

North Pacific Cannery: Success through Exploitation and Convenience

GEOG 429

Sean Chin

April 25, 2016

Report prepared at the request of North Pacific Cannery, in partial fulfilment of Geog 429: Research in Historical Geography, for Dr. David Brownstein.

Abstract:

The North Pacific Cannery, located on the North Coast, has been the longest operating Anglo-BC Packing Company cannery in British Columbia, and my research will explore the reasons behind why this particular salmon cannery was able to survive so long in an economically wavering environment. My paper will argue that the exploitation of ethnic minorities, the cannery's close proximity to the railway and the cannery's lack of complications present in other canneries contributed to the North Pacific Cannery's success. Primary research for this paper was conducted through looking at the Anglo-British Columbia Company records for the North Pacific Cannery and secondary resources were found through historical texts about the industry in British Columbia.

Introduction:

Salmon canning has been a primary economic force for British Columbia throughout the early 20th century and provided employment towards a good majority of the population. The trade was considered important enough to develop frameworks towards the creation of infrastructure (such as railways) alongside the West Coast areas in order to exploit the untouched salmon resources within the coastal rivers. However, this industry is heavily marked by acquisitions, mergers, bankruptcies and restructuring.¹ The industry began in California in 1864 and rapidly spread northward to the Bering Sea. Alaska was the world base for the industry and British Columbia was the second most important.² The British Columbia branch was always different from the American branches, as it was always more export oriented, more diversified, and more heavily regulated by the state.³ Salmon canning was a highly competitive industry, and the companies that were able to financially survive in this environment typically possessed some form of competitive advantage.

Difficulties of the Salmon Canning Industry:

It is important to note that the salmon canning process involved a lot more than just simply salting, drying and packaging the product. Salmon products are highly perishable and must be preserved within hours of being caught. It can be summarized through Dianne Newell's research that the three main factors that accelerate the spoilage of salmon meals include: large distances, warm weather and abundant excess of product.⁴ As a side note, Dianne Newell has been a researcher with a specialization in Pacific and Northwest Coast fisheries and has written several books and articles on the topic,

¹ North Pacific Cannery National Historic Site, 2011

² Diane Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, Montreal, 1989. p.4

³ Ibid, p 5

⁴ Diane Newell, *Dispersal and Concentration: The Slowly Changing Spatial Pattern of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry*, Vancouver, 1988. p.25

	Wages	
January	575.33	authorizing her credibility on the subject.
February	506.13	Cannery operators had as little as six weeks
March	135.00	to catch an entire year's supply of salmon
April	7072.82	due to the seasonal traits associated with the
May	11485.02	business and the problem of post-harvest
June	11541.56	loss due to the spoilage of raw salmon
July	12623.28	became a major issue. Table 1 provides
August	11227.07	evidence of this industry's seasonal
September	3476.86	dependence, as total wages are much higher
Oct, Nov, Dec	450.00	during the summer time.

Table 1: Transcribed Summary of North Pacific Cannery Payrolls 1946

(Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 66, Financial Summary for 1946)

Salmon is not a homogenous resource, as all five distinct species are native to the North American coast and abundant in British Columbia, which made it incredibly important

to understand the spawning habits, sizes, qualities and colors of these differing species in order to conduct business. Unfortunately, factors such as human activities in other industries and variation in local weather conditions all influenced the absolute abundance of salmon each year and made it incredibly difficult for operators to manage a reliable catch each year.⁵ There existed unpredictable local environment changes at the sites such as cannery fires, landslides, tide hazards and changes in the location of the local salmon fishing grounds, forcing many sites physically unsuitable for continued operation.⁶ The enforcement of weekly and seasonal "closure" periods for fishing and the existence of fisherman's strikes made this a very risky business for fisherman and cannery operators. The market was

⁵ Ibid, p 24

⁶ Diane Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, Montreal, 1989. p.10

too volatile and dependent on large supplies of salmon, with several countries competing in supplying the product.⁷ Increased competition for raw salmon and enforcement of government-sponsored conservation measures drew the fishing fleets away from the upstream rivers out towards the open waters. Fisherman started harvesting new varieties of fish, such as halibut, which were caught in more open water and that resulted in the eventual abandonment of old cannery sites located upstream.⁸ In addition to all of these challenges, there was an economic crash in 1929, when the Great Depression “severely weakened the salmon industry”, as the industry declined by almost two-thirds in dollar value of annual outputs.⁹

Despite the numerous barriers to success listed above, the main issue with the salmon canning industry still lies with spoilage of salmon meals. Many researchers back in the early 20th century have attempted to offer solutions to more efficient means of preservation. Maurice E. Stansby, a researcher studying preservation measures of salmon canning back in the 1950s, has noted the most efficient procedure for salmon preservation below and highlights some of the strenuous rules involved in its preservation.

