



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLARD AND PETER COLSON
INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KEITH LUDDEN

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TRANSCRIBER: KEITH LUDDEN

Note: There is some minor traffic noise from an open door on this tape

KJL Let me just start off with some real general stuff--Let me do a little housekeeping first. We are in Southwest Harbor, and it's July 30, and I'm talking to Willard Colson and Peter Colson [cell phone rings, Peter answers and the interview pauses for a moment]

KJL Let me just start with some general things. Do you mind if I ask what year you were born

WC 1923

KJL 1923, OK, and where was that?

WC Milbridge, in Maine. Is that all you need?

KJL I usually just start with some general information. So you lived through some pretty hard times, then.

WC Yes I did.

KJL Can you tell me about that?

WC Well, I was six years old in 1929, so I lived through what they called the Depression--happiest time of my life.

KJL It was the happiest time of your life?

WC Yeah, we didn't have anything to start with, so we didn't miss anything.

KJL You didn't have anything to start with, so...what? I'm sorry.

WC Well, we weren't exactly what you might call rich, so what we did get during the Depression was appreciated, and I don't think people look at it that way, now. The ones that really get hurt are the people that have a lot of money, and all at once they have no money. They were really upset, some of them jumped out of a high window. I stayed on the ground, because I started on the ground. So I hope we don't have another Depression.

But when we did have the Depression we had the sardine factories and the canning plants were available and that was some work for people. And I've always remembered that, they were very important at that time, they continued to be important. But now, we don't have a sardine factory. I think the last one, my son, over here, Peter, was the manager of it. And that was the last one in the entire country. There's some--that one in Canada isn't it Peter?

PC Yeah, New Brunswick

KJL So, you lived in Milbridge until when?

WC I was about five years old and I moved to Steuben. I went to work for Stinson in 1943, and I worked with them over forty years. I had a little time out for the army, Uncle Sam said something about that and so I had to get lost for a little while. Then I came back and took my job over, and continued until 1948. That's when the company--they sold it to somebody else, and I thought it was a good time to retire.

KJL What year was it?

PC 1990. 1990 was when you retired.

WC 1990?

PC When you retired, yeah. That's when Richard Klingerman took over from Charlie Stinson

WC OK, 1990. I'm 88 years old, so I slipped on that one a little bit.

KJL That's fine, that's fine

WC There's a lot of things that goes wrong with 88 years old. A lot of limitations.

KJL So what was your first job at the cannery?

WC The first job I had was my neighbor asked me to drive his wife down, she was working there, and he was unable to go that morning, so I took his car, and took her down, and instead of just hanging around all day, I went in to work at piecework, casing sardines up, putting the cans in the case--which I guess they did automatically, didn't they, Peter, after a while?

PC After a while, yeah.

WC After I got out.

PC After you (laughs) That's right.

KJL Tell me about how that worked. You loaded the cans in a case?

WC Yeah, it's difficult for me to explain it to you, because you don't have the information [] The cans were originally [] How many cases--

PC 18 thousand cans to a retort

WC 18 thousand cans in a retort. And after they'd been processed about an hour at 232 degrees, they came out. They opened the door, and the water and the cans come out [] and they had to wait until morning before they cooled off, the cans went back to their normal size and then, five, six people would get in and take the empty cases-- hundred can cases and pick them up by hand [] and see there's no defect in it and they put them in a hundred cans to a case, that was called casing up. And they paid, I don't know, a cent and a half a case or something like that for piecework. So I did that until we were ready to go home that first night. Later on I went on. I enjoyed it down there, so I went down every []. And that led to a lot of years of working for Stinson.

KJL I imagine that was pretty long hours.

WC Well, the normal day was seven o'clock in the morning until nine at night. We had a noon break, and what we called a supper break at six o'clock, and then we worked 'til nine. If we needed to get the fish upstairs before they spoiled, we would work extra hours, that would be ten o'clock or so.

And then after a while I got to driving the bus. That meant that I picked up my people with the bus at five-thirty in the morning--get down--at night--nine o'clock I'd load them back into the bus and that would be a couple more hours until I got back home. But that meant I was beating the Depression, so to speak. I was making more money, I enjoyed doing it.

KJL Those were some pretty long hours

WC Yeah, it was long hours

KJL Pretty hard work.

WC Yeah, I enjoyed it. I like people anyway.

KJL What was your route with the bus?

WC Well, I took the bus home. I lived at that time in Steuben, and I kept the bus at my home, and that was five miles out of Milbridge. And I used to go from my house to Milbridge, going east five miles, and then I picked up people there all the way back down to the factory in Prospect Harbor. It would take me about two hours to do it--an hour and a half--between an hour and a half and two hours.

