

THE BUSINESS OF CANNING – EARLY ATTEMPTS

Part one of a series

For centuries, people had tried to find ways to preserve food, and up until the 19th century the only effective methods had been salting, pickling, or smoking, and then storing the food in wide-mouth glass or ceramic containers. According to one source, Napoleon's army had lost many of its men to malnutrition, and in 1795, the French government offered a reward to anyone who could devise a method for preserving meats, fish, fruits, and vegetables. Nicolas Appert won the prize by packing fresh meats and produce in glass jars, closing them with corks, fastening the corks with wire, and boiling the jars to sterilize the contents. Thus the foundation was laid for a canning industry. In the United States, William (or Peter) Durand applied for a patent for a "sealed vessel of tin plate and metal for preserving food" in 1810. Although the early cans were crude and there was much spoilage, the move toward a safe and efficient method of preserving foods was underway.



Cobb's Preserving Co. office

The middle of the 19th century saw a boom in the cannery business. In 1853, Gail Borden perfected the manufacture of condensed milk packed in cap hole cans. Gilbert Van Camp began to can fruits and vegetables. The first activities that directly led to Fairport's canning industry began in 1851 when Ezra and Ananias Edgett canned the first corn in Camden, New York. Ezra spent some time in New York City learning the canning trade, and then returned to Camden where in 1858 he opened canning operations in the family barn. In 1866, he moved his business to Newark, New York, an area with richer soil and more diversified crops. There he established the very successful Wayne Preserving Company.

Six years later, in 1872, Edgett opened a branch of his canning business in Fairport, hiring his brother Ananias to run the operation. An 1873 news article describes the "First Canning Works," an 8-acre plot located on the south bank of the canal east of the Turk Hill Road bridge. The main two-story building was 118 by 30 feet and had two one-story additions. The ground floor of this structure was a general work area where the fruit was received, sorted, and put into the cans and sealed on several tables that ran the length of the room. The next stop was the steaming room where the cans were placed in vats and processed. If the cans retained their shape after cooling, they went to a third room, and were labeled and boxed for shipment. The local firm of Green, Simmons, & McAuliffe manufactured the boxes. Upstairs in the main building was the tin shop where the cans and also the solder were manufactured. In 1873, the shop used 500 boxes of tin and 3,500 to 4,000 pounds of solder and manufactured about 150,000 cans.

Ezra Edgett was not satisfied with the job that his brother Ananias was doing as plant manager, and he persuaded his cousin Amos Cobb to buy the business and move to Fairport and run it. Cobb was familiar with the food industry, having worked at Kemp and Day Co., food brokers, in New York City, and also having run his own food importing business, Goodwin,

Cobb, & Company. Cobb agreed to the deal, and in 1881, Amos, his wife Angeline Hodgeman, his daughter Angie, and his four sons, Frederick, George, Clarence, and Amos, Jr. moved to a house on the corner of East Church Street and Turk Hill Road in Fairport. Ananias Edgett went on to start the Thomas Canning Factory in 1896, located at the corner of Parker and State (Lift Bridge Lane) Streets.

The newly named Cobb's Preserving Company did very well, canning cherries, berries, pears, peaches, quinces, plums, peas, and succotash. Initially, it was all hand labor. Winters were spent crafting the cans from tin plate and soldering the parts together to form sealed cans. A small hole, probably 1½ inches in diameter, was cut in the top of the can where the produce would be inserted – hence the term “cap hole” cans. During the canning season the produce was sorted and prepared by hand. Sometimes a portion of the produce was dropped off at private homes where a whole family would participate in the food preparation. The company then picked up the prepared food the following day and proceeded with the canning process. That process consisted of forcing the fruits and vegetables through the 1 ½ inch hole in the top of the can, sealing up the hole with solder and a small cap, and placing the cans in a hot water bath for a period of time. The cans were stored to see if the process had been successful. If not, the cans that bulged were quietly slipped into the canal, while the good ones were shipped out. The canning process was obviously not yet refined. There was considerable spoilage. Canned goods that were not spoiled still were likely to have bits of solder in them, the fruits and vegetables were often shredded from being forced through the hole, and there was discoloration from the solder as well. However, changes were taking place.

To be continued