“The present investigation indicates that the whole pink salmon waste should be ground or shredded to break up the head and collar section. The digestion retort should be equipped with efficient agitators. The ground material, together with an equal quantity of water containing 1-1/2 percent sodium hydroxide by weight, should be heated as rapidly as possible to 190°-200°F. and held at that temperature, with agitation, until the fleshy parts are completely digested, and then a few minutes longer, the total digestion period being approximately 50 minutes. The digested mixture must be allowed to stand for approximately 15 minutes to allow bones to settle and oil to rise. The top layer can then be drained off and passed through a centrifuge. The liquor should not be drained through the

⁷ Alicja Muszynski, *Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of British Columbia's Salmon Cannery Labour Forces*, 1988. p.117

⁸ Diane Newell, *Dispersal and Concentration: The Slowly Changing Spatial Pattern of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry*, Vancouver, 1988. p.32

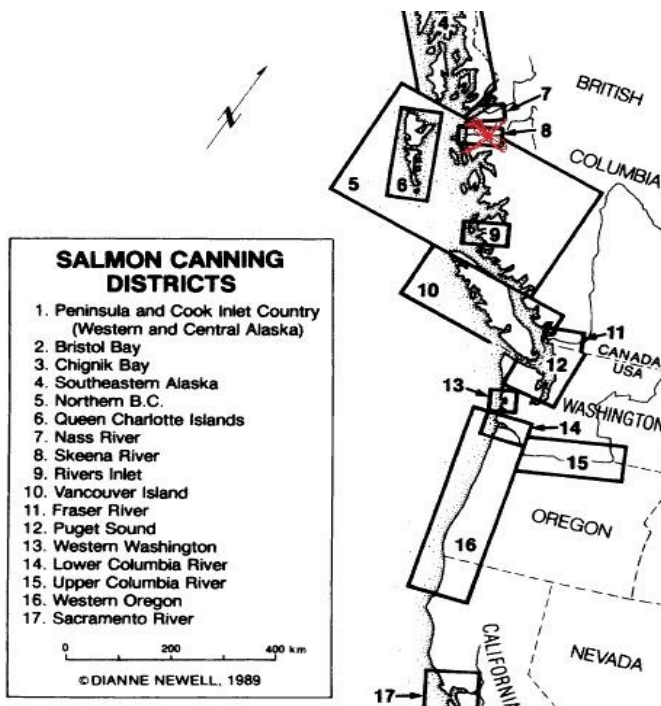
⁹ Diane Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the law in Canada's Pacific Coast fisheries*, Toronto, 1993. p.103

bottom of the retort because the oil layer tends to absorb on the solids which have settled to the bottom of the vessel".¹⁰

It was acknowledged by Stansby, that the freezing of raw products did offer a solution towards the transportation of salmon with spoilage, but would greatly increase the transportation costs.¹¹ Overall, there existed no cost-effective solution towards the preservation of raw salmon during the early 20th century.

The Success of North Pacific Cannery: Location and Transportation

As acknowledged by the North Pacific Cannery's historical website, the cannery owes part of its success to its proximity to the railway, which provided an alternate method for exporting product and importing



*Diagram 1: Map of Salmon Canning Districts on the Pacific Coast. The location of the North Pacific Cannery is shown by the red X. (Diane Newell, *The Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, p. 6.)*