KJL Now, at one time they had a phone system, where the fish would come in, they'd have to call the workers in. Is that right?

WC Right.

KJL Can you tell me how that worked?

WC If we anticipated having work at seven o'clock in the morning, and it was a day that we knew that--there was going to be work at seven o'clock in the morning, we'd call

all of our packers that had telephones and told them to be ready, that I'd be there in the morning to pick them up, so that they'd get to the factory at seven o'clock. So sometimes if it happened in the middle of the night that they brought a boat in, then we'd call them, sometimes in the middle of the night, to get them ready for the morning. And they were always ready. Especially the older people that had been used to working all their lives--didn't matter whether it was snowing, or a bad day, big day, good day, whatever it was, they were ready to go, happy to be there. The younger ones were a little more reluctant to do that, but as time went on, why, we always had enough people to do the work when we needed it.

KJL This was in the forties?

WC During the forties, right straight up through, till we got done--until we were sold out, That was the general thing that we did was call them up, and get them ready for the next morning, and that was it. Any more questions?

KJL So you went from casing to driving the bus, and then what/

WC Then I went in as shipping room foreman. And then I went in as assistant to the foreman on the other level, one advanced up, and then I went in as assistant manager. And from there I went to manager. And from there--my last title was Vice President of Operations. And I want to make that clear, it was Operations, not the company. When John Gilman wrote a book, "Canned," he listed me in the book as the Vice President of the Company, and that wasn't too good.

KJL I'll watch for that, then. Did you enjoy working there at the cannery?

WC I enjoyed it, yes I did.

KJL What did you enjoy about it?

WC Well, outside of the payday, I enjoyed all of the people that I talked with, all of the people I worked with. The people I worked for could not be better to me. They used me pretty well--the Stinsons, the whole family. And the children of Mr. Stinson worked at the factory, too. They didn't just hand money out to those kids. they had to earn it. and they were good, very nice people to work for.

KJL What was the most difficult thing about the job?

WC Oh, I guess probably the hours. Just--like Peter, just a few minutes ago we had a telephone call, and I always had a radio on my belt, or wherever I went, I had a radio and I was always on call, and that was part o the eight hours' time.

KJL Why was it so important to always have a communication line?

WC Well, we had boats out of Canada, fishing ports, we had boats out of Gloucester fishing, we had boats out of Maine, we had people al over the place, different towns-- they operated--boats were working at night, and we--the packers were working during the day. So I had to know what boat had what fish and where they were going. And that kept you awake quite awhile for the night. When those boats would catch fish, they'd call me up by radio, or whoever was in charge for the night, sometimes somebody else might be doing it, but mostly it was me. They would call on the radio, and tell me wha time they were going to be in. If they were going to be in at seven o'clock, I'd call my night watchman at the factory and tell him to get all the people and have them ready at seven o'clock.

KJL So you were kind of always on call.

WC Yeah, I was

PC 24/7

WC 24/7

KJL (to Peter) And when did you start working at the cannery?

PC Soon as I was born (all laugh)

KJL What year were you born?

PC '55

KJL '55, Okay

PC But I was in school when we were uptown over the hill--this is the factory in Southwest Harbor, 'cause I grew up in Southwest, and we lived at the top of the hill, and I was [] getting down over the hill to go to work, even when I was real young. I'd climb up on the fish tanks and help unload fish, I'd help clean up, help case up, like he did when he first started, and I enjoyed it. Still do. Wish it was still there, but we're starting on a new venture now, doing lobsters instead of sardines.

KJL So casing was your first job, too?

PC Well, my first job on the payroll was picking up fish after the packers had packed them, once they got a hundred cans packed, you'd have to take four trays of 25 cans to a tray, and punch their card. that told them that they was going to get 'x' amount of dollars for that hundred cans, and then you put them on a cart, wheel the cart, once it was full, into the steam boxes. and then after that I did all the jobs there was, worked all the way through, up to a manager.

KJL Now, the steam boxes, they were called retorts, or...

PC No, they was pre-cooked before they went to the sealing machines to have the sauce put on.

KJL OK, what were the retorts?

PC They was a sterilized vessel that was pressurized, and that sterilized the product in the can.

KJL OK, and that's different than the steam box.

PC The steam box--the lid and the sauce was not in the in the can yet--on the can, in the can. So they would steam for about 20, 25 minutes, and then you'd take and you'd flip the cart upside down, and drain all the water, and fish oil out of the product, and let them cool down. And once there were cooled down, there you were able to put a sauce and the lid on the can.

