

The Kamloops Canneries: The Rise and Fall of a Local Industry, 1913-1990

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This paper is a study of the tomato canning industry in Kamloops. It asks how the success and failure of canneries at Kamloops were influenced by geography, markets, labour supply, competition, and concentration of capital. Such a study of the life and death of these canneries can illuminate our understanding of the province's fruit and vegetable canning industry as a whole and raises, at least by implication, certain questions about industrialization in British Columbia. It also underlines once again our awareness of how much the nature of economic activity in British Columbia has been shaped by its geography, by the productivity of its resource industries, and by national and continental economic realities.

In particular, the paper argues that tomato and vegetable canneries in Kamloops survived as long as they could compete with producers in the western United States through the use of cheap labour and a protected home market. By the 1950s a shortage of cheap labour, increased competition from the United States, and consolidation of plants throughout Canada and the United States forced those in Kamloops to close. The result for the city was the loss of an important agricultural and manufacturing industry, a lessening of local control, and a narrowing of the economy. Events in Kamloops thus contributed to the decline of the tomato canning industry in the province as a whole—where fifteen plants had operated in 1953,¹ only one still functioned in the 1980s²—and to the diminishing importance of the food processing industry generally. Where, indeed, it had at one time been the number three industry in the province,³ it has, thanks to just the sort of developments that took place in Kamloops, fallen in recent years to the status of a struggling and vulnerable one.

¹ Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Fruit and Vegetable Preservers Industry Report* (Ottawa, 1953), E-28.

² John W. Warnock, *Profit Hungry: The Food Industry in Canada* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978), 117; and information from Bob Griffin of Royal British Columbia Museum, February 1990.

³ William L. Marr and Donald G. Paterson, *Canada: An Economic History* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980), 382.

What follows does not challenge the common perceptions of the economic development of British Columbia. It tends rather to support those views and to show how the various economic forces have acted upon a particular industry. The standard description of British Columbia is that it exists on the periphery of the North American and world economies, and that its development has been characterized by the exploitation and processing of natural resources. The most significant industries have been mining and forestry, but fishing and agriculture have also been important.⁴ The province has prospered through the export of raw materials even though the value of world trade in such products has declined compared to trade in manufactured goods. British Columbia industries, like Canadian ones generally, have been able to grow only because of relative advantages and efficiencies in labour costs, mechanization and automation, or access to plentiful resources.⁵

In spite of attempts to diversify the economy, British Columbia's economic structure has been relatively narrow and simple.⁶ Historically, service and manufacturing activities were oriented largely to local consumer demand or were auxiliary to basic extractive activities.⁷ In addition, British Columbia's peripheral geographic and economic position made the export of highly processed manufactured products difficult and expensive. British Columbia's dependence on imported capital and labour helped to keep wages in the major resource sectors relatively high,⁸ but a more basic factor was the high productivity of labour in those industries, in a booming market for wood and paper. This pattern may now be changing. Recent evidence suggests that by the 1980s the economy of the metropolitan Vancouver area had become diversified enough to be independent of the fluctuating international market for resources. The rest of the province, however, maintains its traditional character.⁹

As with manufacturing industries in British Columbia, agriculture arose largely in response to local needs,¹⁰ to supply the food requirements of

⁴ Ronald Shearer, "The Economy of British Columbia," in *Trade Liberalization and a Regional Economy: Studies of the Impact of Free Trade on British Columbia*, ed. Ronald A. Shearer, John Young, and Gordon R. Munro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 3.

⁵ Marr and Paterson, 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 445.

⁷ Shearer, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Craig Davis and Thomas A. Hutton, "The Two Economies of B.C.," *BC Studies* 82 (Summer 1989): 3-15.

¹⁰ Margaret Ormsby, "Agricultural Development in British Columbia," *Agricultural History* 19 (January 1945): 11 and 14.

labour attracted to the development of staples industries.¹¹ An exception is Okanagan apples and soft fruits, which were marketed in Britain and the prairie provinces. Geography has posed a formidable barrier to agriculture in British Columbia. With only 2 per cent of its land area suitable for cultivation, the province has always been a net importer of food.¹² Most of its best agricultural land is in the lower Fraser Valley or near regional centres in the Okanagan or Thompson valleys. A growing population, while supplying a market for food products, has put pressure on surrounding farm lands and has helped push up land prices, which in turn has added to agricultural costs. This, combined with a short growing season, high labour costs, and the lack of economies of scale, has made the growing of vegetable crops in British Columbia inefficient and unproductive compared to potential competitors in the western United States. Once processors, and the food processing industry, were exposed to unfettered competition from the outside, their relatively high costs made them very vulnerable.

