

Draft 10 July 1988

REMINISCENCES OF A SARDINE CANNERY
AT PROSPECT HARBOR, MAINE, AROUND 1910.

donated by
Beatrice Buckley

(Edited by David B. Ingram, 76 Granite Street,
Foxborough, Massachusetts 02035, in 1988.)

#542
There follows an edited version of a monograph written in the 1950s by my father, John B. Ingram of Mansfield, Massachusetts, probably as notes for a talk given to a class of school children at the Pratt School in Foxborough where his wife, Emily M. Ingram, was a teacher. Born in 1881, John Ingram would have been seventy years old in 1951, and around thirty at the time of the events he recounts.

Sardine Canning on the New England Coast
-- A Fish-story which is True.

By John B. Ingram

This is a story about part of the fishing industry in which I onetime had a small part and thus have some first hand knowledge. Around 1910, I was called to make over some buildings of a factory in Prospect Harbor, Maine, where about 150 people were employed in packing sardines. I became much interested in the people who worked at the factory and in the business of canning the little fishes. [The superintendent of the Russell Company sardine factory was Jim Gillanders, a friend of the Ingram family. They had probably known him in northeast Scotland where John Ingram's father had been a ships chandler, serving the herring fishermen in Fraserburgh. Ed.]

Fishing is one of the oldest of occupations. Man must have food. Where can he get it easier than from streams, lakes and the sea? In the book of Genesis, God is quoted as saying, "Let the water bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life." Two of Jesus' disciples were Peter and Andrew, who were drawing their nets when he called them for his work.

As early as the year 1578, many ships from England, Holland, France, Spain and Portugal were crossing the Atlantic Ocean to fish along the coasts of North America, landing at times to dry their fish on the shore in order to preserve them for their long trip back to the home countries. This was over forty years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, although of course the fishermen did not have permanent settlements; they went back and forth each season.

Fish still forms an important part of the diet of millions of Americans. Large refrigerated trucks come daily

to East Coast ports, such as Boston, where tons of frozen fish caught off the shores of New England and the Maritime Provinces of Canada are loaded and carried back to the midwestern, southern and southwestern states.

I went to Maine in the month of April and I quit when the canning plant closed in November. Before I got through I had been able to help in making the whole business more efficient. My background and experience as an engineer was useful.

The site of the plant was a beautiful one. It was set in a small bay surrounded with hills covered with spruce and pine. On a fair day, the water in the harbor seemed to sparkle with the reflection of the sun and the boats danced at their moorings. But the weather was not always fair. Sometimes, the fog would set in and for several days we would not see the sun. The village had one main street following the shoreline. On one side was an elevated board walk to keep the feet of passersby out of the mud and water. During a fog and at night there was always a danger of stepping off the walk or of running into someone coming the other way. Everyone carried a light at night. The boards of the walk were narrow and nailed crossways. Many were not very sound, so a pedestrian was apt to put his foot right down through if he stepped on one of these rotten boards. We walked very carefully along the board walk.

The canning plant itself consisted of a main building, built partly over the water, and a large shed where the sardines were stored after they had been packed. Each of these buildings faced a strip of wharf on the water side. In the shed portion there was a section which could be lowered like a gang plank onto the deck of a boat. On the end of the main factory on the land side, there was a boiler and engine-house which supplied the steam to run the machines and to heat water. The buildings were covered with corrugated iron, painted a dark red color with paint which we made ourselves, using dry color and the waste oil which came from the fryers.

The Russell Company owned two boats. One of these was a steam-powered yacht which had once been used by a wealthy man to explore the Arctic. The other was smaller, with sails and an auxiliary gasoline engine. In each of the boats, tanks had been installed with a covered opening on the level of the deck. The fish were put in these tanks. These boats were not used for fishing, but only for transporting the fish from the fishermen to the factory.

The captain of the yacht was a one armed man who had sailed along the coast of Maine all his life. He was a most remarkable character. In bad weather as well as fair he could handle the wheel with his one good arm and the stub of

the other in a way that surprised those who did not know him. He smoked a pipe and, instead of using cut tobacco, he cut his tobacco off a plug with a jack-knife, holding the plug between his side and the short piece of arm he had left. I have come across Frenchmen's Bay in the pilot house with him in a storm that would send the boat alternately down into the trough of the sea and then riding up over the breakers. The captain would be holding fast to the wheel, while I had to hang on to the short mast rising through the cabin to keep from being dashed about by the pitching yacht.

It was the captain's duty to go out and buy fish from the fishermen. He was told to buy them as cheaply as possible, and naturally many an argument arose at the weirs as he bargained over what was the right price. Weirs were fish traps. From the earliest days of New England, the Indians set poles out into the mouths of rivers where they emptied their waters into the sea, and over tidal flats where the water was shallower near the shore. These poles were then interlaced with small branches. At the end toward the middle of the river, a pocket or trap was made. Schools of fish swimming along the river ran against this barrier. Trying to find a way out, they turned into the trap where the Indians could harvest them easily.