KJL There was a lot to it.

PC It was.

KJL Now, during the '40's, did the factory pack a lot for the troops?

WC Yes we did. We packed a lot of--all of those cases had to have a metal strap on them, before they were sent to the government.

KJL They had to have a metal strap?

WC A wire strap that goes around it to keep it from breaking open, because they was going to be handled a lot of times before they got to where their destination was, so that was just to reinforce them, the case, make it stronger.

KJL How much work did you do for the military? Was it a big percentage of the work you did?

WC At the time, during the war, a big percentage of the product went to the services.

KJL The soldiers got a little taste of home.

WC Yeah, I guess so.

KJL Was the '50's kind of the peak of the industry, or the '40's?

WC Early '50's I think, probably.

KJL It started to decline after that?

WC Well, it declined, and I was--there was probably several reasons for its declining, but lack of fish was a contributing factor.

KJL You think it declined because of the lack of fish?

WC I would say so, wouldn't you, Pete?

PC Yeah, the methods changed, of fishing, too.

WC Oh, yeah, the fishing methods. When I first started, we had weirs. That was a trap, a fish trap. It was put in a bay at flood tide. They had a ebb tide, they would drive stakes down in a circle [] with [] or twine, so that they were fish tight, the water would go through them. There'd be wings out, like this. I know I say like this, I know you can not see that with that microphone, but--The herring on the flood tide would go up above the weir, and on the ebb tide, they'd come back down, but these wings were out like that, and they would catch [] go into the weir, and that was the

primary method, about the only method of fishing for herring at the time that I went into it.

That evolved into what we called “stop seining” That’s where they would fly over in the evening and find fish going into a cove. Then they’d radio back down to the fishermen that had [] pieces of twine. That would be a seine. And they’d put it right across the mouth of that cove after the fish got in there. So they were trapped. That would take about [] pieces of twine to go all the way across the mouth of the cove. After they got them caught, they put them in what they call a [] on the outside, like that. And they [] the herring could get out. They thought they were going free, but they were going in to the pocket, So then they’d call the sardine boat and the sardine boat would come the next day and and pump them over and take them to the factory.

KJL Now, they pumped the fish out?

WC In the beginning, they took them out, what they called [], and that was a big, deep dip net on a long handle. And that was a big net with a three foot [bowl]. They’d scoop the fish out with that, swing them out over the boat, and then dump them into the boat. And when they’d get back to the factory, they’d do the same thing, with that big net, they’d put it down-that [] net. And they’d take them out of the boat--that same method.

Later on, I was sent to Europe, because we heard tell that they had a new method of taking fish out of the weir, or out of the seines. It was less abusive than the method that we were using. So I went over, to find out what it was, I went to Plymouth England, and I watched them []. I said, “I want to see your new method of [] fish, taking fish out.” And come to find out it was the same method that we started with. They used a great big net on the end of a long handle. They were doing it, and that was an improvement for them. but in the meantime, we discarded that. We were pumping fish out with a big pump-eight inch pump. So my trip to find out how much we were behind didn’t pay off too well

KJL Now, there was a fire, I think, about 1963 or thereabouts.

PC 1968

KJL 1968, OK. Can you tell me about that?

PC Well, all the factories were wooden factories, so within the wooden factory, in the packing area, they'd have hardwood floors. And they--when they were varnished, they would be shiny--every year they would do that, they'd sand the floor down and put a new layer of varnish on it. I believe that they was sanding the floor that day, and the bag or something didn't get emptied.

WC They said it was spontaneous combustion, that the bag had been left in the wastebasket or something, and caught fire. At least that's what we believe happened.

PC There's a picture of the plant burning down at the University of Maine Museum--State Museum, that we donated when the plant finally closed down. I donated a lot of artifacts to the Maine Museum, and the picture of that plant burning down is in there. A gentleman from the Navy had taken that picture, and had it colored, and blown up and sent it to us, and we had it on the wall. But within a year, Mr. Stinson had that plant rebuilt and operating again.

KJL That must have been a pretty tough day when the plant burned.

WC Oh, yeah. A lot of people out of work. And a lot of money that--wasted in that to buy a new one. They built a new factory from there], a much better factory. It was very expensive to have to do it.

KJL What was is like the morning after that fire?

PC We were in Southwest Harbor at that time, and this was in Prospect Harbor, when it burned.

WC That was a factory that I had worked in, but then I was transferred here to Southwest Harbor, so I didn't see it when it burned.

