

# Early History of the Canning Industry in Sutter and Yuba Counties

by  
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In the year 1883 local farmers and businessmen posed a question, "Why not a fruit cannery in the community of Marysville or Yuba City?" Sutter and Yuba Counties are the best fruit growing area in California, with perhaps the exception of the Santa Clara Valley and that is questionable. In the 1880s when the fruit industry was in its infancy, good land could be had in the Yuba-Sutter area for \$50 to \$100 per acre. It was difficult to convince the people that much greater profits in fruit culture could be made in this area rather than going to the Bay Area and paying \$500 to \$1000 for land which was not any better for fruit culture. At that time the canned fruit industry in California amounted to about eight million dollars in assets to California. This represented about forty per cent of the wheat income and fifty per cent of the value of the gold mined in those years.

In May 1883, a group of local growers organized the Sutter Canning and Packing Company. They felt the need for a local processing plant in order to process the few fruits that were grown in this area. The organizational meeting was called to order by B. F. Walton in the absence of Fred Cooper. Dr. S. R. Chandler became chairman pro tem. They went through the pangs of organizing and

writing the articles of incorporation. The Sutter Canning and Packing Company came into being with the issuance of 500 shares of stock. The Board of Directors included many names that are familiar to most residents of this area: J. B. Wilkie, S. C. Deaner, B. F. Walton, J. C. Gray (president of the corporation), H. Luther, J. B. Onstott and G. S. Cooley.

The Sutter Canning and Packing Company purchased a block of land (5¼ acres) across Gilsizer Slough next to the railroad tracks. The property belonged to A. Wilbur. It fronted on B Street and was said to be on high ground. In a very short time they started to erect the buildings. Some of those buildings still can be identified inside the Associated Transportation Company building. It is a solid brick building with a sheet iron roof and is being used at the present time by Bremer's Hardware for a warehouse.

The Sutter Canning and Packing Company Corporation papers were filed with the Secretary of State which made it a legal organization. The land was purchased and work was started on construction. A Mr. W. H. Barker was awarded the contract which stipulated a completed plant in forty days. The Wheeler process was to be used in the canning of the fruit. The processing

machinery was moved in immediately upon the completion of the building.

In March 1884, the first assessment of ten dollars for each share of stock was called for and was to be paid in gold coin. The assessment was to be paid at the office of the Farmers Cooperative Union of Sutter County Bank, located on Second Street. Payments were to be made by April 5, 1884 or stock would be sold at public auction. They had about \$10,000 capital stock at the time. It was known as a joint stock company. In April 1884, about a year after its organization, J. Littlejohn replaced Mr. Cooley on the Board of Directors. Mr. Ashley was appointed superintendent of the plant and his immediate job was to get the plant ready to operate in the 1884 season. The newspapers were very encouraging by publicizing the fact that "a good profit is expected by these enterprising men." By May 23, 1884, they had 66,000 cans made by hand labor. They expected to have 240,000 cans ready by July 1st when the season was to start. That would hardly be a start today in the canning run. This was at the height of anti-Chinese sentiment in California and the local paper wrote, "It is the intention of the management not to hire Chinese in the canning department, but to give hundreds of boys and girls and women employment." Somewhat to the chagrin of the management, the Chinese were the only people who were able to make the cans the first season so they were employed the first season, but the papers carefully explained that energetic young men were going to be trained in this branch of the business. It would seem from the foregoing statements that the management was forced to hire the Chinese that first

season to make cans.

June 20, 1884 the Yuba City Cannery started operating. It would be a wild guess on your part if you could guess what was canned first: CURRANTS.

Labor seemed to be quite a problem that first year, but the encouraging newspaper was always behind the enterprise. To quote from the Sutter County Farmer; "to work and earn the bread by the sweat of the brow is honorable and none should feel that they were too good to labor. Honest toil is better than pauperism and this enterprise (the cannery) offers an opportunity for quite a number to make their fair wages. Girls and women and steady boys will be hired in the Canning Department." The ages of the "steady boys" ranged from eleven to fifteen years. As one of these boys remembered, "They put us out on the porch without even a shade over us, stemming plums with a short, notched stick."

A few years passed by with each year bringing a repetition of the trials and tribulations of the canning industry. The Superintendent had his troubles getting machinery and he had to enlarge the plant because of the increase in green fruit and case goods demand. On July 1, 1887, they started to run apricots with 135 operative employees, chiefly ladies both young and old. The newspaper noted, "Boys and girls of tender ages are all busy as bees earning from \$1.00 to \$1.65 per day." There was a need to enlarge the cannery due to the increase of plantings of new orchards in the area.