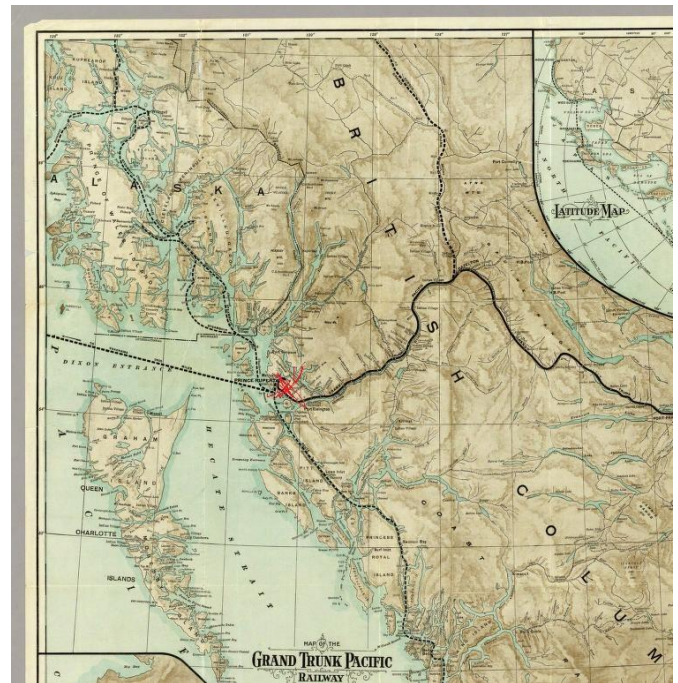


Diagram 2: Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. The location of the North Pacific Cannery is shown by the red X. Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. "Map Of The Grand Trunk Pacific Railway In British Columbia Showing Terminus At Prince Rupert." 28 March 1910. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, 5078.000

¹⁰ Maurice E. Stansby et al., *Utilization of Alaskan Salmon Cannery Waste*, Washington, 1953. p.107

¹¹ Maurice E. Stansby et al., *Utilization of Alaskan Salmon Cannery Waste*, Washington, 1953. p.52

supplies and labour.¹² Diagram 1 shows the location of the North Pacific Cannery as indicated by the red x, while diagram 2 shows the map of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. The red x on diagram 2 situates the North Pacific Cannery conveniently on the railway line.

As opposed to other salmon canneries, the North Pacific cannery has ease of access to the railway, which in turn allowed the company to have an easier access to contract labor, discussed later on in the paper. It also allowed the company to mitigate the costs of fish spoilage because there existed a smaller distance between the fishing ground and export zones. Fisherman would be able to move to the canneries and fishing grounds with less effort and more comfort during the fishing season.¹³

The Success of North Pacific Cannery: Labor Exploitation

As discussed earlier, the salmon canning industry was highly competitive and forced many of the canneries in British Columbia to shut down due to low profitability. The North Pacific Cannery is located near the Skeena River, a location not too far from where other salmon canneries have shut down and disbanded. Why then has this cannery been able to thrive long after the other canneries have shut down? The North Pacific Cannery now no longer functions as a cannery and has been remodeled into a museum. This doesn't change the fact however, that the cannery had almost 90 years of continuous salmon production, until ending in the late 1970s.

The use of Japanese, Chinese and Aboriginal workers was pivotal to the success of the North Pacific Cannery. Japanese citizens came to Canada looking to escape poverty, Chinese workers branched out from working on the Canadian Pacific Railway and the nearby Aboriginals participated in order to support themselves. Although the ethnic minorities suffered heavy discrimination and poor working conditions, the Japanese in particular became renowned for their fishing prowess shortly after their

¹² North Pacific Cannery National Historic Site, 2011

¹³James A. McDonald, *BLEEDING DAY AND NIGHT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GRAND TRUNK PACIFIC RAILWAY ACROSS TSIMSHIAN RESERVE LANDS*, Toronto, 1990. p.57

arrival at the canneries, sparking riots of jealousy to break out over the participation of “Oriental” people in the workforce.¹⁴ Diane Newell has found that in the North Pacific Cannery, in 1904, the average fish yield for the Japanese were 2900 fish per boat, whites 1750 fish per boat, and Aborigines 1350 fish per boat.¹⁵

Financial Summary: H Matsumoto	
18	Red Spring
618	Sockeye
77	Cohoe

Table 2: Transcribed Statement of Account for a Japanese worker

(Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 61, Statement of Account 1918-1920)

Financial Summary: J Mason	
-	Red Spring
291	Sockeye
6	Cohoe

Table 3: Transcribed Statement of Account for a European worker (1921)

(Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 61, Statement of Account 1918-1920)

Comparisons from Tables 2 and 3 further provides evidence of the Japanese worker’s productivity, with a Japanese worker (on the left), having significantly higher fishing catches in comparison to the European worker. There is no date branded on the Japanese worker’s statement, however it can be assumed to be written around the same date as the one on the right as it was categorized in the same time period.

