

The Gilroy Cannery

by

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Introduction

I am a nearly lifelong South County resident, and the Gilroy Cannery has been a constant presence in my life. When I was a child, my mother always used to point the cannery's smokestacks out to me as we drove by. I remember her teaching me to identify the smell of the stewing tomatoes, just as she taught me to recognize the garlic smell which is also prevalent in some areas of Gilroy. The cannery was an integral part of Gilroy for me. It didn't always draw attention to itself, but it was always there in the background. Gilroy is not the same without it, and there will be an even larger piece of Gilroy missing after the facility is torn down this summer to make way for a new housing and retail project.

Whether I recognized it consciously or not, on some level I always knew that the cannery was very important to Gilroy. However, I had no idea how important it was for many people until late last year when I began to do historical research and oral history interviews regarding the cannery. As I pored through antique newspapers and spoke with former cannery workers, the full significance of this cannery to its community began to grow clearer for me. I also developed an avid personal interest in this business and in its rich and colorful history.

Early Years

One thing that has continued to surprise me has been the consistently high opinion that the community members I've interviewed have had of the cannery and its founders. There seem to be three major reasons for this. First, when the cannery was established in 1914, Gilroy "was a small agricultural community with very little commerce or industry so Filice and Perrelli Canning Co. [F&P] was encouraged and welcomed not only as a source of employment, but a source of revenue for the town as well" (Filice 9). Secondly, the owners of the cannery seem always to have done their best to conduct business in a fair and ethical manner, and were widely respected for doing so. The third and possibly most important reason is that the cannery was seen as an inspiring example of how an immigrant could come to this country and end up prospering as a result of their own skills and intelligence.

Keep in mind that these families had been in the United States for only nine years or less . . . could speak only Italian when they left the old country, had very few assets and no formal education. Their entire background for generations had been as sharecropping farmers in a very poor part of Italy. Their strength of character, energy, and faith in themselves made no obstacle too great as long as they were given the opportunity to work and succeed. And they asked for little help, only opportunity. (Filice 9)

As Teddy Roosevelt stated in his 1905 annual message to Congress, “There is no danger in having too many immigrants of the right kind . . . those of whatever ethnic origin willing to learn English, embrace the values and customs of the middle class, improve themselves through education, work hard at their profession, and obey the law” (Filice & Perrelli Cannery 2).

All of the cannery founders seem to represent these values, but Gennaro Filice, the president of the Filice and Perrelli Cannery, particularly embodies this ideal. He never learned to write, but he worked his way up from the bottom of the social ladder to become a highly respected member of his community and a millionaire. He worked a string of jobs when he came to the US from Italy, eventually ending up in charge of the warehouse at the Bisceglia cannery in Gilroy when he was in his early twenties. In 1913 there was a devastating fire at the Bisceglia cannery. The Bisceglia's opted to build a new cannery in San Jose instead of rebuilding their old facility. In the fall of 1913 Gennaro Filice, his brother Ralph, his brother-in-law Pasquale, and their friends John, Frank, and Joseph Perrelli, started their own basic canning facility, which they built themselves on a corner of the Filice ranch in Gilroy. They did not want to have to move to San Jose every season, and they were eager to try starting a business on their own. From the start, it was very much a family-run and operated business.

Because San Jose was twenty-odd miles from where we lived in Morgan Hill, we felt it was too far to travel to go, just like gypsies, bringing all our furniture and things to go into a rented home. So we felt that we couldn't carry on like that.

We decided among ourselves that maybe we ought to go into the canning business ourselves, on our own. We decided in late 1913. We got together the three families, two Filices and one Perrelli . . . We did everything ourselves. We built everything . . . We didn't need too much equipment because in those days everything was hand labor. There was nothing but belts and boiling vats. (Perrelli 30)

This was a huge and risky undertaking, but the Filices and Perrellis believed in working hard and trying their best. "It was all native ability. You do it and you do it. In other words, if you don't try, you'll never do it" (Perrelli 30).

Each founder possessed unique talents and abilities that helped contribute to the cannery's success.