KJL Did most of the people in Prospect Harbor work for the cannery?

WC Some of the people did, but I don't think...

PC A lot of the wives did. A lot of the husbands were lobster fishermen, seine fishermen, things like that, so--at that time, they had like 125 packers, that we cut the head and tails off of the fish, and put them in the can before we automated. So that required a lot of--a lot of help. So they had a good number. They brought people in from Jonesport, Ellsworth, Milbridge, Prospect Harbor, so they had a wide range of areas whee they would bring them in.

WC When I first went to work there, prior to having the bus, and after I had taken the woman's car down, when she got through working, then I wanted to stay working, so I used my own car, I had a small car with a rumble seat, and I'd take two persons in front, and two persons in the rumble seat, and went down, and we were expanding the factory, but we didn't have enough people, enough women to work them, so I asked them if they'd buy me a bus, and they did. And then they had--after a while we had three busses go from different towns. And that made [] to get a hundred and twenty five people in the factory.

KJL And when was this?

WC This was after--about 1945, around there, or '48.

KJL Yeah, a lot of women were working [].

WC Yeah,

KJL Was it tough to compete for the labor, then? I mean, was it hard to get workers?

WC No, no. We had to go a long ways to get them, but there were enough people that--we had plenty of people, we had the tables full. Over here, I had 85 women at the tables, and 17 men to take care of the product that they were making. So I had about 85, 17, two men, foremen on boats. Each factory had a couple of boats for themselves.

KJL Tell me about the sardine boats, what can you tell me about them? They carried the sardines from the....

[Willard shows photograph]

KJL That's the Joyce Marie. If I came back with a scanner at some point, could I scan this?

WC Oh, yeah.

KJL OK, make a copy of it? I don't know why I didn't bring the scanner. Now what...are the other ones--the Lou Ann?

WC All those boats were named for Stinson's children--Mr. Stinson's children. He had--what--four girls.

PC Yeah.

WC Eva Grace, an Ida Mae Joyce Marie, and Lou Ann.

KJL Now these boats would go to the larger fishing boats and...

WC Yeah, if a weir fisherman called me up and said he had fish and wanted to unload, and I said, "Well, I'll have one boat back there tomorrow morning on the low tide." And they'd take the fish out [] I'd send my boat down to that particular one. If it was a purse seiner, we'd send the boat out during the night to take what they had shut off, what they caught, up there.

KJL They would pump the fish out into their hold?

WC They'd pump fish out of the weir pocket, so to speak, out there, into the boat. The boat would come in, and I'd pump them out of the boat, into the factory. That's when Peter was little. That was one of his first jobs, he'd help pump them out of the boat.

KJL Ah, tell me about that.

PC Well, I ran the tanks. The tanks were wooden tanks, and they'd hold anywhere from a hogshead and a half to three hogshead, so we had a whole series of tanks down there. We had a wooden sluice with a wooden gate, and you had a rope on a pulley that would open and close the gate, so I would run the gates to let them in.

WC His boss didn't help him too much, didn't pay him anything (laughs).

KJL Now, when you said you ran the tanks, you opened the...

PC I controlled the gates, filling the tanks up with fish.

KJL OK, the sluice ran from the sardine carrier?

PC The pump to pump the fish out of the sardine carrier would discharge into a long sluice, and that would go the whole length of the wharf, down into the factory to where-- what we called our tank room, and then we'd have the gates for each one of the tanks, so I'd sit up there and run the gates. And during the summertime, you'd have mackerel in

the fish, so i got started out--that I would pick the mackerel out, because we didn't use those for sardines, and bundle all them up and take them to the fish wharf and get ten cents a pound for them.

WC That's how I paid him (laughs)

PC That's how I got paid.

KJL Your version of the paper route.

PC Right, I could even talk to the fish inspector that was from Ellsworth to take a load up to Ellsworth with him and sell them for me, and he'd give me the money. That worked pretty well.

WC That's right. One morning I couldn't find the state inspector. I waited half before noon, "Where's the state inspector?" "Well, last we saw him, he and Peter were headed for Ellsworth with a load of herring--with a load of mackerel to sell.

KJL I gotta ask you about one story I heard. I head a story about somebody's tie being nailed to the floor.

WC (laughs) One of our foremen had an advancement and he figured, I guess that he'd gone up a little higher, he could wear a necktie. So he did, he came to work next morning all dressed up with his necktie. One of the women took him down in the middle of the floor and nailed his necktie to the floor, and he couldn't get up. And it was a little bit embarrassing for a man who was supposed to be in charge of everything. But they would do the same to me if they had a chance [when I worked there]

PC Did you wear a necktie?