The Natives were the ones who fished the land first and preserved salmon prior to European settlement, and were able to teach the cannery operators methods of fishing and preservation.¹⁶ Canneries soon

¹⁴ Derrick Chan, *Detailing the Lives of Those Working in the Fishing Fleet At the North Pacific Cannery*, Vancouver, 2013. p.6

¹⁵ Diane, Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries*, Toronto, 1993.p.140

¹⁶ Alana Westerhof, *Uncovering the Working Experience at the North Pacific Cannery: The Canning Line*, Vancouver, 2013. p.4

began to realize the usefulness of the Native tribes as 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”.¹⁷ It was recognized that First Nations workers were significant contributors to the North Pacific Cannery, however the only indication that First Nations laborers existed

June 1961	
Payroll Distribution	
R. Phillipson	418.00
White Labor	4809.50
Chinese Labor	1710.56

Table 4: Transcribed Payroll Distribution (1961)

(Found in the UBC Archives in the ABC Packing Co. Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 70, Payroll Distribution 1961)

was through the existence of “R. Phillipson”, who was responsible for managing the Aboriginals. His name can be found at the top of Table 4. It can also be discovered through Table 4, that Asian laborers are separated from White labor and this categorization has appeared through all of the cannery’s payroll sheets. Secondly, the monthly wages of the Asian workers are significantly lower than the wages of white workers, despite the Asians being approximately half the fishing fleet. This was due to the fact that Chinese labor was employed through the use of contractors from China who would exploit their own laborers and allow the company to further increase profits.¹⁸

Comparing Canneries: Fraser River Cannery

¹⁷ Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*, 1978. p.80

¹⁸ Hugh, W. McKervill, *The Salmon People: the Story of Canada's West Coast Salmon Fishing Industry*, Vancouver, 1967.p.44

In order to explore further factors towards success, comparisons must be made

between the North Pacific Cannery and

other canneries. The Fraser River cannery

was a cannery that had been met with a

lot of hardship and difficulties not present

in the North Pacific. Figure 1 is an excerpt

from Diane Newell's book showing the

closing down of canneries by Pacific fishing

industry's president Henry Doyle. As seen in the

table, shut downs have been largely scarce in

Skeena River canneries while canneries in the Fraser River suffered from major closings. These closings

in the Fraser River can be contributed from several factors. The first factor would be the huge decline of

Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River, which began in the early 20th century, due to reasons of predation,

infectious disease, contaminants, climate change and stressors in the freshwater environment.¹⁹ The

second factor can be contributed through competition with U.S fisherman over the Fraser River salmon

resources. Figure 2, found in the UBC library archives, is documentation of a fisherman's protest against

U.S fisherman intercepting Canadian fishing grounds and taking away salmon resources from the Fraser

River. Clear indicators of international interference, not found in canneries along Skeena River, are

clearly present in canneries in the Fraser River area.

	Management	
	1902	1903
Skeena	\$ 4,500	\$ 1,800
Rivers Inlet	6,420	3,000
Other Northern Points	7,200	4,500
Fraser	24,800	13,680
	\$57,920 [sic]	\$22,980

making a saving for 1903 of \$29,940.

By closing down 7 plants on the Fraser River and 3 in the North (in excess of those closed down last season), and allowing for the additional men required for the increased-capacity plants, we estimate there would be a saving, exclusive of management, of \$2,500 on each plant, this on 10 plants closed down would be \$25,000, so that we would have in 1903, on the whole, the following result:-

Saving in management	\$29,940
Saving in other labour	25,000
Total saving in labour	\$54,940

In getting these figures no account has been taken of savings made in fuel, steam-boat hire, and general operating expenses, which, of course, would be considerable. In addition, the increased pack at the larger plants will in all probabilities bring down the cost of white labour over what could be expected in smaller-capacity plants.

15. 211 Letter: Doyle to H. Bell-Irving & Co. Vancouver, BC, Dec. 16, 1902

Figure 1: Closing down Salmon Canneries Savings Table.

(Diane Newell, *The Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Bruce Cohen, *The Uncertain Future of Fraser River Sockeye*. Ottawa: Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River, Vancouver, 2012.p.3

Concluding Thoughts

A major discovery I have found during my research after observing multiple articles, is the confirmation that the North Pacific Cannery's close proximity to the fishing grounds was a large contributor to the success of the organization. Its close distance helped with alleviating the issues of preservation that was mentioned above earlier. The North Pacific Cannery had stronger ties with the railway which ran right through the country compared to the other canneries and this made for easy transportation and export of goods and people in and out of the location.²⁰ Overall, my research leads me to believe that the exploitation of ethnic minorities and the cannery's close proximity to the fishing grounds and railways contributed to the North Pacific Cannery's success in addressing the issues of fish preservation, transportation costs, and acquiring highly skilled yet low paid labor.

