

Canning Factory One of Area's Largest Employers



Workers canning tomatoes at a canning factory in the 1940s. Bob Grant photo from the Bob Grant family collection.

Although no tomato ketchup has been bottled in and shipped from Grand Junction for nearly 40 years, Mesa County was once the home of several canning companies.

In January 1905, The Daily Sentinel ran a story that the Hastings Industrial Company of Chicago had sent representatives to Grand Junction to convince the “good townspeople” to buy \$15,000 in stock. The corporation, which was promoting industrial enterprises, promised that if the stock were sold, it would return and build the city’s first canning factory.

A month later, I. N. Bunting, The Sentinel’s publisher, received a letter from another company that built canning factories and offered the city a deal costing \$5,000 less than Hastings.

However, it appears that no canning factory was built in Grand Junction until 1911, when Colorado Packing and Provision and Currie Canning Co. began operation.

The Polk Directory did list the Grand Junction Cider and Preserving Co. in 1910. However, I could find no proof that this was a canning factory.

In the fall of 1918 there was an abundance of tomatoes in the valley. A news story ran in The Sentinel urging women to come to work at Currie Canning Co. with the promise of making from \$1.75 to \$1.50 per eight-hour day “according to their individual ability.”

In October 1944, the valley again had a bumper tomato crop. With so many young men away at war, there was a shortage in the work force. When the call went out to the community for help from Kuner-Empson, and Sebastian Canning Co., volunteers gladly agreed to help.

Twenty members of the Business and Professional Women’s Club put in several hours each night for two weeks to save as much of the crop as possible.

School District 51 also responded to the appeal for help that year, releasing Grand Junction High School seniors to work at the canning factory. No senior was required to work in the factory, but they were being encouraged to do so to help the local canneries meet government quotas of tomatoes and ketchup required to feed the armed forces.

A third group also came to help the canning factories. The Mesa County Cannery Assn. contracted with the U. S. government to bring German prisoners of war to the area from Camp Carson in Colorado Springs, where they were being held. The prisoners did farm work, helped in the fields and assisted at the factory.

Joann White of Grand Junction recalls that her husband, the late Ted White, was one of the seniors from Grand Junction High School who worked at the canning factory in 1944. He told her that when the 10 a.m. rest period rolled around, the Germans would simply walk away from the conveyor, leaving the rest of the crew to catch the cans of tomatoes. Sometimes there was a real tomato mess when all the cans could not be grabbed up before the conveyor could be stopped.

Anyone I have contacted who worked in the canneries with the German prisoners said they were always nice and polite and didn't seem to resent working here. There are stories that a few of the German prisoners returned to Grand Junction with their families after the war ended, but I could not confirm this.

For years Kuner-Empson Canning Co., at the current location of Star Tech, filled the autumn air with the aroma of ketchup being made. Kuner-Empson was the last of the canneries in Grand Junction, closing in 1970.

The current Daily Sentinel property was the site for most Grand Junction canning factories. The parking lot at the corner of Third Ave., and S. Seventh streets was first the location of the Miller SJ Packing Co. and later the Mesa County Canning Corp.. The building was destroyed in a fire Aug. 19, 1961. The north parking lot at the Sentinel was the home of Currie Canning and later the Sebastian Canning Co.

When The Sentinel's current building was constructed in the early 1970s, the publisher decided to retain the cement floor now used as a parking lot and two building entry steps which face Third Avenue because it would have been difficult to remove them.

Mesa County was home to several other canneries over the years. I found references to Fruita Canning and Preserving; Loma Canning and Preserving; Grand Valley Canning at Appleton; Palisade Colorado Growers Co-Operative; Norish Finer; Palisade Colo-Flavor Products, Inc.; and Colorado Packing & Provision.