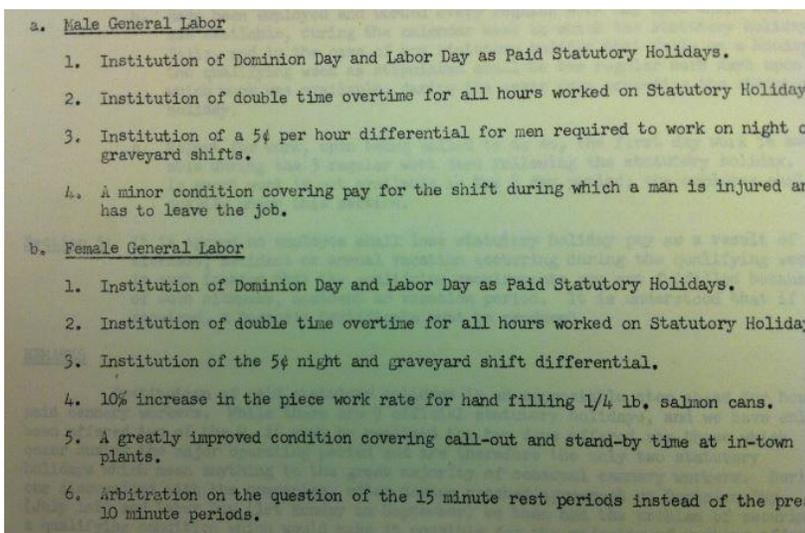


Figure 2 Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, Box 61.

The cannery workers also took away from the profit in certain years in the cannery, for things like strikes and job actions took place. Also, many canned goods were considered bad quality due to things such as contamination which also

took away from the profits of the cannery. Strikes took place in many different canneries along the coast in different years, but “there were broader based strikes on the Skeena and Nass in 1896 and 1897” (Knight, 97). In 1945 the UFAWU (United Fishermen and Allied Workers’ Union) was established. This was a union that fought for better wages and working conditions in the industry. I was able to find a report from the Union Headquarters stating labour negotiations explaining what they agreed should improve in terms of wages and conditions as seen in Figure 2. These strikes made production decrease greatly, and sometimes stop full force, in the relevant canneries. Workers were often just seen as a way of getting the laborious work done cheap, but they had rights too. Along with strikes, there was an economic crash in 1929 and the Great Depression which “severely weakened the salmon industry. Salmon canning declined by almost two-thirds in dollar value of annual outputs” (Newell, B, 103).

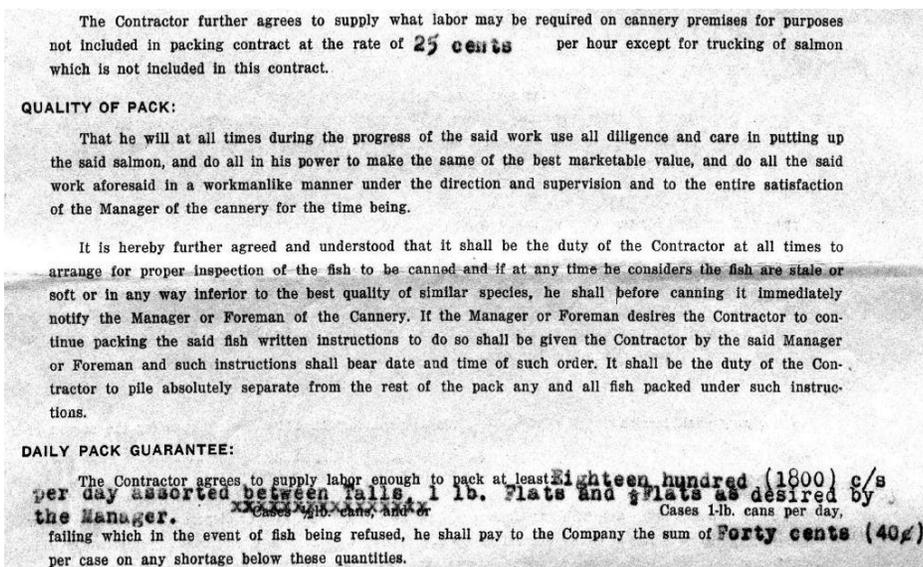


Figure 3 Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, Box 61.

