

Interviewed: March 15, 1976

ENGINEER - B. C. PACKERS

Mr. Phil Thomas

- Worked for B. C. Packers as a machinist.
- His father, Stan Thomas, was a cannery man as an "Iron Chink" master and a carpenter in the Fraser River and up the north coast with the B. C. Packing Co. before it became B. C. Packers.
- Mr. Philips and Mr. Gillespie were managers.
- In 1935 when he was still 15, he went to work for B. C. Packers in the summer, it was a big year with lots of fish, worked on a packer, pumping out the water, also worked at pumping gas for boats.
- He was born in Marpole and moved to Sea Island.
- Went to Bridgeport School and then Richmond High School on Cambie Road.
- When he started for B. C. Packers he pushed carts into the retorts... everything was in wooden boxes.
- He describes the lacquer machine which was used as a preservation on the cans, everything was done by hand, no lift trucks in those days.
- Used "full cases" in those days; today they pack them in half cases... half case is 48 of half-pound tins or 24 one-pound tins.
- He worked at canneries during the summer while he went to school.
- 1938 went north to Queen Charlotte Islands to work as a machinist and worked there as part engineer as well...repairing boats and machinery for four years.
- Then he worked filling the cans with fish at the rate of 60 cans a minute.
- Fish were pre-cut into slices and then put into the can.
- Then he went to Kildonan on the West Coast of Vancouver Island working for B. C. Packers.
- Canneries on the Coast were all basically the same and they all process at about the same rate.
- At Kildonan, one time, they had a steam box and four spindle machine, to achieve a vacuum in the can; he describes the process, which is to seal the can while it is hot with steam and then ~~cooked~~ cooked it in the retort.
- Today, the can is sealed in a vacuum chamber.
- When he first worked here, they used to brine the fish first, today it's mechanically salted.

- Today, some herring is salted for the market mostly for China.
- Herrings are put in large tanks with brine and then three or four hundred pounds of salt per ton of fish then you make a full strength brine solution.
- It's stirred every day for about a week and then it's drained out and packed in wooden boxes under pressure with salt and then shipped...good for about three or four months.
- Some salmon is salted for the market but it's a specialty item.
- Also some salmon is smoked for the market but again it's a small specialty item such as "tips and tails" of the salmon.
- They smoke it, with hardwood sawdust.
- They used to use a forced smoker.
- Also today they "dip-smoke" it; not really a smoke but it comes out of this solution ^{orange} ~~orange~~ and flavoured.
- B. C. Packers also markets cod, halibut, sole, fresh and frozen and oyster stew, clam chowder, fish spreads, etc.
- Used to be oyster beds around but not very many anymore because of pollution.
- 20 - 30,000 cartons of oysters a year.
- Many of the canneries on the coast have gone.
- The old canneries used ~~by~~ labour intensive, everything was done by hand; and the capacity of each cannery was small with one or two lines in operation.
- Today, B. C. Packers use 7 or 8 lines.
- Plus the fishing season is much shorter and therefore, concentrated into two or three peak weeks in the year.
- Therefore, the centralization of the industry resulted.
- Now there are bigger packers and able to carry more fish to Vancouver or Prince Rupert.
- Brine solution is used for longer storage.
- In 1935 most of the fishermen were Japanese, and many women worked in the cannery.
- At Namu mostly Indian people manned the cannery.
- The company used to provide houses for the employees; today in Steveston some of them are now net storage places.
- The canneries used to use a Chinese contractors who hired most, if not all of the labour in the plant.

- Chinese labour used to get 12¢ - 15¢ an hour, also they had bunk houses and meals.
- The Chinese contractors were phased out in 1946 - 48 (he's not sure).
- He was constructing the plant at Namu with university students and that was one of the first years without a Chinese contractor.
- He belonged to the union for a while until he became a foreman.
- There was little opposition from the company to the unionizations of the shoreworkers as far as he could see.
- Safety in the plant is discussed and the recent rash of accidents in the herring industry.
- Namu was built but not used, because it was uneconomical; it is still used for cold storage and dress salmon and freezing herring.
- Sundry of the villages that supplied labour for the canneries have suffered and some villages are practically extinct.
- The fishery is a fluctuating business and needs to be controlled by Department of Fisheries plus the labour needs to be more stable with less strikes.
- Pollution of the Fraser is discussed; he feels it is being taken care of very slowly.
- The plant itself has a good pollution control program to retain solids and limit wastes going into the river.
- He feels that the quality of fish in the Fraser has not deteriorated due to pollution.
- He swam in the Fraser as a kid at Marpole and the Fraser was dirty then, it's not much different as far as he is concerned.
- Discusses the 200 mile limit and he feels that the company is in favour of and supports the policy but the industry is not really equipped to exploit the fish further out in the ocean.
- He knew a few Japanese people before the war and was sorry to see them go at the outbreak of the war.
- The Japanese boats were towed up the river to New Westminster, some of them were towed under water and damaged.
- It all happened very quickly and there was not much time to react.
- He was at the Queen Charlotte Islands during the war there was an air base there and when you travelled on the water you had to use no lights just black-out curtains.

- There were reports of sub-marine sightings but none were confirmed.
- There was a net used to protect Prince Rupert harbour which was probably not very effective.
- People on the Queen Charlottes felt that they were vulnerable to invasion on attack because it was so remote and isolated.
- The radio-telephones were poor and communication was infrequent.
- The companies helped the Japanese fishermen back into the industry with boats and gear, but they do less and less of that now.