

THE CANNING BUSINESS – AMERICAN CAN COMPANY & BEYOND

Part four of a series

“Canco” continued to expand and diversify through the 1960’s and into the 1970’s. In the 1960’s a giant coil processing line went into operation. Instead of delivering the raw material for the cans in sheets, it was delivered in huge rolls weighing up to 20,000 pounds. The coil unwound at speeds of over 300 feet per minute and was cut into three-by-three foot sheets prior to being printed, cut, and formed into cans. The company now controlled the process from raw material through to the finished can, which guaranteed greater efficiency and better quality. Further, by the early 1960’s, the traditional tin can had been replaced by one of aluminum-coated steel.

By the mid 1960’s, like many corporations in the country, American Can had expanded into six large divisions. The Canco Division, the company’s largest, operated 60 manufacturing plants of which the Fairport plant was one, having approximately 600 workers and a \$4.7 million payroll. Cans were produced for fruits and vegetables, but also for items such as beer, cocoa, soft drinks, oil, anti-freeze, shaving cream, and shampoo.

With the expansion of the company, its old family atmosphere began to erode. By the mid 1970’s, there were no more summer jobs, and the number of workers was declining due to the increased mechanization of the process. According to one account, the only thing that mattered for a plant manager was the last monthly statement. At least once, corporate headquarters replaced nearly the entire management team. Weekly “manning meetings” made sure that there were no unnecessary workers. Union-management relations, which had been good, began to decline.

Canco undertook a major building project in 1976 when the Empire State plant was constructed on Whitney Road. The state-of-the-art plant manufactured the two-piece can, familiar as the typical pop-top beverage can, and was designed to make cans for a Schlitz Brewing Company facility located near Syracuse. Unfortunately, Schlitz closed that brewery in 1979, and Budweiser, which had taken over the Schlitz brewery, contracted with a new firm to produce cans at a lower cost. While Canco was paying its workers up to \$26 per hour with five-week vacations, the new firm was hiring at a rate of no more than \$15 per hour. Nevertheless, with some retooling, the plant survived by making over 100 different types of cans for “customers from Boston to Indianapolis.” By the mid 1980’s, the plant was manufacturing over one billion cans per year for such brand names as Quaker State, Comstock, Motts, Ocean Spray, Nestle’s, Pepsi, Genesee, Tab, Fresca, Wegman’s, and Coca-Cola, from the 22 ton steel coils that were delivered to the Fairport facility. Especially important were the Quaker State, Genesee, and Nestle’s contracts. However, barely five years later, the company was talking about closing the plant.

The number of workers in the newly automated and modernized plant had declined from over 600 workers in 1979 to about 230 in 1988. In 1989, citing lack of local demand, American Can closed the main plant on Whitney Road, but kept the facility on Parce Avenue open. It was no longer profitable for the company to manufacture cans in Fairport and then ship them to the eastern seaboard for filling and processing. According to a former employee, however, the closing was not a complete surprise, for as he said, “...the plant has been on the slide for the last few years...It’s not the same American Can as it was years ago...”

The closing of the American Can plant saddened the community, for many had worked at Canco all their lives, as had their fathers and other relatives. Four generations of the Hull family worked for Canco beginning with Chester Hull, then his nephew Ed Hull, and continuing with Ed’s sons Don, Duane, and Dave, and then his grandsons. Red Rohr, who in 1984 had been with the company for 41 years, followed his uncle, grandfather, and father into Canco and worked alongside his wife, sister, and brother-in-law. Longtime employee Frank Marra noted upon the plant closing, “I never thought I’d see the day when American Can would close... It’s devastating, an end of an

era...It gave me and my family our livelihood. I put my boys through school, bought a house, and now all I can do is watch it close.” Mayor Clark King stated that “American Can’s closing won’t have a major impact on the village economy, but from a nostalgic standpoint, it’s the end of an era in Fairport.”

Due to Fairport’s good business climate, however, which included low electric rates from the municipally-owned Fairport Electric, access to the railroad and the interstate system, and a modern, flexible plant, the area was able to attract a buyer. In 1993, Cantisano Foods purchased the Empire plant on Whitney Road where it produced a variety of pasta sauces and salsas for such brands as Francesco Rinaldi, Newman’s Own, Hunt-Wesson, Tostitos, and Wegman’s. . The firm has continued to expand and is known today as LiDestri Foods.



Joyce Perry at the American Can Company’s Empire State plant on Whitney Road in the early 1980’s