Tariffs played a role here but the tariff has always been low on agricultural produce, though higher on processed food. The intention was to protect Canadian processors but, as will be seen, it proved ineffective in protecting British Columbia's vegetable processing industry due to B.C.'s higher costs compared to its competitors.

Agriculture grew in the Kamloops region in response to the development of staples industries. The Hudson's Bay Company established the first farms to supply meat and vegetables to its trading posts, and the cattle industry began in the 1860s to feed miners during the gold rush. A depression followed the collapse of the gold economy in the 1870s, but Kamloops grew rapidly as a rail centre after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. Some mining development in the 1890s brought further growth that accelerated with the development of logging and the lumber mills which supplied the booming prairie market from the mid 1890s to 1914.¹³ Between 1885 and 1914 Kamloops grew from a village of a few hundred to a city of nearly 4,000 people.¹⁴

The period also saw major investment in agriculture in the region.

¹¹ Marr and Paterson, 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹³ Mary Balf, *Kamloops: A History of the District to 1914* (Kamloops: Kamloops Museum Association). Economic history of the city is scattered throughout the book, but particularly relevant chapters are 2, 4, 7, 10, 18, and 27.

¹⁴ 1885 figures are based on Kamloops Museum & Archives estimates from the Kamloops Inland Sentinel; 1911 Canada census population for Kamloops is 3,772 and the 1921 Census figure is 4,501.

Besides growth in cattle ranching, an influx of homesteaders and some large projects financed by British capital expanded the area's economy. The orchards and town of Walhachin, about thirty-five miles west of Kamloops, were established by British speculators in 1910¹⁵ and, beginning in 1903, a British-based company developed B.C. Fruitlands on the fertile flat lands across the river from Kamloops.¹⁶ It was common practice among orchardists to grow tomatoes and other vegetables between the rows of apple trees in order to have another source of income while waiting for the trees to mature or for the fruit to ripen.¹⁷ These developments resulted in a more diversified agricultural sector in the Kamloops region.

In the days before refrigeration, perishable products like vegetables and soft fruits had to be canned, and before long a canning industry began at Kamloops and some surrounding communities. The first was incorporated at Walhachin in 1913.¹⁸ The major shareholders of this cannery were the Marquis of Anglesey and other principals in the development of the town.¹⁹ Earlier unsuccessful attempts had been made by Kamloops businessmen in 1895 and 1908, but a cannery was finally begun there in 1915. This small operation, which sold only to city stores, lasted until 1920.

A much larger cannery started up in Kamloops in 1920, financed by various prominent businessmen in the city. They purchased the equipment from the Walhachin cannery, now defunct, and hired Charles Bickford as manager. Bickford was an experienced operator, having worked for Broder Canneries on the coast since early in the century and for the Walhachin cannery for three years. The Kamloops Cannery did well, supplying the local market as well as exporting to Calgary and Vancouver.²⁰ Annual production by 1924 was 75,000 cases and, besides tomatoes, included beans and pumpkins.²¹ In 1926 Kamloops Cannery became affiliated with a larger holding company, the Western Packing Corporation, that owned four other canneries on the coast and in the Okanagan. The holding company went bankrupt in 1928 and, even though the Kamloops plant remained viable, it too went under.

Charles Bickford took over as the new owner in 1929 and he operated it, except for a two year hiatus after a major fire in 1938, until 1944,

¹⁵ Balf, 120.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John Skelly interview, 1988.

¹⁸ *Kamloops Standard*, 18 November 1913, 5.

¹⁹ British Columbia, *Registrar of Companies Report* (Victoria, 1895-1960).

²⁰ *Kamloops Inland Sentinel*, 30 August 1921, 3.

²¹ Ibid., 25 July 1924, 1.

when he sold to Royal City Cannery based in New Westminster.²² In 1958 Royal City announced it was closing the cannery for one year due to competitions from California producers,²³ but it never re-opened.