Gennaro, as the oldest, and with his innate leadership qualities, was the undisputed leader of the group, and an amazing group it turned out to be. Gennaro had the bearing, intelligence and charisma to win the respect of virtually any one (sic) he approached and became an extraordinary salesman. John; big, burly and strong, had been a brickmason's apprentice in Italy, and had a natural talent for construction and machinery. Ralph, Frank and Pasquale would prove to be excellent plant managers who would run clean, high quality and cost effective plants. Joseph, the youngest of the group, would be designated as the one member that would acquire a formal college education so as to deal with the

financial affairs of the company to be. He went to public schools and the University of California, Berkeley to study accounting and finance. (Filice 8)

They combined their resources to start, and Gennaro Filice obtained a loan for an additional \$600 from the Bank of Italy. In 1914 the six founders planted, harvested, and processed about fifty or sixty acres of their own tomatoes, ending up with a pack of about twenty thousand cases. As Joseph Perrelli remembers, “. . . when we first started to go into farming and canning, we did the farming. We planted the tomatoes, and we harvested the tomatoes, and we canned them all in the same ownership, practically” (Perrelli 29). They did hire outside help to aid in harvesting and peeling the tomatoes. In 1915 they decided to purchase the burned site from the Bisceglias and set up operations there.

Challenges

Ultimately the Gilroy cannery was a very profitable business, but the cannery's early history was challenging. The owners had to work very hard to keep their business running, and there were many times when F&P almost went under. After initially getting the plant off its feet and making it through World War I, the cannery's founding families:

suffered the first major set-back (sic) that threatened their survival. The price of sugar had risen dramatically during the war years and was rationed. Since sugar was a major ingredient in canning, F&P, like the other canners, had secured as much sugar as they could at the inflated prices to insure sufficient quantities for the impending canning season. With a large stock in their warehouse, the market broke resulting in a huge loss on their inventory of sugar which was reflected in the lower price for their production of canned fruits that year. (Filice 11)

The Great Depression also had a huge detrimental impact on the Filice & Perrelli Canning Co. They hardly made it through this time period, and sometimes families of the cannery founders were able to draw little or no salary. Even in his later years, the memory of these years was very difficult for Joseph Perrelli:

I was worried about the financial end of it. And I had plenty to worry about. We had a very difficult period during the thirties. We were lucky that we pulled through. There were quite a few canneries that didn't pull through during that period . . . to be honest with you, there was a period of time when the Filice and

Perrelli members did not draw salaries. We just lived from hand to mouth. It brings back too many memories. It got to a point where I couldn't sleep at night. (Perrelli 51)

Joseph Perrelli also felt awful about the fact that they could not provide much-needed employment for many people at this time. An interviewer reports that at one point during her interview, "Mr. Perrelli asked me to turn off the tape recorder. He became very quiet and then tears poured down his cheeks. More than half a century had passed but the memories of lines of women standing at the cannery gate each morning hoping to be hired still touched him deeply" (Perrelli).

This time period was made even more difficult when the Gilroy cannery burned down in April of 1931. The owners were greatly affected financially, the spinach pack was destroyed, and many workers who had depended on the cannery for employment were out of work that year. The Gilroy plant was reduced to "absolutely nothing but a pile of cans. If you stayed by, you could hear them pop" (Vigna 4). They were ultimately unable to rebuild in time for that season's pack, but luckily the Richmond cannery had been completed by now. With the help of a leased cannery in San Jose, the Richmond facility was able to finish that year's canning. Many workers from the Gilroy plant moved to Richmond for the season to help. Construction was begun as quickly as possible, but the new and improved Gilroy cannery was not completed until 1932.

Throughout the following years the owners gradually made additions to their business, making the facility larger and able to handle increasingly bigger packs. The

company was always looking for opportunities to expand their business, and for a time the owners leased a second canning facility in San Jose. This cannery operated until 1929, when the second Filice & Perrelli cannery was built in Richmond and headquarters were moved there. In 1953 a third facility was established in Merced.

Gennaro also took long business trips across the country to find markets for their products. They also kept up-to-date with technology and made accommodations for their ever-growing workforce, even building small cabins on-site for workers to live in. Their tomato output increased, and they soon expanded and began canning fruit as well. In their early years they packed apricots in July, peaches and pears in August, and tomatoes in the fall months. Later they also packed spinach in March and April and added fruit cocktail and prunes to their mix. They always made an effort to treat their employees and the people they did business with fairly and honestly. Former employees report that they paid people as well as they felt they could for the times and ran their business based more on integrity than on greed. During several rough periods, the Filice and Perrelli family members went without pay so that they could afford to pay their non-family workers and their debts.