They finished the apricots in about two weeks, packing over 5,000 cases. Another interesting point to be mentioned is that several lots of

blackberries came down from Browns Valley to be packed. The superintendent's job had gone to Mr. J. J. Pratt in 1887. In 1887 we find about 150 tons of apricots were packed, and approximately 225 tons of peaches, 30 tons of pears, with tomatoes trailing with 15 tons. The prices paid for the green produce were about one and one half cents to two cents a pound. To quote the newspaper: "The fruit was well graded and sold on its merit." In that same year, 1887, there were rumors of another cannery in Marysville. The papers came out again with some good Chamber of Commerce material.

In 1888, the directors of Sutter Canning and Packing Company (J. C. Gray, R. C. Kells, B. F. Walton and others) agreed to enlarge the cannery to three times its original capacity. The problem with hired help was a drawback in spite of newspaper propaganda. There were not enough people locally who wanted to work so they began to import help. The people way out yonder in West Sutter and Meridian were interested in working if living quarters could be provided. In order to avail themselves of this labor the company built a "Tent City" and they furnished the "Tent City" with grocery service. Different grocery stores in town came around with their wagons, took the orders, to be filled and delivered later in the day. The "Tent Cities" were a great success in spite of primitive sanitation conditions to be lived with in our hot July and August weather.

A new form of power came into being about that time. The coal miners were on strike and freight rates for shipping coal from the East were prohibitive. Gas replaced coal and was

used in the tin shops and cooking tables. Gas produced less heat for the hot summers in the plant.

Wages in 1888 were from \$6.00 to \$12.00 per week. Boarding houses were established where one could get board for 50 cents per day, sometimes the price would go up to \$1.00 per day for board and room. The cannery housing was operated as a non-profit venture. The cottages were furnished to employees rent free. A deposit was required and if anything was broken during the employee's stay, he forfeited his deposit. We might say this was labor's "fringe benefits."

A 90,000 canned shipment exhausted all the supplies on hand in 1888. They put up nothing but first-class fruit and sold it all. Nothing but the best fruit, fresh from the trees was canned. With good newspaper propaganda that equaled a sellout.

In March 1888 we find a new cannery being born in Marysville. Some people say it was on 14th Street and others say it was on 11th Street, but the writer is inclined to believe it was on 14th Street since his grandfather, Mr. R. W. Skinner, was the biggest promoter. Many local people will remember Mr. R. W. Skinner in Yuba City and Marysville especially the Boy Scouts who attended the annual cherry feed in the Skinner cherry orchards. Granddad Skinner was usually seen about town dressed in a corduroy vest, a black hat that was completely round, a white stiff front shirt and bow tie, usually black pants, suspenders (with the old wide straps), and a pipe in his mouth. Probably a safety pin over one pocket because he kept a few folded bills in there. The silver with which he bought the kids ice cream was loose in his pocket.

R. W. Skinner was Superintendent of the new cannery. The newspapers stated he expected to employ about 200 hands for the season. The cannery was established on the railroad spur, the old California Northern Railroad. They put in a spur line to the tin shops and started working with two men, both Chinese. To quote Mr. Skinner, "Of course, in a few years I expect to see peas, asparagus, cherries and other early products produced in this vicinity to a larger extent, and then our season will begin much earlier." Mr. Skinner was a man of great vision and faith in the future of this area. There is not too much to be found in the Sutter County Farmer about the Marysville Cannery, but the Sutter Canning Company received its share in print.

April 1886 the Board of Directors of the Sutter Canning Company published an annual report which is always interesting reading to a co-op member. During the last four years of their operation the commercial rate of interest had been paid to the stockholders, which was between six and seven per cent in those days. S. J. Stabler, H. Luther, J. F. Wilkie, Mr. J. Gray, B. F. Walton, P. C. Kells, and Mrs. Jenny Starr were on the Board of Directors at the time the above report was published.

The pack for the first day's run at the Marysville Cannery was 20,000 cans of apricots. They were packed in extras, standards and seconds. The extras and standards were similar to corresponding packs of the present time, but the seconds were what we would class as pie food.

In 1889, there was a short crop. About seventy-five per cent of the quality fruit was very good. New

machinery was put in including the very latest in a syrumping machine. It metered the syrup into the cans which equalized the syrup in all the cans.