The Kamloops Cannery was not the only one in the city. The Broder Canning Company of New Westminster, later renamed Royal City Cannery, opened a plant in Kamloops in 1927 but sold it to Frank Carlin, a vegetable wholesaler in the city, in 1928. On his death in 1932, Ross McKinnon of Vancouver and W. A. Palmer of Salmon Arm took it over, but they in turn sold out to James Skelly in 1938. Skelly had been Western Canada Sales Manager for the Burns Company of Calgary and purchased an orchard just east of Kamloops in 1925. After he moved to Kamloops he operated his cannery until 1959, when it was also forced to close.²⁴ Other canneries in the region closed around the same time — the one at Lillooet in 1954²⁵ and the Ashcroft Cannery in 1959.²⁶

The three basic economic factors of capital, labour, and markets need to be considered in an analysis of the canning industry in Kamloops. In the case of capital, two things are immediately apparent. The first is that the canneries were begun by local entrepreneurs with locally raised capital. The exception was the one at Walhachin.

The orchard land at Kamloops was developed by British capital, but the canneries, which used the tomatoes grown there, were locally financed. The City of Kamloops actually held the \$4,000 mortgage on the unsuccessful 1908 attempt to start a cannery.²⁷ All of the investors in the North Kamloops cannery of 1915 and the Kamloops Cannery of 1921 were businessmen in the city.²⁸ Stocks were sold locally and loans arranged at the Kamloops branch of the Royal Bank of Canada. When Charles Bickford re-started the company in 1928, he borrowed money from the same local bank.²⁹ Even though outside capital was involved in the Broder cannery of 1927, Kamloops people eventually bought it out. Charles Bickford maintained local control of the Kamloops Cannery from 1928 until his uninsured fire in 1938, after which Royal City Cannery purchased half

²² Charles Bickford correspondence to American Can Company, 1947, copy in Kamloops Museum & Archives.

²³ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 28 February 1958, 1.

²⁴ John Skelly interview, 1988; also James Skelly obituary in *Kamloops News*, 17 December 1979.

²⁵ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 28 February, 1.

²⁶ Canadian Fruit and Vegetable Preservers report, 1959.

²⁷ British Columbia, *Registrar of Companies Report* (Victoria, 1910).

²⁸ Registrar of Companies, 1920; *Kamloops Standard Sentinel*, 26 October 1920, 4, and 4 February 1920, 1.

²⁹ Registrar of Companies, 1934.

of the stock.³⁰ The Skelly Cannery was locally owned and operated until it shut down.

Also apparent is the fact that vegetable canneries, like salmon canneries on the coast,³¹ were relatively inexpensive to start up. The total assets of the Walhachin cannery were \$50,000. Financed for \$20,000 in 1920, the Kamloops cannery was re-financed in 1934 for \$25,000. The Carlin Canning Company incorporated in 1931 with assets of \$21,800. The mortgages on the buildings and equipment for all of those canneries varied from \$4,000 to \$10,000.³² The capital investment in Kamloops canneries can be usefully compared with that in sawmills. Local entrepreneurs could establish a sawmill in the 1880s for \$30,000 and employ about two dozen men. Two decades later, however, a new mill such as the one established in 1908 at Chase, thirty miles east of Kamloops, was built by American industrialists for \$250,000. The relatively low cost of start-up for canners tended to encourage numerous small operations in the canning industry.

This seems to correspond to the industry throughout the province. In 1922 British Columbia had seven vegetable canneries, all locally owned.³³ In 1931 Broder Canneries, Royal City brand, owned two plants, one in New Westminster and another in Chilliwack. By 1946 they also owned ones in Lillooet and Kamloops.³⁴ A locally owned cannery began in Ashcroft around 1928³⁵ but was bought by the large Ontario firm, Canadian Cannery, in 1939.³⁶ Though there was increasing concentration through the 1930s, the majority of vegetable canneries in British Columbia remained locally owned.³⁷ Even by 1953, eleven of the eighteen vegetable canneries in the province were community operated. In Ontario and Quebec, the major provinces in the Canadian food processing industry, the pattern was similar in that concentration of ownership came late. The same is true in the United States, where it was not until the 1960s that four firms controlled 40 per cent of the market.³⁸ What this meant was

³⁰ Jessie Bickford interview, 1988.

³¹ Dianne Newell, "Dispersal and Concentration: The Slowly Changing Spatial Pattern of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry," *Journal of Historical Geography* 14 (1988): 22-36.

³² Registrar of Companies, 1913, 1920, 1931, 1934.

³³ British Columbia, *Department of Industries Annual Report* (Victoria, 1922), p. X63.

³⁴ Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Canadian Fruit and Vegetable Canners and Preservers*, 1931, 1946.

³⁵ *Kamloops Inland Sentinel*, 31 August 1928, 7.

³⁶ *Canadian Fruit and Vegetable Canners and Preservers*, 1953.