The cannery's founders also came up with innovations that revolutionized the canning industry. Along with Walter Burns, one of the food brokers who represented the cannery's output to buyers, Gennaro Filice came up with the idea to produce small eight-ounce cans that could be carried in a worker's lunchbox. Later, Joseph Perrelli created a new kind of peach-pitting machine that produced fruit of a far larger quantity and better

quality than previous machines had. He worked nights for twenty years to develop a better peach-pitting design, and in 1953 finally patented a machine that met his standards. An entirely separate company was started to market this machine. The company was called Filper, incorporating the first three letters of the last names Filice and Perrelli.

The canning methods at the cannery changed greatly over the years. When the cannery first opened the tomatoes were harvested by hand. Then:

The tomatoes were put in baskets, and then we scalded them either in water or in steam . . . Then we . . . dumped the baskets on the table and the women picked the tomatoes manually and took the core off and took the skin off and whatever blemishes might be there. Then the tomatoes were put into another container and were brought to the canning tables, at which point they were put into cans . . .

(Perrelli 37)

Later the cannery became much more automated, and many people worked to help the machines run smoothly instead of working hands-on with the product.

World War II proved to be another challenging time for the Filice and Perrelli cannery. New government regulations stated that all companies that produced food had to provide for the military first before they sold anything on their own, and there were also new restrictions on the amounts of sugar that could be used in canning and on the prices of produce. The F&P Company adhered to their usual ethical policies when selling their now much smaller supply and still paid their suppliers a fair price. Many other companies were resorting to unethical means during the war to make a profit, so

this earned the F&P Cannery even more respect from the people they did business with and from the community as a whole. Their sense of ethics also kept them on good terms with growers, who boycotted many buyers at this time when they would not pay the prices that the growers felt were fair for their produce. The war had negative effects on the family on a personal level as well. Many male family members went off to war and Clara Filice, Gennaro's wife, had to leave her home temporarily. She had never become a naturalized citizen and, along with all Japanese citizens, all non-naturalized Italian or German citizens were seen as enemy aliens. Non-naturalized Italians were ordered out of coastal blackout areas, and unfortunately the Filice residence was located in such an area.

The Golden Age

By the time WWII was fought, however, the Filice & Perrelli Canning Co. was very well established as a business and in the Gilroy community. The government contracts had the beneficial side effect of placing the Filice & Perrelli Canning Co. in a position where they would not have to compete with other companies. The company ended up making it through the war much more easily than many other businesses, and during this time the founding families finally began to take a little more time off to relax instead of working nonstop.

For companies that made it through WWII, the end of the war proved to be “the golden age for canning, since frozen foods were in their infancy and fresh fruits and vegetables were strictly local and seasonal” (Filice 21). Business was so good that a decision was made to build the Merced facility, as both the Gilroy and Richmond plants were working at capacity. At this point in time “F&P was . . . one of the largest, [most] highly regarded independent canners in the state, and was producing millions of cases of product annually (Filice 21). The founders owned vast land holdings as well as the Filper Corporation.

Golden ages don't last forever, however, and by the mid-50s the golden age of canning had begun to lose its luster. There was much more competition from fresh, frozen and boxed foods. Many canning companies began to lose money and go out of business. The founders did not want to end up losing their money. They were also ready

to start moving towards retirement after all of the work that they had done for most of their lives, and Gennaro Filice's health was rapidly failing.

Later Years

In 1958 the cannery was sold to California Cannery and Growers, a farmer's cooperative that wanted to revolutionize the industry by bringing growers and canners closer together, for nineteen million dollars. The same management and employees were kept on. At this time Gennaro Filice was the president, Peter M. Filice was the executive vice-president and general manager, Joseph Perrelli was secretary-treasurer, Gennaro Filice, Jr., was vice president and in charge of sales, Michael P. Filice was vice president and assistant manager, and W. E. Harcourt was vice president. Frank Perrelli and Michael Filice were in charge of Gilroy operations and Michael A. Filice was the Gilroy plant manager. All of these principal officers retained their titles and duties. Sadly, Gennaro Filice died a year later at the age of 69. In the 1970s The Filper Corporation was also sold.

The Cannery Experience

Many people who went to work at the cannery were students or parents who were drawn by the good pay and the seasonal aspect of it. For most, it was far preferable to an agricultural job, and the pay was better. An employee could work during the packs and have the rest of the year off, collecting unemployment or, in the case of many female workers, raising a family during the off-season. Young people could just work during the summer and attend school the rest of the year. “. . . for many of the young college students who worked summers there, the cannery was called F&P Summer School” (Barozzi 1). Many employees also liked being able to work the night shift, which fit better with many schedules. Most cannery workers found the management to be tough but fair. “. . . the peoples who operated the cannery, they were good peoples, but you had to do your job. You did your job and nobody bothered you . . . they appreciated you and you got your check” (Vigna 6). The management was also seen as being honest, which contributed to the pride that many workers felt in their job. “I felt great because it was an honest job, and I felt that anything that’s got to do with honesty is a good job” (Trujillo 3).