Many funny episodes take place in a cannery during the season. The writer recalls a funny thing happening in his grandfather's cannery which no doubt was the incentive for much kidding: One day during the season they had to shut down the whole plant and open every one of the cans which they had run that day. One of the girls had inadvertently placed her false teeth into one of the cans while empty. The can was processed with the rest. They had to search all those cans until they found the teeth.

The Yuba City Cannery started in 1883 had grown to such proportions by 1890 that a new warehouse had to be added. It was to be 40 by 100 feet and fireproof. They built it at a cost of \$4,500 which also included some tin supplies. The building was started in February and by April 6 of the same year the \$4,500 had to be paid back to those who made the loan, presumably the Board of Directors.

The Skinner Cannery in Marysville was known as the Marysville Canning Company. Later another fruit packing company was formed in Marysville, known as the Marysville Packing Company.

In 1890, the superintendent of the Marysville Canning Company made the following statement: "The fruit is likely to be of superior quality this season and the total yield of the orchards in this district will show no falling off as compared with last season. The increased age of bearing orchards and the number of young orchards which have just come into bearing will more than make up for any

loss or injury to the trees because of too much water." One can see that high water problems, sour sap, brown rot, etc. were prevalent in those days as well as at present.

In 1891, the Sutter Canning Company held a stockholders meeting and found that a favorable year had just been concluded. Good crops, good markets, excellent quality pack, and many new buyers caused things to be really looking up for the canning industry in California. Many enterprising people began to plant orchards and go into the fruit production business. The canneries were packing cherries of the Royal Anne, Governor Wood and Tartarian varieties. Some of the orchards producing the cherries were the Jones orchard, Bunce orchard, Teagarden Track, and J. B. Wilkie orchard. Apricots of the Royal, Peach and Early Golden varieties were packed the same year. Growers sold their fruit to the cannery for about one-and-a-half cents a pound. The cling peach price was two cents a pound or \$40 a ton in June 1891.

The local newspaper was instrumental in putting the business before the public and was very encouraging. A quote, "Canneries are neat and clean, a good place to work. We will need many workers during the coming season." The cannery operated at about 14,000 cans per day with about 400 employees. They were running peaches and pears at the same time. They were also cutting and drying at the Sutter Canning and Packing Company. They continued to operate into September of that year. The first indication of fruit being shipped into Yuba City by railroad cars was in 1891. The paper stated that a

carload of pears from Southwest Sutter arrived in Yuba City from P. V. Veeder's place on the Sacramento River. A carload of sugar was also received over the Knights Landing railroad.

Wages paid to the workers were increasing a little. The girls and boys cutting fruit were earning eight to nine dollars per week. Some of them earned as much as twelve dollars per week. The payroll of the cannery was about \$3,000 per week.

Year by year, the pack was steadily increasing. In 1892, the Sutter Canning Company canned about 32,000 cases of peaches, 4,000 cases of apricots, 1,600 cases of pears, 3,000 cases of plums, and about 800 cases of grapes. Besides canning, they dried about 213 green tons of produce.

Quality pack was very much in demand in the East and every year new markets were opening. Over \$75,000 was distributed between labor and the farmers in this community from this one little cannery in one year. (1892)

Peaches and plums were being packed in 1893. Approximately 1,500 cases of green-gage plums were packed. After plums they started on peaches which were primarily of the Tuscan variety. There were also some early Crawfords and Fosters. The price in 1893 seemed to stabilize at one-and-a-half cents per pound, and only first-class and extra quality in size were used. Some pears were delivered at the same prices.

Most of the employees of the Sutter Canning and Packing Company lived in the cottages furnished by the company. They were given preference of work when needed.

The season of 1893 found market conditions a little chaotic and quiet.

There was considerable carryover for several canneries. The Sutter Canning Company disposed of most of their stock, and that year over \$13,000 was paid to the farmers, and about \$15,000 to local labor.

In 1893, only about half a pack was processed due to economic conditions; however, by the beginning of the 1894 season the fruit canners were rejoicing over the unprecedented demand for California canned fruit. The demand came from the eastern market; however, in another record we are told that we were exporting overseas, and London and Liverpool seemed to be the outstanding market for case goods. From 2,000 to 5,000 cases were shipped daily. Of course, climatic conditions caused much of the demand for western fruit that particular season. The eastern fruit belt had a killing frost and production was very low.