³⁷ Warnock, 105.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

that canneries remained small and the industry as a whole, lacking economies of scale, remained inefficient and unproductive.

Historically, processing plants have been located near to the source of supply. The resulting decentralized industry had a chronic problem of over-capacity in the industry as a whole and within each plant. The reaction by owners in eastern Canada was to form the Canadian Packers Association in 1894 in an attempt to fix prices and force all processors to sell through their wholesalers and brokers, or face a cash penalty. This failed because new plants, unaffiliated with the association, were inexpensive to open.³⁹ The first large merger of plants took place in 1905, when twenty-four Ontario canneries formed Canadian Cannery. However, individual and partnership ownership were still common in the Ontario industry into the 1940s.⁴⁰

Higher concentration in the Canadian vegetable canning industry began in the 1940s. In 1949 the Federal Royal Commission on Prices reported that by 1947 the nine largest fruit and vegetable packing firms had over 40 per cent of the sales. The 1959 Commission on Price Spreads noted that by 1956 the four largest firms in Canada had 43 per cent of all sales, and the *Combines Commission Report on Concentration in Manufacturing* reported in 1965 that the eight largest firms had 52 per cent.⁴¹ In British Columbia, by the early 1970s the four largest firms of Sun Rype, York Farms, Fraser Valley Foods, and Empress Foods represented 59.7 per cent of sales and 81.4 per cent of profits.⁴² The wholesalers were also subject to corporate concentration. Kelly Douglas and B.C. Packers are owned by the Weston conglomerate, and in 1975 the Weston-owned Nabob Foods was purchased by Jacobs AF of Zurich.⁴³ In the United States, the industry was even more concentrated by 1965, with the twelve largest companies controlling 81.4 per cent of all profits.⁴⁴

An important factor affecting capital concentration in the Canadian vegetable canning industry was foreign ownership. In 1936 American branch plants, concentrated in eastern Canada, accounted for 10 to 15 per cent of the Canadian market. By 1969 the Federal Taskforce on Agri-

³⁹ Ian M. Drummond, *Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario From Confederation to the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), 200.

⁴⁰ Warnock, 106.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴² British Columbia, Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Concentration and Integration in the B.C. Food Industry, Phase III, Research Report* (Victoria, 1979), 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Warnock, 109.

culture reported that “over 70 per cent of the fruits and vegetables in Canada were processed in American owned plants.”⁴⁵ In British Columbia, Canadian Cannery, which owned four plants in the province, was purchased by the Del Monte Corporation of California in 1956. This acquisition led to further rationalization in the industry when three of these canneries were shut down by Del Monte by 1960.⁴⁶

In recent years vertical integration has tended to keep independent packers out of the market in British Columbia.⁴⁷ Safeway, for example—the province’s largest retailer—owns its own packing and processing house, Empress Foods. Other chains contract out their house brand labels. By the 1970s, the canned food market was dominated by large, often international, conglomerates and large retail chains with their own house brands.⁴⁸

After World War II the development of refrigeration technology for trucking and railways had two serious effects on the canning industry. It was possible now to ship tomatoes from the fields to distant canneries as well as to ship fresh vegetables from growers to distant consumer markets. This meant that growers in the United States and Mexico could ship fresh produce, year round, to British Columbia retailers, which meant a decline in the market share for canned vegetables.

Because of the inherently higher costs in British Columbia agriculture, the province’s growers and processors were, and remain, unable to compete with the far more productive and efficient ones to the south. This is true as well for all of Canada, where imported canned vegetables increased from 11.62 per cent of the Canadian market in 1964 to 24.25 per cent of the market in 1974.⁴⁹ Between 1972 and 1976 vegetable processing in general in British Columbia declined from 9 per cent of Canadian production to 7 per cent. The B.C. Select Committee on Agriculture reported in 1979 that this was due to a shift of processing to Alberta and the U.S.A. in peas, beans, and corn. This resulted in a decline in before-tax profits in the B.C. industry from 3.2 per cent of sales to 0.06 per cent. If closures occurred, they benefited national companies which centralized production outside of the province.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁶ British Columbia, *Journal of the Legislative Assembly* (Victoria, 1963), 39.

⁴⁷ W. H. Horner, *Western Canadian Agriculture to 1990: A Canada West Foundation Special Report* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 1980), 16.

⁴⁸ British Columbia Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Phase IV Research Report* (1979), 98.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-05.

