

CALVIN LAFORREST STINSON, SR.

Born at Corea, Maine, November 22, 1891. The second child of John W. and Eva Tabbutt Stinson. There was an older sister Ida and a younger brother John W., Jr. Later a younger sister Dorothy, who lived only a few days after birth. John, Sr., was captain of a schooner and later managed a lobster pound for Consolidated Lobster Co. at Hancock Point, Maine. He later built his own pound at South Addison, Maine. Eva was a school teacher and homemaker.

Calvin, when not in school, took trips with his father on a schooner; and before he was old enough to be a real crew member, he found work in the galley helping the cook. He in later years filled in for the cook on a few of the trips.

He also found employment cutting fish in the local sardine factory where he needed a wooden box to stand on in order to reach the cutting table. There was always something to keep an ambitious young fellow, eager for experience, busy; but he also realized the need for an education and enrolled in Rockland Commercial College, where he did exceptionally well and was able to graduate early and with high honors.

He then went into the lobster business with his father, operating as J. W. Stinson & Son. They were buying lobsters for the pound from local fishermen; and in order to get more volume, he got a lobster smack, a boat with circulating sea water in the hold so as to transport live lobsters greater distances. This enabled him to go to the fishermen and buy more lobsters.

Then came World War I in 1916, where he served in France and Germany under General Pershing, taking part in two major engagements at Chateau-Thierry and the Battle of the Marne in 1918.

After the war ended, he came back home to the lobster business with his father. He soon figured about the only way to increase profits was to eliminate a middle man, so he went to New York City to establish direct contacts and set up a sales office. The idea was good, but doing business and living in the Big City was not for him; so after a brief experience he returned to small town life in Maine with the comment that he would rather dig clams than put up with life in the city. He then figured there were more opportunities to be found right here at home, but in a business where there was more value added to the product.

Along with partners Jones Wass and Wass's two sons, Lester and Henry, he purchased the E. T. Russell Co. sardine cannery at Prospect Harbor, forming the Wass & Stinson Canning Co. Later in 1927 he bought out his partners, and Stinson Canning Co. was established.

He then married Marion A. Harding, who was working as a nurse at the Stinson Private Hospital in Bangor, owned by his sister, Ida S. Burgess. In 1928 the first of six children was born. In 1931 he purchased the Addison Packing Co. in Southwest Harbor.

These were hard times for everyone during the Great Depression years. Money was hard to come by, and with competitors sitting on the boards of the local banks, it was that much more difficult for a newcomer in the business to get the necessary working capital. He was able to get concessions from some of his suppliers during the height of the packing season; and as long as he could sell for a profit and pay his bills after the sardines were sold, he was able to get credit extended for the next season. This brings up a little story where he was offered a lower price on a volume item by a new supplier. Rather than take advantage of what he decided was probably a temporary introductory deal, his real reason for refusal was loyalty to the regular supplier, who had extended credit when he was getting started and really needed it.

He tried to make every penny count in order to keep costs down and overhead low to get the profit needed to pay the bills and to eventually expand when the opportunity was right. He didn't draw a salary, his car and house were owned by the Company, and he was able to find a little expense money in order to pay grocery bills. The IRS wasn't checking much on small business, and not much money was spent on accountants and proper bookkeeping. As long as he knew what the costs were and could sell for a profit, that seemed to be the important thing.

A person could start a small business with a little ability, not much money, and a lot of hard work. It was a slow process, needing a little luck and timely opportunities. Now people move faster and on a much larger scale, with leveraged buyouts, junk bonds, and in general a lot of other people's money at risk.

He eventually accumulated enough money and credit for further expansions. In 1946 he and Glenn Lawrence, who owned a sardine cannery in Belfast, Maine, built the Bath Canning Co. and a couple of new and larger sardine carrier boats. A few years later he bought out Mr. Lawrence's half of the Bath company and shortly afterward the Belfast plant.

The Seaboard Packing Co. and American Sardine Corp. had been among the larger and more prominent Maine sardine companies and had built up some excellent brands and expanded them with good profits in the sardine business during World War II. After the war period the profits declined; but these companies, being used to high dividends, a higher debt structure, and generally increasing expenses, were eventually taken over by the bank. This was one of the big opportunities that Mr. Stinson had prepared for, and he purchased them in the early 1950s, adding plants in Robbinston, Lubec, Machiasport, and South Portland. He also purchased the Brawn Co. in Portland and a majority interest in the Haskins Packing Co. in Lubec. During the 1954-55 packing season he operated nine sardine plants all along the Maine coast, but this with his aggressive production philosophy produced more sardines than the sales organization could orderly dispose of. This resulted in closing some of the higher cost plants and duplications, leaving only the more efficient and strategically placed plants in operation.