Automation began to take its place in the canneries. A mechanical can carrier was installed in the Sutter Cannery. A chain in a tin trough, about five inches wide, carried the cans along continuously. The conveyer carried the fruit all the way from the cutting tables, through to the canning department, and on to the vats where they were cooked. The retort was not a line retort as is used today, but big vat retorts. At the same time a gasoline engine was installed to pump water.

January 17, 1896, the headlines in the Sutter County Farmer broadcast the news that a new cannery was to be built in Marysville to replace the one which had recently burned down. Subscriptions were being collected. Some of the contributors were: Frank House, Jenny Starr, Mrs. Parks, W. P.

Harkey, the Giblin Brothers, and others.

A month later R. W. Skinner announced plans to erect a new cannery on the site of the one recently burned. Mr. W. H. Wright of San Jose Packing Company planned to establish his plant in the old Marysville Pavilion located between Fifth and Sixth Streets on B Street. The State Fair was held in this building at one time which gave it the name "Pavilion." This cannery had a capacity of producing about 100,000 cases of fruit per season. The manager was Mr. A. C. Baumgarden. Nothing more was said about a cannery which R. W. Skinner was to build. He changed his plans and never did build another cannery in Marysville.

The Marysville Cannery canned 18,000 more cases than their guarantee with the stockholders required. The can sizes were a little different than they are today. They used a gallon size which corresponded to the number 10 tin of today. The number 10 tins were packed twelve to a case instead of six. Quart cans compared to number 2½ tins of the present day, and were packed two dozen to a case. There were also small size cans which were experimental. Four dozen small cans were packed to a case. The cases were made of wood in those days instead of cardboard which added much to the weight in handling.

The best export sales for peaches were London and Liverpool. The Marysville Cannery helped the San Jose Cannery and the Oakland Canneries fill their orders. The annual payroll was approximately \$25,000.

About 1896 the Yuba City Cannery began processing olive oil, and they also pickled olives which were sold in barrels.

In 1898 a rumor began to circulate stating that R. W. Skinner was about to start a new cannery in Woodland. He did open a cannery in Woodland at the same time he was manager of the Lincoln Fruit Packing Company. He was also trying to make a cannery go in Marysville. A quote from the newspaper about Mr. Skinner at the time states, "He is an energetic man and a thorough fruit man, it is hoped that his efforts will prove successful." They did prove successful in establishing a new cannery on the Yuba City side of the river.

In 1898, there must have been some adverse growing conditions as far as the weather was concerned. There was a very short crop, and only the Sutter Canning Company did any packing that year. There was about one-fifth of a crop of peaches.

Rosenberg Brothers gave notice in 1899 that a cannery was to be established in Yuba City just across the tracks from the Sutter Canning Company on B Street. They already had a dried fruit concern going there in 1899, but they were to establish a cannery which would pack a million cans. A million cans were ordered. Mr. C. A. Rand was superintendent. The newspaper, always promoting business for Yuba City, stated, "The new cannery was good for the community as it competes with the Cannery Association."

Articles of Incorporation for a new fruit cannery association, better known as the C. F. C. A., appeared in July 1898. The C. F. C. A. eventually became the California Packing Corporation or C. P. C. of the present day. The C. F. C. A. was originally started by ten different members: Cutting Fruit, Fontana Fruit, King

Morris, San Jose Packing, Sacramento Packing, Rose City, Southern Packing Company, and A. F. Tenny & Company. The capital stock was \$3½ million at \$100 per share. Sutter Canning Company held their stock at too high a price for the Corporation.

In 1899, two canneries were operating in Sutter County: the Sutter Canning Company and Rosenberg's. In addition to the cottages for employees, tents were being rented for fifty cents a week; however, they needed more help.

It was announced in January 1900 that R. W. Skinner, part owner of the Lincoln Canning Company, would be superintendent of the Marysville C. F. C. A. Plant, and R. C. Kells was recommended as assistant. A good season was anticipated.

In 1900, a new name appeared upon the horizon, Hunt Bros. of Hayward combined with Sutter Canning Company. At that time prices for green fruit ranged from \$25 on clingstones to \$17.50 for freestones. Size of fruit began to be mentioned as a criteria for sales. Peaches had to be between 2¼ and 2½ inches or better. Smaller fruit was of less price. Several thousand tons were contracted for the above prices in 1900. That same year Rosenberg's sold out to Hunt Bros. leaving only one cannery in Yuba City. The Sutter Canning Company, Hunt Bros., and Rosenberg's were all three combined into one plant. Working conditions were improved by installing electric fans which were to run constantly during warm weather. Wages were good, and it is interesting to note that the health of the workers was considered. "Drinking water will be boiled during the evenings and allowed to cool overnight. The

employees are assured of fair treatment, and fair wages for their work."