WC I don't wear [a necktie]

KJL They had to take him down a peg, huh?

WC We had another kind of amusing thing happen to me when I was in Plymouth. When we were talking about that, I remembered it. I had left my hotel. I was staying out on North Road East, so I left my hotel, and I went down to the wharf to see what else I could find out before I left, so it was raining. So I picked up a phone and I called for a taxi, and the dispatcher says, "I'll have a taxi there in about ten minutes," so about ten minutes later I looked, and a big car coming around there, and looking around. So I stepped out so he could see me and he stopped to pick me up. And he said, "You want a ride?" and I said, "Yes I do," and I said, "Take me up [] that boat, 'cause there's a boat that I want to look at." and I said, "Try and hurry, because I'm in a hurry."

Well, he said, "Okay," and away he went, and I said when I got out, "You stay right here and wait for me, because then I'll go up to North Road East, pick up some more men and come down. If I can go on this boat, I want to go." So I said, "You wait right here." "Well," he said, "I'm not a taxi fella, actually." And I said, "You're not? What are you?" "Well," he said, "I was driving along, and I saw you step out" and he said, "I thought that bugger might like a ride." So he picked me up, and I started giving off orders, "You stay here, take me up to my..." I think that was a contributing factor to that thing they say everybody in Europe thinks we are a stuck up people over here, and arrogant. But I think I might have contributed to that. I apologized and then after I apologized, he said, "I'll take you up to your room." He took me up to my room and he laughed, and he said, "That was a bloody good joke." That was interesting. It was a lot of fun being over there.

KJL Now, you made the cans yourself, is that right?

WC Yeah, we did. We had our own can factory in Prospect Harbor. Part of the plant was the can factory.

KJL How did that work? What kind of machinery did you use to make those cans?

WC Tell him about it, Pete.

PC Well, your can maker was a set of dies, and the roll--the aluminum came on a roll, and you'd punch out the cans and they would trim the flange of the can. And then you'd also make your covers. You'd have to have [] the covers so when you put the can and the cover [together] you'd have an overlap, and everything was sealed together. That's what the sealing machines did. You'd also have a compound put onto the cover, like a gasket, so when it formed it would seal the can up. Then the retort process would finish it off, basically, so it'd be sterile when the product was all done retorting.

But they started out with just a cover that had a ring--actually nothing on it at first, back in the early days, and you'd have to use a can opener to open it up. And then they came out with a key that you could open the can. And one of my jobs when I was a kid was to help the women down there put the key on the can, and then they'd slide the can, and then they'd slide the can in a smaller box, and then put that box in a bigger box. And there would be 50 to a case. These women could get really fast. The dexterity in their hands was unbelievable, packing fish, or casing up. They'd take that can, put a key on it, slide it in the box, do both ends, then slide it into the case, and they were getting piecework for that.

But we did--started out with tin cans, back in the early days, and then they went to aluminum back in the early '60's, right?

WC Yeah, right.

PC And then they invented different types of ring pull tabs, and ring tabs, different styles of ring tabs, and that's what they're using today is a ring tab on the can. They got different brands on there, too, as well.

KJL You had more than one label, didn't you?

WC Oh, yeah, we had several different brands. The primary one was Beach Cliff. What were some of the other ones?

PC Oh, we had Neptune was our smaller fish, that was a higher priced can, was the Neptune brand. But we had Beach Cliff, we had Possum, that would sell down south, we had Billo, we had Sea Lion, we had Commander. Speaking of jokes, I don't know if it's much of a joke, but they were doing a documentary on bears out west, we was watching it on the news, and they said they'd use sardines to attract the bears so they could do a documentary on the bears. Geez, I looked up on there, a can of Commander sardines pounded on the tree, with a nail. That's what there was using to attract the bears for the documentary [].

WC We had a really diverse market.

KJL Even the bears went for them

PC Even the bears could eat them.

KJL Well the factory has evolved and improved and mechanized and everything. If I went in to Peter's factory that he's running now, I wouldn't have a clue how to run it. It was so modernized. Casing up was done by machines, wasn't it

PC Yeah, Everything was done automatically.

KJL Did the technology change fairly rapidly?

PC About a decade at a time.

WC Yeah, Yeah, I guess relative to other evolution, it did, yeah.

KJL Can you tell me--you mentioned some of the things like the keys, and the ring tabs, and things like that--What other kinds of changes in technology did you see?