⁵⁰ British Columbia Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *The Food Processing Industry in B.C., Phase III Research Report* (February, 1979), 16-17.

The fruit industry, on the other hand, has not suffered as badly because the higher quality fruit grown in the Okanagan has been able to maintain good markets in spite of higher costs. Even though markets for British Columbia apples have been lost in Britain, new ones have been found in eastern Canada, the eastern United States, and California.⁵¹ The dairy industry has also done better because freshness and nearness to markets are still required for dairy products.⁵²

However, tomato growers in British Columbia have been at a greater disadvantage in the post World War II era than growers of fruit and other vegetables. Three-quarters of the vegetables for processing in the United States are grown in border states with climatic conditions similar to Canada. The major exception to this is processing tomatoes, which are grown predominantly in California, where year-round production is possible.⁵³ British Columbia tomato growers were exceptionally vulnerable because of their greater costs compared to the rest of Canada and because of the relatively short distance between California and the Pacific province.

Since the 1930s Canadian canners have requested tariff protection. The federal government responded with high tariffs on processed goods, but it remained low on fresh produce.⁵⁴ The trend since World War II has been towards a lowering of tariffs. In 1961 tariffs were imposed on 55 per cent of Canadian imports. This portion declined to 37 per cent by 1975 owing to trade liberalization policies pursued under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The duty collected on all imports declined from 17.4 per cent in 1961 to 15 per cent in 1975. The decline for both fresh and processed fruit and vegetables was even greater, as shown in table 1 below.⁵⁵

TABLE 1
Tariff Rates on Vegetables Imported into Canada

<i>Year</i>	<i>Fresh</i>	<i>Processed</i>
1961	9.3%	15.9%
1975	4.2%	9.8%

⁵¹ British Columbia Food Council, *The B.C. Food Industry: A Study Authorized For the B.C. Food Council* (1973), 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ Canada, *Report by the Tariff Board, Fresh and Processed Fruits and Vegetables, Vol. 1 Part 1, Summary and Recommendations: Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Reference No. 152* (Ottawa, 1977), 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 109-12.

The Canadian government has tried to help struggling agricultural industries through mechanisms like price stabilization boards and other measures. When the British Columbia tomato growers and processors ran into trouble in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the federal Agricultural Stabilization Board tried to assist by buying and marketing the product rather than by raising tariffs.⁵⁶ British Columbia governments continued to rely on marketing boards, set up in the 1930s, for the different sectors and geographical areas of the province.⁵⁷ These boards, however much help they were, could not overcome the larger structural problems and disadvantages for vegetable growers and processors in British Columbia.

Federal and provincial efforts proved unsuccessful because costs in the British Columbia industry remained high not only in comparison to U.S. producers, but also compared to other Canadian producers. By the 1970s the unit cost in the British Columbia industry was 122, while it was 106 in Alberta and 110 for all of Canada.⁵⁸ A major factor in the higher cost in British Columbia is wages. In 1976 wages as a percentage of value added in the British Columbia canning industry was 45.2 per cent, far higher than the 28 per cent in Ontario, 22.9 per cent in Washington state, and 30.7 per cent in California.⁵⁹ In its 1979 report, the British Columbia Select Committee on Agriculture expressed the belief that labour costs could be reduced in the province's canning industry, but it failed to address the problem of workers being able to find higher paid work in other industries.

The report also ignored other reasons why American producers were more efficient than those in British Columbia. The post-war period saw the introduction of varieties of tomato plants whose fruit all ripened around the same time, thus greatly reducing the costs of picking.⁶⁰ By the 1960s the picking process had become mechanized. British Columbia growers could not take advantage of these advances due to a climate that was too cold for the new plant varieties and a lack of large flat fields that would make picking machines cost effective.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Stabilization Board Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1959), 1 and 7.

⁵⁷ B.C. Food Council, *The B.C. Food Industry, a Study Authorized for the B.C. Food Council*, 1973, 18.

⁵⁸ British Columbia, Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Concentration and Integration in the B.C. Food Industry, Phase IV Research Report*, 1979, 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁰ British Columbia Food Council, *The B.C. Food Industry: A Study Authorized by the B.C. Food Council* (1973), 112.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

The decline of the vegetable canning industry, especially the tomato canning sector, is well illustrated in table 2 below.