It was often difficult and humiliating to get a job at the cannery. Many prospective workers remember having to stand in a line at the beginning of the day and being picked out by a manager or union representative. “Relating to a prior reference of my youth, it was somewhat like being picked for a softball game with the big kids. You

didn't want to be picked last, but if your skills didn't measure up you didn't want to be embarrassed" (Westwater 1).

There were a lot of different jobs available at the cannery, but most people worked on the line for at least part of their time there. Working on the line was difficult and tiresome work. The produce came out of the processors hot, and workers had to stand in one place all day on damp cement. Many former workers say that they developed arthritis as a result of working in these conditions. Many cannery workers went through several different jobs during their time at the cannery, so they were not tied down to one static duty. The other jobs at the cannery were often very hard as well. Louie Barozzi, for example, says, "The morning after the hard jobs I would awake to find my hand closed into a loose fist. I experienced intense pain upon opening them" (1).

There were also several strikes over pay and benefits starting when the union began to form around 1935. Often these strikes were just as stressful for the workers as they were for the management:

. . . a couple of times... they took our benefits away, like the hospital, and then everybody wanted to go on strike. The union would come in and try to talk to the people, the workers. And the bosses would say, okay if you want to pull a strike, then we're gonna lock the doors. And they said they want us over. And they said how many meetings we're having. And we said, "No, no, no, we want our job. Oh, my gosh, I hope they don't strike," and then they would close it down . . .
(Rose Marie Calabro 3).

There was also a great deal of gender segregation in regards to jobs. There were specific jobs that women worked, and, throughout the existence of the cannery, the management was almost always made up entirely of men from the founding families. Even women from the founding families could not advance higher than forelady.

The atmosphere of the Filice and Perrelli cannery changed a lot over the years. For the first thirty years or so the cannery provided a family-like atmosphere for workers. It gave them a sense of community and they felt close to the other workers. "... there was a lot of people who were friends that worked there, you know. A lot of people you know pretty good. A lot of them were relatives. And becomes a close family, you might say in a way" (Trujillo 4). This "family" feeling did continue into later years, but as time progressed employees of the cannery often felt more distanced from both the management and the other workers. The racial makeup of the workers also changed over the years, leaving many of the older Mexican and Italian workers feeling even more alienated. "There was also Italians and Portuguese. Some, they were mean. Then, after the Mexicans took over, they were the supervisors and everything" (Perez 4).

The job was made much easier if workers were on good terms with one another and could socialize as a distraction from their tasks. Many employees' favorite memories of the cannery involve the people they worked with. "We were all friends, yeah. Everybody sort of looked out for the other person, you know. It was kind of like a big family, really" (Roberts 3). They particularly enjoyed the social gatherings like the end-of-season potluck. "... we used to have a lot of fun, really. . . Oh gosh, we'd have

parties. What I mean by party, at the end of the season. It was, you know, just like one big happy family working there” (Stimic 5). The unions also made work a little easier on the workers. “Oh, you were treated better. Working hours were ... Before you had to work all the time, you know. There was no quitting time. But when the union came in, then you worked eight hours, and then if you were lucky enough to go back, you could go back in and work at night a little bit. It was rough” (Scagliotti 10). Despite the difficult and frequently repetitive work, many cannery workers felt very positive about their job and the experiences they had there:

In retrospect the cannery experiences were not black or white. They were real. I didn't have to pay my college tuition, but my F&P “hire” education gave me the satisfaction of knowing that I could earn enough during the summer to pay for my higher education. The cannery didn't advertise that lessons learned here would involve psychology, sociology, foreign language, economics, political science[,] chemistry and biology, but they did. (Westwater 2)

The Closure of the Cannery

California Cannery and Growers went out of business in the early 80s. The former Filice & Perrelli canneries were taken over by another cooperative company. The Gilroy Cannery closed its doors in 1997. Many people experienced a profound sense of loss over this. The cannery meant so much to the community economically, socially, culturally and historically. The Gilroy cannery also contributed to the rhythm of everyday community life, marking the hours with the blows of its steam whistle and filling the air with the familiar smell of stewing tomatoes. The community has continued to go on without it, but it will never be quite the same.

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