PC Well, the type of cans, I mean you went from tin to aluminum, and the series of ring tabs I told you about, but even the way that we'd cut the fish. As the years went by, we was having less people that would hand cut the fish. So--and then the fish was getting--we was going in deeper waters and getting larger fish. And then if you just took a three and a half inch piece of fish off a twelve inch fish, you had a lot of wasted material there that we would use for lobster bait, but Dick [] invented a steak machine. And what he'd do is take from the gill back to that three and a half inch fish part--would slice it up like t-bone steaks. So we was able to utilize a lot more of the fish and get more production out of that fish. And that was back in the early '70's.

Then after Dick invented that machine. His machine would take actually all the fish and turn it into steaks, and then they just decided they wanted--they couldn't use that [] talk section into steaks because it was all bone, so they could utilize the sardine part of the fish and then the front part as steaks, so we invented a machine that would do that, so we'd get a lot more usage, a lot more yield out of it.

Then after that, in 1986, this plant in Southwest Harbor--they would close that plant down at the end of the year, and in '87 they modernized the plant in Prospect Harbor, and they bought Norwegian machinery, and they were called [trio] machines. They would take the small fish, and automatically feed them to a conveyor belt. You'd have one person on each machine, and that would cut the small fish to size, so that you could --all you would do then is the women would stand on the conveyor belt, and place the fish onto the can.

Well, we had different sizes of fish, when a boatload came in, or a truckload came in--of different varieties, anywhere from four and a half inches or five and a half inches to twelve inches, so we had to invent a separator to separate the sizes of fish to go to each one of the machines, and that was done.

But in 1990--in 1990 the Stinson family sold to Richard Klingerman, and he ran it from 1990 to 2000, then Connors Brothers took over, and when they took over, they poured a lot of money into the plant and modernized it even more. And that's when they came up with the automatic packing--packaging machines. Once the cans were retorted and went into a bin, the cans were automatically stacked, and then a machine would put them into the box, and move the box, and all you'd have to do is stack it. So there's been a lot of--a lot of inventions.

KJL I want to go back to something you said a little while ago. You had some brands--labels that were kind of aimed at other parts of the country, like Possum for the south...

PC Yeah, then you'd have Chili brand. A lot of that was in the southern part of the states. Your Beach Cliff brand was all over the country. You'd have oil, mustard, tomato, green chilis with soybean oil. You'd have some kippers, which you'd take out of--you'd get sliced filets off of big fish, and put those into a can with the smoked oil, and you'd have that brand--all the different flavors.

Back in the '70's, to put a chili pepper in the can was all done manually after the fish were pre-cooked we'd take them over to the tables. The women put a chili pepper in each end of the can, and then they'd have to take those trays, and put them back on the cart, take them over to the machine. And then we invented--he invented the chili machine, basically--a dispenser that would dispense sliced chilis into the can.

KJL So you invented some of your own machinery.

WC Well, it just evolved. I didn't call it an invention.

PC Well, it happened.

KJL Did you draw the plans for it, and ...

PC Went to the engineers, basically, right? And the sauce machine, too. We used to have what we called a “cow” that was a cylinder that you just controlled it with a valve. Well, if the machine stopped, the mustard would boil over and go back down and recycle again, but we decided we wanted ‘x’ amount of cc’s into a can, so they had a piston filler. As the can went around, the port, it put a precise amount of sauce into the can. So that was done the same time the [] machine was done.

KJL When did--when I was reading about some of the canneries, one thing I noticed was there seemed to have been quite a few fires.

PC It was all wooden plants.

KJL OK, now that was the main reason?

WC Well, the old wooden plants, and then we did all of our own electrical work, mostly, and some of that left something to be desired, like a new factory.

PC We didn’t have OSHA then.

WC We used to put mustard in some of them. We sent a truck down to the mustard factory, and they--mustard came in big barrels, wooden barrels, wooden heads on them. And we’d probably have two or three truckloads of them in storage, in one room. And I had a little problem electrically on the further end of that room. And so the electrician decided that he would go over and fix that. He started walking across the heads of those barrels, and one of them, he went into the barrel of mustard. And he come out like a hot dog. He was very--I tried to laugh at that, but he didn’t see any humor in it. He doesn’t even like to talk about it anymore.

KJL []

WC I lost a whole barrel of mustard. I didn’t like that, either.

KJL Now, these ships, these sardine carriers, these were all motorized, is that right?

WC Oh, yeah, yeah. Diesel engines.

KJL Diesel engines, uh huh. Can you describe the inside of the cannery for me, what it looked like?