In these early days the business was very seasonal. The canneries were equipped to operate only during the summer months when the fish are most available. Some years the fish would show up in one section of the coast

and not in others. The only means of getting fish to a cannery was by carrier boat and salting them for preservation. This limited the distance the fish could be transported even in good weather. A company with only one plant was at risk of a shortage of fish in its area. A couple of bad years in a row would and did eliminate many of them.

Mr. Stinson started making his own tin sardine cans in 1959. The next year he built a can shop and warehouse and began producing cans and covers for all of his plants. He changed from tin to aluminum cans in 1965 to go with the aluminum easy-open "banana tab" being produced by American Can Co. Around 1970-71 he began making his own improved easy-open "ring tab" covers.

In the early 1950s family members were coming into the business to help head up various parts of the rapidly expanding operation. Eventually two sons and three sons-in-law were to take over management of the sales, the overall production, and the can shop operation.

In 1966 we purchased a plant in Rockland that had been used mostly as a shrimp processing plant, and set up a fresh and frozen operation for shrimp, ground fish, and herring fillets. We also purchased machinery and freezing equipment for individually quick freezing and packaging shrimp in the Belfast and Bath plants. The Prospect Harbor plant burned in May of 1968. We built a new plant and office building and had it operating before the end of the year.

From 1966 through 1977 we participated in Codex meetings in Bergen, Norway, in an effort to set minimum quality and health standards for sardines in international trade. At this time we were experiencing shortages of small fish along the Maine and Canadian coast, which soon led to a general shortage of all canning-size sardines. We were able to purchase small sardines packed under our label by Norwegian packers and a couple of years later we got the regular-size 4-6-count sardines packed under our labels by a Danish packer at a more competitive price for our volume sardine market in the USA.

In 1972 we began experimenting with the larger Maine fish and came up with what we called "fish steaks." It was a very clean-looking product with six to eight small steaks of herring placed neatly into a sardine-type can. With cutting machinery these were less expensive to pack than sardines, and they were introduced in the regular oil, mustard, and tomato packs. We then developed chili pepper, Louisiana hot sauce, smoked, barbeque sauce, and finally with five to seven varieties available for the markets it became very difficult for our competitors to keep up or even to gain much of a foothold with this product. Within a few years fish steaks were one third of our sales volume or better than 150,000 cases and 70% to 75% of the industry volume for this product.

Other changes that were taking place included the trucking of fish in tank trucks, then to smaller tubs carried on flat bed trucks. We also went from salting to icing the fish in order to keep the fish fresh during longer hauls to the canneries. This soon eliminated the need for plants all along the coast and made it easier to consolidate and mechanize some of the plants.

We mechanized the new Prospect Harbor plant with sorting, sizing, and cutting machinery, a new type packing line, and continuous cookers connected directly to the saucing and closing machines. We added machinery to a couple of other plants and reduced down to four and finally in 1987 to three plants operating without reducing our volume of production.

This was his life. Mr. Stinson enjoyed building the business by keeping a step or two ahead of the competition, but he found time to play and relax as well. He learned to handle a shotgun as a young man hunting eider ducks for market. They were salted into barrels and shipped by sailing vessel to Boston. He was introduced to clay target shooting in the mid-1940s and began winning state trap championships in 1949, taking the State All-Around for the next four years along with an occasional 16-yard, handicap, or doubles title each year. He went on to take trophies throughout the New England states, the New York Athletic Club, and at several of the Florida winter chain shoots. He was inducted into the Maine Sports Hall of Fame in 1982 for his trap shooting accomplishments.

He always had used a shotgun and had little problem shooting birds on the wing, but big game hunting with a rifle was something new until Leigh and Harry Coffin introduced him to deer hunting in the early 1940s. They had a camp in Township 7 with no roads for easy access, but they would get the train to drop them off with their supplies and equipment and pick them up after a week or two of hunting. It didn't take long to catch on to deer hunting, especially the fresh air and relaxing exercise out in the quiet of the wilderness. The camping and story telling with friends for a few weeks was not hard to take; and when the old camp burned, they built another right by the railroad track. Then in 1945 he had the opportunity to purchase 3800 acres of woodland surrounding the camp. Now he could be sure of a place to hunt and camp with friends for as long as they wanted.

Until his death on April 4, 1992, at the age of 100, in work and in play he welcomed a challenge, enjoyed the competition, and was always trying to be a little bit better at whatever he undertook.

--Calvin L. Stinson, Jr.

Charles B. Stinson

Kathryn S. Wayman
granddaughter

Mrs. Charles Stinson

Cy Wayman
great grandson

Leigh Wayman
Mrs. Calvin Stinson Jr.
Long Ann Francis
Calvin L. Stinson Jr.

Copy for file.
Read by Elinor Vassey at
September 13, 1993
G.H.S. meeting.