TABLE 2
*Numbers of Fruit and Vegetable Canneries in B.C.
for Selected Years*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Canneries that include tomatoes</i>	<i>Vegetable canneries (includes those that do tomatoes)</i>	<i>All fruit and vegetable canneries</i>
1922		7	
1930		22	
1945		25	
1953	15	18 (3 do not do tomatoes)	72
1960		13	45
1975		9	17
1980	1		

SOURCES: It is necessary to show the numbers in this manner because the statistics are so variable in the way they are reported. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics reported on every cannery in the country, and on what products they canned, until the early 1960s, when only the names of fruit and vegetable canners were listed. Later, canners were simply included with processors of products like jams and frozen foods. Other figures have had to be obtained from occasional reports by the B.C. provincial government and by the industry.

Seventy-two fruit and vegetable canneries operated in British Columbia in 1953. This number had declined to 45 by 1960 and to 17 by 1975. In Ontario the drop was proportionately less, from 185 plants in 1957 to 149 in 1960.⁶² In part this was due to concentration into larger plants throughout the period. In all of Canada, processors with sales over \$1 million rose from 34 in 1952 to 61 in 1961. In the same period plants with sales of \$15 million rose from 3 to 8, while those with less than \$100,000 declined from 210 to 117.⁶³

The statistical evidence shows an increase in imported foreign grown tomatoes and a corresponding decline in the British Columbia industry. Canned tomato production fell from 8,806,820 pounds in 1952 to 2,944,843 pounds in 1961. At the same time the number of acres producing

⁶² Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Canadian Fruit and Vegetable Canners and Preservers*, 1953, 1967, 1975.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1967.

tomatoes in the province fell from 1230 in 1958 to 820 in 1962 and to 260 in 1972.⁶⁴ In Kamloops the overall acreage for commercial vegetables dropped from 876 in 1951 to 238 in 1961.⁶⁵ With British Columbia production falling so precipitously, its growing population had to be using more and more imported tomatoes and other vegetables. In 1979 the Select Committee on Agriculture reported a drop of 88 per cent in tomato production in British Columbia since 1967 due to rising costs and a declining number of processing outlets.⁶⁶ In the meantime the value of U.S. tomatoes imported into the province increased from \$1,447,623 in 1960 to \$3,522,488 in 1972.⁶⁷ By 1979, British Columbia was importing forty-one million pounds of tomatoes in canned, paste, or juice form.⁶⁸

It is important to note that the problems in the tomato growing and canning sector were symptomatic of a troubled agricultural industry generally. In 1951, with a population of 1,165,210, British Columbia had 120,292 agricultural labourers, and by 1961, with a population of 1,629,082, the province had 84,655 labourers. At the same time the number of farm operators dropped from 26,406 to 19,934.⁶⁹ The number of workers in the tomato canning industry dropped from a high of 2,320 in 1953 to 1,905 in 1961. Figures for the 1980s are not available, but with only one cannery in operation, it cannot have been above 100 or 200 people. This does not represent a large loss of employment for the province as a whole, but the regional effects were much more serious. In Kamloops the drop was from a few hundred employees to zero.

With all the factors that worked against the survival of Kamloops growers and canners, it can be asked how they were able to start up in the first place, and how they could stay in operation for over forty years. The answer is a combination of a protected market and cheap labour.

The market for British Columbia tomatoes was protected by geography and tariffs. British Columbia and western Canada are far from more productive farms and canneries in eastern Canada and the United States, so that fresh produce could not be easily transported the long distances involved. The tariff on canned goods coming into Canada protected local

⁶⁴ University of British Columbia, *Statistics of the Agricultural Industry in B.C. 1946-65* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1966), 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (1967 edition), 18.

⁶⁶ British Columbia, Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Concentration and Integration in the B.C. Food Industry Phase IV Research Report*, 1979, 221.

⁶⁷ University of B.C., *Statistics of the Agricultural Industry in B.C. 1946-65*, 76.

⁶⁸ British Columbia, Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Concentration and Integration in the B.C. Food Industry Phase IV Research Report*, 1979, 122.

⁶⁹ University of B.C., *Statistics of the Agriculture Industry in B.C. 1946-65*, 20.