PC Well, we start at the beginning, we unloaded the fish into the tanks, like I described earlier. Then you'd use a lot of salt water to flume, instead of using conveyors. It saved a lot of money on electricity by doing that. But you'd flume the herring out of the tanks, up a conveyor, and up to the '90's, before we automated, they'd go on to a conveyor belt. And then the women would sweep the fish onto the table, and they would cut the heads and tails off. The heads and tails would go down a flume, and flume it down into what we called the chum area. That we'd use for lobster bait, or we'd send it to Rockland for fertilizer.

So if you went up to the packing room, the packers are packing the cans. They would take the cans also of and lay them down where they were going to be packing, put the fish off, and put them into the can. Then they put the can onto a tray, which they had to reach under the table and get. And then what the pick-up boy would do, he would come by every time they got a hundred cans, pick them up, put them onto a cart. And once they got down on trays, you'd also have to take the cart full of empty trays and put them back underneath the tables again. So it was a cycle.

Once the cart got full--It'd hold about eleven cases of product--eleven hundred cans, then then would go over to the steam box area. And the guy would take and put a top on the cart, and a strap, and then fasten it down, and then wheel the cart into a steam box, and it'd hold two carts, I believe. And you'd use raw steam to steam the product, but I'm gonna have him take over for a minute and he can talk about where they used to cook them--used to fry the fish.

WC Well we steamed them--you doing steaming?

PC Steam, but before that you fried them.

WC We have fried, yeah. I can't remember about frying them.

PC You fried them in oil, didn't you, before. Didn't you have fryers there fried the fish before they packed them? Instead of steaming them? That was back in the '40's.

WC Back in the 40's--When I first went to work, we steam them.

PC You were still steaming then?

WC Steaming, yeah, 'cause I remember working on the steam boxes. And from the steam boxes, they came in what they called the dryer

PC Yeah, right. That was on the raw product.

WC Yeah.

PC I thought before that they had a...

WC They may have, but that might have been before my time.

PC Oh, OK.

WC Because when I went to work for Stinsons, it was steaming.

PC It was?

WC Yeah,

PC OK

KJL And before steaming, did you say they fried them?

PC They'd fry them, and they'd come up on pans, I guess. That's what I've been told. By the time I was born, they was getting into steaming them. So. But they was pre-cooked. They had to be pre-cooked before you put the sauce and the lid on. But when you was talking about the dryer, there'd be a big room with a big fan in it. It would suck all the heat out of--out of the room, so that you'd cool the product down. And sometimes we had them stay overnight and did them the next morning, but there's be nothing wrong with them.

They would take--go into what we'd call the block, they'd take one tray at a time, and slide the cans onto the conveyor belt, then push the cans down to another conveyor belt that would feed the sealing machines. That's where the sauce would be put into the can, and the lid would be put on, at about 90-100 cans a minute. And once the lid was put on, they go to the retorts, and once the retort was full, about eighteen thousand cans, then you put the steam to the retort, and you'd have to vent it to get all the air out of the retort for about ten minutes. And then you'd shut the vent off, and you'd start your retort process. And there'd be a recorder chart that'd show you your time and temperature.

And then once they was cooked, it would have to be cooled and you would use air and water to cool the product so you didn't collapse the cans. And that had to be done just right, otherwise you'd ruin eighteen thousand cans in the retort. So once it was cooled down enough, you'd open the bottom of the retort up and get all the cans out onto a conveyor, and a can washer would wash the residue off the can =. they'd go into what we called the cooling bin. And you could put up to thirty six thousand cans in a bin.

And the next day, the women would come in and case up the product. Once they was cased up, they'd go onto a pallet, about 240 cases to a pallet, and they'd be shipped to the warehouse and from there they go abroad.

KJL Do you think people's taste changed, and they stopped eating so many sardines?

PC No, a lot of people still like sardines. They're finally getting out now, that sardines are a real healthy food for you, and for the omega 3's. But they didn't really advertise that until it was almost too--it was too late, before they started developing those diagnoses that sardines are really a good healthy food for you.

KJL I remember my folks eating sardines sometimes.

PC Oh, yeah. But then you've got all these variety packs now, and all the junk food. That's what the kids like, and that doesn't help any.

KJL How did the progression of the industry play with regulations and the way the fishing industry was regulated?

PC I don't even know as I want to talk about that. That's a real sore subject.

KJL I was afraid it might be, yeah.

PC They put a lot of limitations on what size you could catch, when we could catch them, and at the end, they'd only allow two days of fishery a week for the boats to go out and catch, because they had a quota on the amount of fish that we could catch in a certain period of time. And by then--you had to use your fish up within about a twenty four hour period, otherwise the product would--the quality would be really poor on the product and you couldn't use it, you'd have to throw it away. So that helped with the demise right there.

