A History

of

THE CANNING AND FREEZING INDUSTRY

in

New York State

As Recorded

by

THE NEW YORK STATE
CANNERS AND FREEZERS ASSOCIATION

On the Occasion of its

75th ANNIVERSARY

1960

turn of the century in Fairport, ten miles east of Rochester. Although the first tin can was patented in England in 1810, it was not until the early 1900's that the container assumed its present profile — one which has changed only in improved detail in the intervening decades.

The sanitary can story is a remarkable example of the interdependence and teamwork of different interests in this industry. Its sponsors, all New York men, and all now among the honored dead, were a triumvirate of determined and tenacious innovators. There was Marx Ams, of the machinery field; W. Y. Bogle, a grocery distributor; and George W. Cobb, then a canner, and later a prominent can manufacturing executive. From the first letters of their last names their contemporaries named them the "A-B-C" of the sanitary can.

Until the gradual development of the "sanitary" container at Fairport most cans were made by hand with tinsmiths' tools. Can making was a laborious task and a slow one. Many canners spent their winters fabricating cans; their summers filling them. The cans themselves were not the contemporary "bottom-like-the-top" models which permit filling with anything from whole tomatoes to chunks of stew meat. The early models had a hole in the can's top through which products were forced, necessarily in small pieces. The canning of foods like pineapple rings was unheard of. The caps were sealed with solder and acid. The incidence of seam leakage ran high. The cans often swelled and burst.

About 1900, the first "sanitary" style of can was introduced commercially. After many false starts, the Sanitary Can Company began operations at Fairport. Launching this revolutionary project took perserverance, faith, vision, and downright stubborness. Ideal in theory and science, sound in mechanics, it still was a discouraging up-the-hill-all-the-way to put it across. Discouraging pressures many times nearly stopped operations, but every time, when prospects looked darkest, these men gave the project more time, more money, and more intensive effort, until success finally crowned their pioneering work.

Their sales brochure in 1905 is a dandy. On one page they cite, under the heading, "Advantages to Packers", the following list of improvements achieved by the Sanitary can:

"No solder, no steels, no copper; no capping, no cappers, no acid, no acid stains; no tipping, no tippers; no wiping, no wipers; no gas, no gasoline; no fire pots, no fire risks; labor saver — rapidly filled, rapidly sealed; output increased — thus enabling the packer to keep up with the receipts; can contents open to inspection at packing table; labeling facilitated, bottom like the top, no lacquer or wrapper required to hide ends of can".

We would agree that those were a mighty mouthful of advantages to come from one single development but it was no doubt true.

But like we said, problems abounded. Little by little these were met and solved. The first hurdle involved the can's lid. The business of having to cram any and all products through a small hole with resultant damage had to be eliminated. The double-seamer, which crimped the entire lid on after it had been filled made obsolete once and for all the solder-and-acid closing. More importantly however it enabled canners to manufacture cans faster and with more economical methods.

Despite success with this new type can the seams frequently leaked. To overcome this, a machine was introduced at the Fairport plant which formed tin plate into cylindrical bodies by interlocking the ends of the body shank and compressing them into a lock-and-lap seam. Once this process was perfected the plant began turning out 40,000 cans a day. By 1904, annual production had reached 6,000,000 cans. Each succeeding year, the output doubled the figure of the year before.

The Sanitary Can Company opened plants in Indianapolis, Indiana; Bridgeton, New Jersey; and Niagara Falls, Ontario. The company and its four plants in 1908 became an integral part of the then seven-year-old American Can Company.

The Fairport plant of the Company's Canco Division to this day bears the identification number of Plant 1-A.

Several years ago while visiting with Milt Hallauer of the old Webster Canning and Preserving Company he told us the first Kraut packed in the new "sanitary" can was put up in his plant.

We have also learned that initial users of the cans were the Cobb Preserving Company in Fairport; Kittleberger at Webster; Curtice Brothers in Rochester; and W. N. Clark in Rochester.

In reminiscing about the past with some of the old timers we were told that in those early days plenty of trouble was encountered with enamel coating because while the enamel helped retain the color in fruits they found pin-holing developing in the cans. Too with corn they had a terrific problem with blackening of the product after it was canned. After much experimentation it was found that by adding zinc oxide to the enamel the problem was solved.

Packing of fruits, especially cherries, raspberries, and strawberries in those days called for artificial coloring. Another "discovery" was one by W. N. Clark Company in canning peas. One year there were some corn cans left over from the previous pack which had been enameled. They were tried on peas and worked perfectly, eliminating the sulfur taste in the product which had heretofore been a real problem.

The State of New York accepts the sixty billionth can used for packing canned foods produced in New York State, in November 1953. Left to right: Al Worsdall, Assistant Commissioner of Commerce; Dr. A. J. Heinicke, former Director of the New York State Experiment Station, Geneva; New York State's 1953 Canner and Freezer Queen; Walter Wilson, Silver Creek Preserving Company; S. D. Arms, American Can Company, New York City.