The same method was used by the European settlers who used a thread net instead of interwoven branches, making a sort of purse affair at the end into which the fish swam. Here they churned around, their silver sides glistening and their movements getting more and more restricted as additional fish came in. The fishermen usually went to the weirs early in the morning as soon as it got light.

The captain of our boat knew just where to go for fish. Sometimes he went south to Blue Hill Bay and sometimes north towards Jonesport to get a load. It was grand fun to go with him on such a trip. Standing on the deck in the cool of the morning, one could see the the sun just peeking up over the water, the hills in the distance rimming the bay with blue solitude. As the captain edged his boat close to a weir, the fishermen would be waiting in a dory. They would be wearing high hip boots, flannel shirts and often sou'wester hats. Sometimes it was too shallow for us to get into the weir at all. In that case, the fishermen would scoop the fish into their dories and, when they were full, row out to where our boat was anchored.

When a price was agreed upon, a large basket would be lowered from our vessel on a rope and the fishermen would load it with fish. It would then be hauled aboard and emptied into our tank which contained enough water to keep the fish sloshing on the return trip to the factory. The catch was reckoned by the number of bushels of fish and they

were bought and sold by that measure.

The trip back to the factory would be made as quickly as possible so that the fish would not spoil and so the packing could begin. In times when fish were scarce, several days might pass before a run could be found. The workers were glad when they heard the factory whistle calling them to the plant to go to work, because a run of fish meant several days of work and there weren't many alternatives. Generally, fish were found two or three times a week and employment would be more or less continuous. If the captain of the boat could get ashore before returning, he would usually telephone to the factory to report how much fish he had and when he would "get in." However, many times his degree of success was largely uncertain and the factory workers would be left wondering if he had a big load or a small one. But upon hearing the whistle they would troop down to the factory wearing their large aprons and it would not be long before the boat docked. Then the baskets of sardines would be hoisted up with a winch and dumped into a sort of hopper where a stream of water would wash them through a trough into a large wooden box or tank, open on top and about three feet high.

In that day, sardine packing plants had about five departments. First was the flaking room where the fish were taken from the tank and spread on wooden screens called "flakes" to dry. Next, they went to the frying room where they were put into pans and run through a long trough of boiling cotton-seed oil which cooked them. After that, they went to the packing room where women trimmed the fish to the right size to fit in the cans and carefully packed them. The next stop was the sealing room where tops were put on the cans and they were sealed by large, power-operated machines. Finally, the cans went through the bathing room where the sealed cans were put in boiling water for a time to ensure that they were tight and to remove any grease or oil sticking to them. In addition to these principal operations, there was a so-called cartoning room where the cans were put into pasteboard boxes and a shipping room in the shed where they were packed in cases of one hundred cans each, the unit by which they were sold.

The cans were manufactured by the American Can Company and shipped to the factory in large quantities, usually enough for a whole season's packing. Of course the bottoms were separate from the tops which were little more than flat pieces of tin plate. Years before, the tops had been soldered on after the sardines were put into the cans. Then an ingenious machine was invented which folded the edges of the tin top over the edges of the bottom in a manner to make each can air-tight. In the early 1900s, this could be done at the rate of thirty cans a minute.

The tank in which the fish were cooked was narrow, about two feet wide, fifty feet long and one foot deep. Along the bottom ran pipes holding live steam produced in the boiler house. The cotton-seed oil covered the pipes to a depth of about three inches. When the temperature of the oil had reached almost the boiling point, the tank was ready for the sardines to be put in. Prior to this time, they had been taken from the flakes and put into pans with screen bottoms. This allowed the hot oil to come up through and cover the fish when the pans were placed in the long trough. The pans closely fit the width of the trough. Thus, when the trough was full of them, as a workman put a fresh pan into one end, he pushed all the trays ahead and his partner at the other end took out a pan of cooked fish. The pans holding the cooked sardines were placed on little wheeled trucks called "dollies" and then pushed through to the packing room. There, the women who cut and packed the fish worked at low tables.

* * * * *

Editor's note: Unfortunately, the surviving narrative ends here. Apparently one or more concluding pages were lost. Nevertheless, it is possible to visualize the sheer hard work which went into canning sardines which about eighty years ago, sold for a few pennies a can.

For a more recent view of the Maine sardine industry, see an article in the June 1979 issue of "Yankee Magazine." Written by Martha Barron Barrett, it is titled, "Hauling in the Twine off Jonesport." The focus is more on catching fish than on the canning operations, but Prospect Harbor is mentioned and there is other overlap with John Ingram's story.