British Columbia canneries until refrigeration and other transportation improvements allowed the lower-priced American, and later Mexican, tomatoes into the market. By 1978 the only tomato cannery in British Columbia, Royal City in New Westminster, imported its tomatoes from the United States.⁷⁰ Today vegetable canneries in the province often import produce from as far away as Australia.⁷¹

At first it might appear contradictory that British Columbia canneries survived because of cheap labour when wages in British Columbia were generally high. The truth is that wages have been traditionally high for white males, but significantly lower for Asians, native Indians, and women. Throughout their existence the canneries were able to employ these low-paid workers or, during the depression of the 1930s when unemployment was high, pay low wages even to white males. The historically low wages for Asians in British Columbia have been well established by various researchers at anywhere from one-half to one-third less than those paid to whites.⁷² The pattern for women has been similar. In 1941, for instance, the average yearly earnings for women in Kamloops was \$533, compared to \$1,220 for men. In 1951 the average was \$2,097 for women and \$4,110 for men.⁷³

During the 1920s and 1930s, canning work at Kamloops was divided according to race, sex, and even age. The crop was picked by Chinese, native Indians, and immigrants who were mostly Italians or Germans from eastern Europe, hired as farm labourers by B.C. Fruitlands. James Skelly, owner of one of the canneries, grew tomatoes on land leased from the Kamloops Indian Reserve, where native and Chinese workers did the growing and picking.⁷⁴ The heavier work of unloading flats of tomatoes at the cannery and other yard work was done by white males. Women of many races — Chinese, native Indian, East Indian, and Caucasian — as well as girls as young as thirteen, peeled and cut the tomatoes and filled the cans.⁷⁵ School girls worked during summer vacation or on weekends. Men took over again for the canning process, and Chinese males put the

⁷⁰ Warnock, 116; Jessie Bickford interview, 1988.

⁷¹ Jessie Bickford interview, 1988, comments by Bob Griffin.

⁷² Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1978), 17; Peter S. Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36.

⁷³ Canada Census, 1941 (Labour Force); Canada Census, 1951 Volume 3, part 3.

⁷⁴ Jessie Bickford interview, 1985; Jessie Bickford interview, 1988; Betty Stroesser interview, 1977; John Skelly interview, 1988.

⁷⁵ *Kamloops Inland Sentinel*, 30 August 1921, 3; 25 July 1924, 1; 4 September 1928, 1; Jessie Bickford and John Skelly interviews, 1988; Betty Stroesser interview; Eva Williams interview, 1985.

labels on cans and packed them into cases.⁷⁶ School boys were usually hired for clean-up.⁷⁷

Throughout the 1930s white males were paid the legislated minimum of thirty-five cents an hour. Women were paid by piece work, ranging from twenty cents to twenty-five cents per tray of tomatoes in the mid 1920s⁷⁸ and from thirty cents to thirty-five cents per tray in the 1930s.⁷⁹ Two former employees, and the wife of a former owner, remembered those wages as being fairly good for the period. However, there was constant pressure to work harder, and people occasionally rebelled by putting foreign objects, like rags, into the tins. When they were caught, or when tins were not full enough, supervisors often emptied the tins and the peeler had to refill them.⁸⁰

During the 1934 canning season, fifty male and some female employees of the Kamloops cannery, one-quarter of the workforce, went on strike for a five cent increase in the hourly rate. They stayed out for the season but were replaced by unemployed people eager for any work.⁸¹ In 1938 tomato prices and wages throughout B.C. were reduced by 10 per cent with government approval.⁸² Contrary to the nostalgic memories of owners and some workers, it seems likely that the pay was not good, but was far better than relief. The canneries at Kamloops did not thrive between the wars, but they did survive to provide a market for local growers and employment for pickers and two hundred or three hundred seasonal cannery workers, a significant number of jobs in a city of around 6,000 people.⁸³

World War II brought new markets in Ontario and Britain for the Kamloops canneries, but it also caused a serious labour shortage.⁸⁴ Canneries throughout the Interior were able to overcome this problem by getting permission to employ Japanese women and children who had been expelled from the Coast and interned in camps in the Interior.⁸⁵ John Skelly, son of cannery owner James Skelly, said that there was no help

⁷⁶ John Skelly, 1988.

⁷⁷ Jessie Bickford, 1988.

⁷⁸ Eva Williams, 1985.

⁷⁹ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 23 April 1935, 4; Jessie Bickford, 1985.

⁸⁰ Betty Stroesser, 1977; Eva Williams, 1985.

⁸¹ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 7 September 1934, 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 12 August 1938, 1.

⁸³ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 10 August 1934, 1 (says 200 jobs); John Skelly, 1988 (says over 300).

⁸⁴ John Skelly, 1988.

