

Emeryville COOL Fun Facts

ISSUE 2

APRIL 21, 2020



As we all know, ART REALLY OPENS YOUR MIND. The latest addition to Emeryville's private-public art partnership at 5959 Horton Street featured a bear stealing a peach from a conveyor belt. This got me thinking-what's with our city's canning history? PLEASE TAKE A LOOK.

The city's best known cannery was located at 1200 Park Avenue between Hollis & Watts (now "Pixar"). Western Canning opened in 1918 and was part of a larger company owned by the Mee family.

Company housing, consisting of 25 bungalow cottages, was built on site. The October 1920 issue of the trade journal *Canning Age* provides a 12-page analysis of the new plant (Factory Heads take note!).

According to *Canning Age's* Charles W. Geiger, "the welfare of the worker has been given unusual attention, with the result that workers are well satisfied." The uniform worker cottages gave "the appearance of a colony," Geiger noted enthusiastically. (For an

alternate perspective on company towns, check out Hardy Green's book *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy*).

In 1921, the plant was sold to the Virden Packing Company amidst the post-World War I recession. It was sold again in 1926 to the California Packing Company (later known as Del Monte). Del Monte operated Plant No. 35 until 1989, along with Plant No. 7, located nearby at Halleck & 40th. Plant No. 7 operated from 1916-1940.

Women were critical workers in the cannery plants, and the work was difficult. Don Hausler, president of the Emeryville Historical Society, spoke about the canneries for an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in May 2000: "It was brutal work," said Hausler. In early days, shifts were 12 hours long and women had to plunge their hands continually in water. "The skin just fell off your hands," he said.

Emeryville is responsible for an important innovation in peach peeling. Central Canning developed the "lye method" right here in the early 1900s. Lye: great for making canned fruit AND soap!

The difficulty of cannery work was noted in a 2004 oral history interview from UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library with second-generation Plant No. 35 worker Stella Adoa Baptista. Stella started working at the cannery alongside her mother in 1942. She explains how workers generally gained employment during this time: "If you didn't know anybody, you'd have to go stand outside early in the morning and then somebody would come outside and call you, you know. And while you'd come in, they liked your face or something-you got in. If they didn't like your face, you stayed outside."

Shifts were generally 12-14 hours until the plant was unionized, which resulted

in better wages, 8-hour shifts, and increased safety measures.

The Del Monte Emeryville plants produced peaches, pears, and everyone's favorite mid-century snack: fruit cocktail. Personally, I would not advocate for the consumption of fruit cocktail.

Del Monte Plant No. 35 was torn down in 1992, and Kaiser almost moved its Oakland hospital to the formerly cannery location in 1994. Instead, Pixar purchased the site and opened its headquarters there in 2000. Without this move, who knows if we would have ever seen a reference to worker-owned cooperatively-made pizza in an animated film?! (do you think Pixar animators were really inspired by Arizmendi's WPA style mural of workers working? RIP that mural! OMG WHAT IF IT WAS PAINTED BY THE SAME ARTIST WHO MADE THE PUBLIC ART WE TALKED ABOUT IN ISSUE 1?!?!?!?)

Here are a few cool fun facts: Huey Newton once worked at the Emeryville location of Hunt's cannery (ADDRESS REMAINS MYSTERIOUS). According to noted historical information database eBay, F.B. Hood Packing Company's "League Brand" label featured a baseball player, which leads me to believe they may have been located near the baseball stadium like Western-Virden-Del Monte. In November 1918, the Emeryville location of Hood's was fined \$5 for selling rotten tomato sauce. Yum. ROTTEN CITY HUH?!

Research shout out to Oakland Wiki, Vasonabrand.com's blog about packing houses, and the California State Board of Health's *Monthly Bulletin*. The July 1918 issue features a cover story on an outbreak of typhoid fever due to contaminated water. TIMELY!



Got any hot takes on the cannery lifestyle??? Information to share? Ideas or stories for future issues?

Leave a message at (510) 519-7283

WOMEN NEEDED

Urgently for
Night Work

Full Shift: 7 P.M.-6 A.M.

Half Shift: 1 A.M.-6 A.M.



**Also a few Day Shift
Workers Needed**

For Full Information Call or Phone:

DEL MONTE CANNERY No. 35

1236 PARK AVE. (Emeryville)

Phone: OLympic 1230

California Packing Corporation