

Factory days: Work in Carroll County canneries was not for the faint of heart

“Hot, hard, and dirty work.” That is how many older adults remember their experience working in Carroll County canneries as teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s. They admit the jobs put money in their pockets and gasoline in their cars, but many found one year was enough, while others vowed they’d never do it at all.

Whether you lived on a farm or in one of Carroll’s towns or villages, there likely was a canning factory near your home back then. According to “Carroll and Frederick County Canneries” by Harry Conover and John H. Foertschbeck, Sr., over 50 canneries of various sizes operated locally between 1868 and 2000. Their products bore names such as Real Value, Happy Meal, Fame & Glory, Wax Wing, Mother’s Delight, Tommy Stew, and Pride of Carroll County. Most of the work was seasonal – canning crops as they ripened. Peas and beans came first, then tomatoes and corn. Those were the four vegetables almost every factory processed each year, but lima beans, beets, peaches, plums, and other fruits also found their way into cans.

Migrant workers often picked the crops, but teenage boys and girls plus adult women were the dominant work force in the factories. Only parts of the canning operation were automated. Much was done by hand as quickly as possible on what was essentially an assembly line. There was no room for slackers who might slow down the process at any stage. Once the cans were filled and sealed, they were loaded into huge cookers, ultimately given a colorful label indicating the cannery which produced them, then boxed for shipment by rail or truck. Families often had a favorite local brand; hominy packed by the Mt. Pleasant Packing Company was one of them.

What fun it was to interview people now in their 70s or 80s about those “hot, hard, and dirty” jobs! Their memories were not fond, but they were vivid. Some teenagers had worked in smaller operations like Carroll Bish’s Mt. Pleasant Packing Company north of Westminster near the intersection of Stone Road and Rte. 97, or at Greenmount between Hampstead and Manchester. Others had worked at two of the largest canneries – A.W. Feeser with plants in Keymar, Silver Run, and Taneytown, or B.F. Shriver with four factories scattered from Union Mills to Sykesville. The largest Shriver plant stretched along Railroad Avenue in Westminster parallel to the tracks of the Western Maryland Railroad. Some of the buildings still exist but have been repurposed.

Work was unlike the 8-hour shifts of an assembly line today. Your job might not begin until 10 a.m. or later, depending upon whether the crop to be processed was being harvested that same morning. Peas had to be canned immediately. Once work began, you stayed until the job was finished, even if that meant it was dark when you finally got home. Employees usually packed their lunches and ate them whenever they could grab a short break. Several fellows working at the Shriver cannery in Westminster in the 1960s hopped in a car and dashed the short distance to Munch’s Drive-in on Route 140 where they could buy a burger for 10 or 15 cents. If you needed to work through the dinner hour, that could present a problem. Although the Shriver cannery in Westminster had a cafeteria where employees could buy lunch or dinner, smaller canneries apparently didn’t offer that amenity.

Anyone involved in canning tomatoes arrived home drenched in sweat and tomato juice – undoubtedly needing a different set of clothing for the following day as well as a shower. One teenager who worked on the line feeding husked corn into the corn cutter remembered it took only a couple of hours before she was covered in corn. It even oozed out of her shoes. While those who peeled tomatoes were paid by the number of buckets or baskets they finished each day, other workers remembered hourly pay between 75 cents and \$1.05. Unskilled teenagers in Carroll County were lucky to have canning jobs, but they also might find summer employment in shoe or sewing factories – not the case in 2024.

The last job at night, which was usually left to the more responsible employees, involved spraying down all the equipment with high pressure steam hoses. It was one of the more dangerous jobs, but there must have been many others as well. Child labor laws passed in the 1920s and 1930s prevented canneries from using underage employees; if a few slipped in under the legal age, they stayed out of sight when inspectors came around. One underage youngster who grew up near the Shriver cannery in downtown Westminster helped unload boxes of empty cans arriving by rail. He and a couple of his friends were “paid” by sending them home with gallon cans of corn or other vegetables for their mothers.

Many employees already knew the dangers of working around machinery. They grew up on farms and likely operated tractors before they were 10 years old. Conover and Foertschbeck’s book mentioned one tragic incident which occurred in 1952 where an 18-year-old fellow at the Greenmount Canning Company was electrocuted, but none of those interviewed spoke of instances where someone got seriously hurt.

Anyone interested in learning more about Maryland’s role in canning might enjoy a few hours wandering through the Baltimore Museum of Industry on Key Highway. One exhibit highlights a major contribution to the canning process made by Carroll County’s own Shriver family.

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*Image 1: Source: Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: This undated photograph of employees at one of the B.F. Shriver canneries, perhaps the one along Railroad Avenue in Westminster, may have been taken before child labor laws were introduced in the U.S.*

*Image 2: Source: Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: One of the colorful labels used by Carroll County canneries. A.W. Feeser & Co. had its headquarters in Silver Run. By 1925, its three canneries processed 300,000 plus cases which were shipped across the U.S. and Canada, an indication of Carroll’s huge contribution to the food industry at that time.*

