

Segment 8: Unlimited Appetites

About the time Julia Platt was battling chickens in Pacific Grove, the town began to undergo a major shift. Next door in Monterey, Norwegian canning expert Knut Hovden had swept into town. The spring salmon run was so huge that the fish could never be used fast enough; as many as 7,000 fish might be caught in one day. Canning was the solution, and several investors were vying to develop the secrets of a successful operation. But the salmon run is short in Monterey Bay, and if canneries are idle for most of the years they make poor businesses. Luckily, other fish were hugely abundant, especially the large sardines that filled the bay each summer.

Unlimited Appetites

Sardines have odd appetites. Most coldwater fish are ferocious carnivores, lunging at other fish or invertebrates with sharp teeth and powerful jaws. Sardines eat differently, steadily driving through the water with their mouths open like a living net. Seawater pours in, bringing with it the nearly microscopic plants and animals that make up the green soup of Monterey Bay. This tiny but abundant food supply is filtered by the sardines' gills and fuels their unending swimming and their fast growth. When the ocean is green, there is always food for sardines.

Beginning as tiny larvae off the coast of southern California, the Pacific sardine swims north against the current, filtering mile by mile. As the summer progresses the sardines get larger and larger, and they begin to spawn as they move north. The sardine populations progress up the coast, arriving at Monterey in mid- to late summer. The supercharged productivity of Monterey brings unbelievable numbers toward shore. In their peak years, there were more Pacific sardines off the West Coast than there were people on Earth.

H. R. Robbins was determined to take advantage of this bounty. He started the first cannery in 1901 between Point Alones (site of the future Hovden cannery and the Monterey Bay Aquarium) and the commercial wharf in Monterey. Pictures from 1902 show fishermen dipping sardines out of the water with hand nets on the Monterey beaches in order to fill the capacity of Robbins's tiny cannery. Frank Booth started the second cannery in 1903, and he bought the Robbins operation soon after. He hired Knut Hovden, who quickly became the key innovator of the industry, inventing solutions to problems as varied as how to move the sardines between the boats and the processors and how to solder the lids onto the cans. At first, the buyers resisted; the world market remained dominated by European sardines. But slowly, canned sardines from Europe gave way to Monterey sardines, and by 1917, five fish plants were steaming away in Monterey.

The canneries were a new business venture, and as their profits increased, they expanded quickly. As they grew, their smell rose up to greet the towns around them. "The juicy rich smell causes everyone to hold his or her nose," reported the *Monterey Herald*. The smell struck at the very heart of the primary engine of the Monterey and Pacific

Palumbi and Sotka, *Serialization of Death and Life of Monterey Bay*

Grove economy: the seaside tourism of the early 1900s. When the canneries came, tourism contracted a long, smelly illness from which it could not recover.

Too Much of a Good Thing?

The booming sardine business was not without its price, and in 1919 the state of California established its first Department of Commercial Fisheries to evaluate the fishery's effects on sardine abundance. Housed in the newly completed buildings of the Hopkins Marine Station, scientists at the new agency worried about the future: "Fisheries are subject to depletion because of too intense exploitation, as has been proved in Europe and in our own country." But they had little knowledge on which to act: "There is almost no adequate knowledge concerning the methods of conservation, or prevention of depletion. We . . . must be sure that we begin an era of scientific investigation of our fisheries in time to adequately guide and control the exploitation." This may have been the first public warning about the potential demise of the sardine fishery. What ensued was a bitter battle, pitting fledgling fishery scientists against the fishing and canning interests in the state.

The scientists had logic on their side, but the fishing industry seemed to have the numbers. From 1920 to the end of the decade, sardines arrived in greater tonnage every year, growing more than tenfold in landings. The sardines were also close at hand: A 1921 map of sardine catch areas shows most of them within a few miles of the Monterey harbor (Figure 6.1).

Bolstered by teeming success, the fishery continued. Eventually cracks began to show in the exuberant fish landings, but they were cracks that only careful science could detect. Sardine scientist N. B. Scofield rejected the use of landing data alone as a sign of fishery health. The important thing, he thought, was how much effort it took to catch those fish. Late in the 1920s, he was convinced the fishery was in trouble, writing, "Although the amount of sardines caught has been increasing each season, the catch has not increased in proportion to the fishing effort expended." But the fishermen and cannerymen thought the scientists were crying wolf, and the industry went about its business of unbridled growth. And they were about to hit the jackpot.

Dating and Sardines

On the front porch of a little house in Pacific Grove, Joe Bragdon fretted almost daily. The house seemed like most of the others, a small and unassuming wooden structure packed in tightly by its neighbors. But as far as Joe was concerned, it had one key difference: Doris lived inside.

It was 1935, and Joe was there as he was on many days, hoping to see Doris and ask for a date. Doris worked at the cannery day care center. But Joe worked at the canneries themselves, maintaining the huge ovens that fueled the fish meal dryers, rebuilding them when they became too enthusiastic and burned down the buildings. Arriving at Doris's house from work, Joe never was allowed inside. It wasn't any social stigma about his job; everybody worked the canneries.

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No, Joe's real problem was that his job stank. Actually stank. It made him stink too, and Doris wouldn't let him in the house because of it. This left Joe on the front porch, trying to be convincing enough from this distance to get a date for later in the day. And when he did, he would rush home and scrub off the smell.

Joe solved his romantic dilemma through porch-based social skills, and as of 2010 he and Doris had been married more than 60 years. But everybody in town was affected by the smell of the cannery's success, and some didn't do as well.

The Smell of Money

The canneries produced more than canned fish, fish meal, and fish oil. They also produced a stink in the air and a gush of fish parts that was dumped back into the water. When the Hopkins Marine Station first opened its new science labs on China Point in 1917, the next-door canneries dumped all their waste and guts (officially known as offal) in the nearby waters, and China Point floated with "globbs of fat and oil," making it extremely difficult to work among the rocks. A 1925 report to the Pacific Improvement Company, which owned the railroad in Monterey, lambasted the "foul condition of the water caused by the canneries discharge of sewage and waste." Cannery operators exacerbated the problem when they cleaned their machines, flushing the offal-laden cleaning water into the bay.

Few statistics of the pollution impact of the Monterey canneries exist, but Hopkins Marine Station professor Dr. Rolf Bolin complained that "the fumes from the scum floating on the waters of the inlets of the bay were so bad that they turned lead-based paints black." In modern fish meal factories, about 10 percent of the catch is lost in this wastewater, and if this were true in Monterey, then waste from processing a million pounds of fish would have dumped 100,000 pounds of fish organics back into the bay every day, more than the sewage produced by the whole city.

The polluting canneries damaged not only Monterey's ecology but also its other businesses. Although canning employed many people, it also reduced Monterey to a one-industry town. Tourism was particularly hard hit. Struggling to stay alive, the hotels in Pacific Grove and Monterey fought vainly against the increasing might of the canneries. In 1934, Del Monte Properties, owner of the landmark Del Monte Hotel, filed an injunction against all Monterey canneries for their odors and for the "large quantities of decayed and putrefied fish" in and around the plants.

But George Harper, head of the Monterey Canning Company, brazenly fought back. "Nobody has died of fish odors yet," he cried, "it's one of the healthiest things we have." Harper counted on support from his workers, who were unlikely to complain about a smell that represented their livelihood, and they did not let him down.

"You know what you smell? You smell money!" Women working in the canneries widely broadcast this attitude, and many could be found who echoed this feeling. The Great Depression created grateful employees, and the workers who labored on the canning lines valued their paychecks over what they regarded as a merely inconvenient smell.

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