In 1900, Hunt Bros. elected R. W. Skinner to manage their Yuba City Plant, Marysville Can Company, and the Lincoln Cannery. This placed all canning in this part of the State under C. F. C. A. control. Mr. J. J. Pratt retired to go to the Hayward plant, claiming poor health. He had been manager in Yuba City since the beginning in 1884. The growers' contracts were not affected.

In 1901, frost claimed about one half the crop of peaches. Cherries were about average. In 1902, Charles E. Littlejohn and R. W. Skinner were elected as managers of the canneries in Yuba City, Marysville, and Lincoln. M. C. Coats was head of the clerical work.

With the 1902 season bringing in a large crop, causing prices to drop, the growers became very disgruntled, and wished to see a competitive cannery in the field. The acreage was increasing, and the C. F. C. A. appeared to be in control of the canning industry.

The Sutter Preserving Company was the result of the unrest and came into being with a capital stock of \$50,000, five hundred shares at \$100 each. One hundred were sold to R. W. Skinner, one hundred to San Francisco capital, and local growers bought up the other three hundred shares. The site of the new cannery was on B Street where the C. P. C. cannery is now located. It was located beside a spur railroad track. A building 40 feet by 300 feet was erected. A tank tower was built, and a boiler room was installed. The latest improved machinery and conveniences for

handling fruit were installed. The general management was under a Board of Directors with R. W. Skinner as manager and Charles E. Littlejohn as superintendent. Skinner was to manage the Woodland Cannery also. The two plants would mutually aid each other in the purchasing of supplies and distribution of fruit, although they were separate and distinct corporations. A wagon road was opened into the location, and the lumber was put on the site. A two hundred by four hundred foot canning room was built, a twenty by twenty engine room, and a tank tower was added. They built fifty feet of open platform between the two buildings at the south end of the main canning room. A forty by one hundred foot warehouse for storage was constructed. All the buildings were built five feet above the ground. All the shaftings, beltings, steam pipes, and water lines were under the floor. City water and electric lights were used by this modern plant. They also installed a 5,000 gallon tank for crude oil. The waste water was piped along the railroad tracks to the slough (Gilsizer Slough). A local lumber yard had the contract to build, and C. J. White was to superintend the construction. Frank Crane was appointed superintendent of the new plant in Yuba City, and George W. Pratt was in charge of green fruit, receiving, and shipping. This is the first time we find the canning and green fruit separated into two distinct departments.

In 1903, it is noted that the new buildings of the Sutter Preserving Company were coming along rapidly. Mrs. Della Morris was appointed bookkeeper. A seventy-five horsepower boiler had been installed,

and a good well had been sunk. In spite of all the modern installations and extensive preparations, business was not good that season, and competition was keen. The Sutter Preserving Company went broke and was forced financially to lease the well-equipped new plant. J. K. Armsby & Company leased it and started anew. Later a fire forced the lessee out of business. The Sutter Preserving Company stockholders were held responsible for \$17,000 or \$59.71 a share for the failing company. In spite of all this, R. W. Skinner must have had a way with the newspapers because they appeared to be on his side. The local paper states, "Circumstances caused the situation; however, the company did help the growers and the community, but not the stockholders." The plant burned in 1906, which ended the lease

with J. K. Armsby & Company; however, he in turn purchased the business.

The year, 1910, found Armsby's plant rebuilt and working. Later the Central California Cannery purchased the Armsby plant. The Central California Cannery has been in operation continuously to the present time, but a number of years ago became the California Packing Company or C. P. C.

The writer stopped this historic growth of the canning industry before the Harter Packing Company entered the field. That is a story within itself of the growth of a modern home-owned packing company.

Another book could be written on the development of the packing industry in Sutter and Yuba Counties in modern times.

I got a lot of exercise at the roller rink in Sutter, did you?

Do you remember motorcycle hill climbing mid-way through the Buttes on Pass Road (the north side) and the good crowds that showed up?

Speaking of the Buttes, do you remember the hoped for oil boom when they spudded in the first well in the Buttes? No oil, but look at all the gas wells in the area.

Last, but not least, do you remember 8¢ gasoline? But don't forget you worked 10 hours a day for \$1.75.



Let's go way back - do you remember the tin slide fire escape from the second floor of the Grammar School at Plumas & Bridge Streets at the southwest corner? Wheeee!