

THE BUSINESS OF CANNING –THE AMERICAN CAN COMPANY

Part three of a series

The American Can Company came to Fairport in 1908, having absorbed the Sanitary Can Company. George Cobb, who along with his father Amos, had revolutionized the canning industry with the introduction of the sanitary can, was sent to the company's New York Offices and eventually became general sales manager. Another Fairport industrial family, the DeLands, were also closely tied to American Can. George Cobb married Leora DeLand, daughter of Levi DeLand, and her brother Daniel was superintendent of the Fairport facility at the time it became part of American Can. Several of the DeLand and Cobb children also worked there.



Canco truck on Fairport's lift bridge in the 1950's

The can company, often referred to as Canco, quickly became a major employer in the village, having about 250 workers in 1908. During the first half of the 20th century, the company continued to expand and innovate. Millions of cans for the World War I American Expeditionary Force in Europe were produced, and soon thereafter, in 1921, the “c-enamel” can that kept high sulfur foods from discoloring was introduced. In the 1930's beer cans were developed, and studies began on the production of sterile paper containers for milk and milk products. Tomato juice and other fruit juices were successfully canned. World War II brought new challenges. Instead of food cans, Canco began producing containers for explosives, signal flares, First Aid utensils, ammunition, and blood plasma. In 1943 alone, the company produced 4,000,000 blood plasma cans and was, in fact, credited with solving the packaging problem associated with safe transportation of plasma to the front lines.

During the boom period of the 1950's, Canco underwent significant expansion. With an average work force of 560 people and 150 customers, the company produced 90 types of cans, and, at peak capacity, was capable of turning out up to 4,000,000 cans in 24 hours. It was estimated that in 1952, 30% of the Fairport village population was in some way dependent on Canco money. Continuing the tradition of innovation, Canco introduced efficient methods of lithographing cans, and built a new 300-foot long L-shaped building in the early 1950's for the lithographing and enameling processes. During World War II, the company had had to reduce the amount of tin used in cans because the primary sources of tin from Southeast Asia had been cut off. By 1950, the amount of tin had been reduced by one-third and the amount of solder used in the side seams had been reduced by three-quarters. The new types of enamel used in the cans not only preserved the color but also extended the shelf life of many products.

In the 1950's the can created markets for food and non-food products that had not existed before. For example, beer can sales mounted into the billions as the general public bought beer for the home. Coffee sales boomed when the vacuum can for ground coffee was developed. Petroleum and chemical products for industry became readily available in tin cans or paper containers. In fact, the production of vegetable and fruit cans declined as the demand for beverage cans, cans for oil products, and pressure cans for deodorants, increased. A list of “Canco Firsts” is found in a Canco publication of 1951. These include, among others, salt

containers with spouts, sliding lid spice cans, oblong asparagus cans, frozen food containers, cans for film, and tennis ball cans. The smallest can produced was a bird biscuit can for R.T. French, which was about 2/3rds the size of a box of matches, and the largest a gallon or hotel-sized container for fruits and vegetables. As the 50's progressed, literally the entire can-making process became automated, from cutting to carrying the cans to the freight cars for packing.

People who worked at the can company in the 1950's and into the 1960's were often the second or third generation of their family to be employed there. Don Hull, a Canco retiree, recalled a family atmosphere where people worked their way up from stacking cans in the railroad cars to positions of foreman and superintendent, and where over 10% of the employees had been with the company for over 25 years. Many of the employees during that time were of Italian or Sicilian descent or were people who had grown up on the farm, knowing, as Don Hull put it, both how to work and how to use their hands. It was also a time when the sons and daughters of the employees could count on a summer job that worked them hard, sometimes up to 60 hours per week, but also made it possible for them to earn the necessary money to pursue their education. It was a time when there seemed to be a sense of mutual loyalty between worker and boss. It was a time when employees worked extra hours because that was what everyone did out of a sense of community and responsibility, and there was the feeling that that sense of community loyalty was reciprocal. Frank Fagnoli, who grew up near the Parce Avenue plant, remembered that the kids in the neighborhood would go to the plant nurse for checkups and treatment of minor ailments. Canco, in the words of one retiree, was "...a backbone of Fairport, there was no other major industry."

To be continued