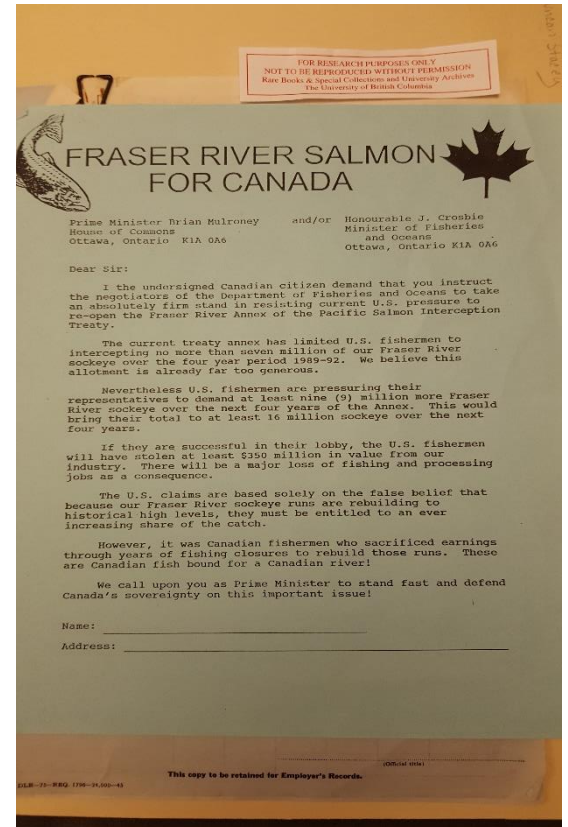


Figure 2: Fraser River Fisherman's Protest

(Found in the UBC Archives in the Duncan Stacey Fonds, RBSC-ARC-1522-14-7)

²⁰ Alana Westerhof, *Uncovering the Working Experience at the North Pacific Cannery: The Canning Line*, Vancouver, 2013. p.5

Works Cited

Secondary Sources:

Chan, Derrick, *Detailing the Lives of Those Working in the Fishing Fleet At the North Pacific Cannery*, Vancouver, 2013.

Cohen, Bruce I., and Deslibris -. Documents. *Uncertain Future of Fraser River Sockeye, Volume 2: Causes of the Decline*. N.p.: Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River, 2012.

Knight, Rolf, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*, 1978.

Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. "Map Of The Grand Trunk Pacific Railway In British Columbia Showing Terminus At Prince Rupert." 1: 1 250 000. 28 March 1910. 1 map: ms., col., 65 x 83 cm. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, 5078.000.

Mcdonald, James A, *Bleeding Day and Night: The Construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway across Tsimshian Reserve Lands*, 1991.

McKervill, W. Hugh, *The Salmon People: the Story of Canada's West Coast Salmon Fishing Industry*, Vancouver, 1967.

Muszynski, Alicja, *Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of British Columbia's Salmon Cannery Labour Forces*, 1988.

Newell, Dianne, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game*, Montreal, 1989.

Newell, Dianne, *Dispersal and Concentration: The Slowly Changing Spatial Pattern of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry*, Vancouver, 1988.

Newell, Dianne, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries*, Toronto, 1993.

North Pacific Cannery National Historic Site, 2011, URL: <http://www.northpacificcannery.ca/history/>

Stansby, E. Maurice and associates, *Utilization of Alaskan Salmon Cannery Waste*, Washington, 1953.

Westerhof, Alana, *Uncovering the Working Experience at the North Pacific Cannery: The Canning Line*, Vancouver, 2013

Primary Sources

UBC Special Collection Archives, Fraser River Fisherman's Protest, Duncan Stacey Fonds, RBSC-ARC-1522-14-7.

UBC Special Collection Archives, Payroll Distribution, Anglo-British Columbia Packers Fonds no. 9.1, Box 70, Payroll Distribution 1961.

UBC Special Collection Archives, Statement of Account for a Japanese worker, Anglo-British Columbia Packers Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 61, Statement of Account 1918-1920.

UBC Special Collection Archives, Statement of Account for a European worker, Anglo-British Columbia Packers Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 61, Statement of Account 1918-1920.

UBC Special Collection Archives, Summary of North Pacific Cannery Payrolls, Anglo-British Columbia Packers Fonds, no. 9.1, Box 66, Financial Summary for 1946.