The aim for a cannery was to make as much profit as possible, and this was accomplished through hiring employees to work for as little as possible. “In the early days this could be done by paying a

contractor rather than bringing the workers themselves onto the cannery’s payroll” (Muszynski, 6). By not bringing them into the payroll, their wage was not recorded and the minimal wage was given. As seen in Figure 3 the contractor further agrees to supply what labor may be required. Chinese workers were hired through a contractor as seen in the contract in Figure 3. This specific contract was written in the year 1936 between Sung Quong and Sung Yick of the City of Vancouver B.C. in the province of B.C.

between the “contractor” and the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company Limited. Here is where certain agreements are made between a Chinese contractors and the company, ensuring that there will be a legitimate amount of Chinese workers in order for the estimated amount of work to get done. Requirements were set to ensure the quality of the products, such as “proper inspection of the fish to be canned”, and to meet the “satisfaction of the Manager of the cannery” as noted in the agreement above. Also found in this contract was a daily packing guarantee, ensuring that a certain amount of cans per day would be made, as desired by the manager, otherwise they were fined for the loss of production.

In the 1946 salmon fishing season at the North Pacific Cannery, I was able to find a layout of the number of Employees in the Establishment, which I understood to be people such as the cannery workers and people that worked specifically inside the Cannery. This document split the workers in multiple ways; first being gender, second being race, also including the totals of all employees as shown in Figure 4. As seen here in the document from 1946, there were a total of 219 Employees in the establishment at the North Pacific Cannery. Surprisingly, there were more women workers than men, for there were 112 women and 107 men employed at NPC. Here we are able to see that the large

		Whites	Indians	Japanese	Chinese	Totals
Number of Employees in this Establishment.....	Men	40	19	-	48	107
	Women	2	110	-	-	112
	Total	42	129	-	48	219

Figure 5 Found at the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Fonds, in Box 61.

majority of the women working at the Cannery were Indian, for only two of the women working at the cannery were not Indian, but rather White. On the other

		Whites	Indians	Japanese	Chinese	Totals
Number of Employees in this Establishment.....	Men	35	20	-	35	90
	Women	1	95	-	-	96
	Total	36	115	-	35	186

State below the average catch of Sockeye by employed fishermen:--

Figure 4 Found at the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Fonds, Box 61.

hand, no Chinese women worked at the

cannery this year, but only men, making up just less than half of the men employed at this time. From

this document, it is relevant that no female or male Japanese workers were employed inside the Cannery, for they were rather the ones fishing. Figure 5 is the year 1947, and it is noticed here that employment went down this year from the previous. There is no one race which decreased in numbers though, for they all decreased in relatively similar amounts. The same trends are noticed in both years, being no women Chinese workers, no Japanese workers, and the majority of the women workers are Indian.

	<u>Cases</u>	<u>Value \$</u>
<u>CANNED</u>		
Sockeye	12076	237,655
Red Springs	444	6,282
Pink & J. Springs	--	--
White Springs	108	960
Steelheads	756	10,697
Bluebacks	--	--
Coho	2840	40,186
Pinks	5198	42,675
Chums	9815	77,861
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	31037	416,336
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Different types of fish required different methods of canning and were valued at different amounts. For example, in Figure 6 is a record of the year 1946's canned salmon for the season at the North Pacific Cannery, starting from July 1<sup>st</sup> through to September 7<sup>th</sup>. It lists the different types of salmon canned at the fishery, and for what price

Figure 6 Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Company Fonds. Box 62.

they received for that amount. According to this,

Sockeye went for about \$20 a case, while Red Springs went for about \$14 a case while the lowest were the chums, selling for about \$8 a case. The fact that the Sockeye's were the most valued salmon was known at the cannery, and when dealing with either the fishing or the canning, more focus was on these salmon than any other.

Thought my research I was able to notice trends such as who worked in the cannery in terms of gender and ethnicity. I was also able to find wages between ethnicities and working condition inside the North Pacific Cannery. I was hoping to find more information as to who works what stations in the canning line itself, but did not come across any of that info in my searches. There this concludes my research for now, although I wish I was able to find more. There is so much information to go through at

the University of British Columbia Archives, specifically the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company Fonds. I hope that my research is a start, for I know there were certain parts of the research I was not able to touch on regarding the length of this class, and the restrictions to the actual location of the North Pacific Cannery.

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