⁸⁵ Margaret Ormsby, *op. cit.*, 19.

during the war and that his father's cannery could not have operated without the Japanese.⁸⁶ Both Kamloops owners brought workers from camps in the Kootenays and built bunk houses for them near the canneries. Japanese women and girls were used as peelers and boys did the heavier yard work, including unloading coal for the boilers. Japanese internees also worked as labourers and pickers in the fields. Most of them left after the war, but some remained to work in the canneries alongside local housewives.⁸⁷

In the post-war period both Kamloops canning companies built new plants, Skelly in 1946⁸⁸ and Royal City in 1955.⁸⁹ The next year Royal City also opened six new green-houses in the city.⁹⁰ It appears that the Kamloops canneries were attempting to modernize their operations in order to compete with American ones. Royal City and Skelly's both mentioned increased competition from cheaper U.S. canned products and a shortage of suitable labour as the causes of their difficulties in the 1950s.

As John Skelly put it in 1988, as the city grew "people found better ways to make a living" other than growing tomatoes or working in canneries. "There was no market," he said, as U.S. brands of canned tomatoes were cheaper. As competition increased, orders from brokers and wholesalers came in late, making the business that much more unpredictable and unstable. John Skelly could see that the future of his father's cannery was not good, and he eventually went into the broadcasting business.⁹¹ Jessie Bickford recalled that the cannery run by her and her husband Charles had many applications for jobs in the 1930s, but towards the end they had trouble getting workers. Beginning with the war, people could get other better paying work,⁹² and by the 1950s appeals were occasionally made in the newspapers for workers to help save the year's crop. The British Columbia Department of Agriculture Annual Report for 1955 noted that "farmers and ranchers have found it extremely difficult to obtain sufficient labour. The wages offered by industry cannot be met in agriculture at present relative economic levels. Insufficient manpower adds further to costs of production."⁹³

John Skelly mentioned one further factor in the death of the canneries

⁸⁶ John Skelly, 1988.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, and Jessie Bickford, 1988.

⁸⁸ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 13 March 1946, 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1955, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1956, 5.

⁹¹ John Skelly, 1988.

⁹² Jessie Bickford, 1985.

⁹³ British Columbia *Sessional Papers* 1956, Department of Agriculture Report, HH11.

in Kamloops, that of climate. He said that the weather was always variable and unreliable, with the first frost often coming as early as the second week of September, only two weeks after the picking had begun. In the mid-1950s one severe early frost killed a large portion of the fruit trees in Brocklehurst (B.C. Fruitlands), which added to the pressures on orchardists and tomato growers to subdivide their land for housing. The Thompson Valley has the necessary elements of soil and sunshine for tomato growing, but early frosts are a constant threat this far north, as Nelson Riis has shown for Walhachin.⁹⁴ The climate also prevented successful growing of new strains of tomatoes that proved so useful in the United States.

By 1960, then, the Kamloops canneries were gone, and the rest of the tomato canning industry in B.C. was reduced to one plant by the late 1970s. The final chapter was written in the autumn of 1990, when John Skelly was finally able to have his family's former tomato fields east of town removed from the agricultural land reserve, thus opening the way for subdivision and development. The reasons for the death of the industry are related to the basic economic structure of British Columbia. The province's distance from markets, chronic labour shortages, high wage structure, and vulnerability to outside competition all contributed to its demise. New transportation developments, and the move towards lower tariffs after World War II removed protection from the canning industry, and corporate concentration resulted in outside producers serving the British Columbia market. When combined with the marginal nature of the climate in the Interior, these factors sealed the fate of a once important industry.

Most Kamloops residents, aside from the growers, did not feel the effects of the closing of the canneries during the city's prosperous decades of the 1960s and 1970s. By the time the recession of 1981 hit, however, many people wondered at the city's economic vulnerability and its dependence on forestry and mining. Kamloops market gardeners, finding it nearly impossible to sell their produce in local supermarkets, helped found a successful farmers' market in the late 1970s, but the market is local and there is no added value. However, it is possible to have ambivalent attitudes towards the disappearance of the canneries at Kamloops. On the one hand, they provided needed seasonal employment, represented some economic diversity and self-sufficiency, and were worth \$500,000 annually to the city in the 1950s.⁹⁵ On the other hand, one can feel uncomfortable

⁹⁴ Nelson Riis, "Settlement Abandonment, Walhachin," *BC Studies* 17 (Spring 1973): 14-15.

⁹⁵ *Kamloops Sentinel*, 10 September 1956, 8.

with the industry's need for heavy tariff protection (resulting in higher costs to consumers) and a low wage structure to survive. The history of tomato canning at Kamloops is one more example of British Columbia's difficulties in escaping from its historical dependence on resource extraction to develop a more diversified economy.

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