KJL Now, did--was there a lot of interaction between the cannery and the other businesses in town?

WC Well, the only interaction we might have in that, if somebody might have more people than we had and we wanted some, we might steal some of their people []. It was highly competitive. We had three factories here on the island at one time, and a fella named George Emmet run one of them that was []'s factory. And if his people had a fight with hime, they'd get--he did something they didn't like, they'd pack up and come over and work for me, and my people would do the same for him.

I remember one morning I was looking out one office window, and I saw three or four women coming [] the sardine factory, they had dinner pails in their hands, so I called the manager, name was George Emmet. I said, "George, I see some of your people coming down the hill, do you want me to put them on, or not?" "Oh, yeah," he said, "Put 'em in, they'll be back tomorrow." They had something wrong--thought he'd done something wrong and they quit and come over to work for me. But we went back and forth like that. It was competitive, but it was a lot of fun.

KJL So you had to compete for the labor force sometimes?

WC Sometimes we did, right. And when the blueberry season starts, Peter had trouble keeping his women, some of them want to go work in the blueberry factory. Of course that was seasonal, too.

KJL What about suppliers and things, did you interact with businesses in town for supplies and things like that?

WC Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, when one of those factories closed, it wasn't just the people that worked in it that suffered for it. Over here at Southwest Harbor, we bought all our trucks and our personal cars and what not from the local car dealer. And so that took it away from him.

PC Plumbers, electricians, the hydro--I mean our light bills were pretty darn high that we gave to. Within a fifty mile radius, it affected a lot of vendors--as far as Bangor.

WC When the close the factory, it isn't just the hundred and fifty or so people on that payroll. I mean there some [] interaction between that and the people in town like he just described. I don't know what they called it, it was some kind of a name--from the extra money that we put out other than our payroll. The payroll was probably a lesser part than the money that we--other money that we put into a town.

KJL What was the operating--If this is proprietary information, let me know--What was the operating budget of the cannery by the '80's or '90's?

PC It was in the millions

WC Oh, yeah.

PC It was in the millions.

KJL What was Prospect Harbor like in the '40's and '50's?

WC About like it is now, I would say, wouldn't you, Pete?

PC Yeah.

WC It was just a small town, and they were very happy to have that sardine factory in there, and they were very sad to see it go.

PC We sold a lot of lobster bait to the lobstermen, and that's a lobstering community. And when we closed--once we closed down--we held the price down on the bait, but once we let go, then the price shot up probably three times because the guys catching the

fish now could set that price whatever they wanted. The lobstermen had to have it to get their lobsters with, so that was devastating to the lobstermen. Between the bait prices and the fuel prices going up, its a hard to make a living lobstering now.

WC The bait that we sold was the heads and the tails that we cut off the fish, the waste part of the fish, so we sold it as lobster bait. And that was a break for the fishermen, as he just described.

KJL So all these little ripples go out

WC All the little ripples. yeah.

KJL Is there anything you want to point out to me that I might be overlooking, that I might not think to ask about?

PC Not that I can thing of. We've gone pretty much in detail, what we done, but...

WC All of that evolution that happened between his factory and mine, everytime we made a change on it, there was a little bit of a problem with it. Like the time we went from aluminum cans--from steel cans to aluminum. And when we started water cooling we had a problem, because we've got a retort with eighteen thousand cans in it and all at once they want to cool it with water. Well, you pipe water in here, and then when you're cooling it, we had an instrument that said what the pressure was inside of that--seventeen and a half pounds of pressure in that retort when it gets to 232 degrees. So when you started cooling it, then that pressure handle drop down. And you could pull a negative so it'd be a vacuum inside of there. But that vacuum was in the retort, but it wasn't in every can. Water didn't get to every can all at once, so you had some cans with no pressure in them, cooled down. Another can had seventeen pounds in it and no pressure in the retort [] vacuum in the retort. And that seventeen pounds is more active than if you had the pressure in the retort, so we had a lot of cans thats --create a

vacuum in the cans because it was--the pressure was too much the stuff would leak out and when the water hit it, it would twist the can. We had a lot of cans that was lost [].

After a while we began to figure out what it was, and we knew enough to put air inside so if se see this [] dropping down on pressure, we add air along with the water to maintain the pressure in the retort, stop the cans from creating a vacuum. We lost a lot of cans because of the vacuum in the cans. And that was a very hard thing to explain. I took a lot of abuse on that.

KJL You took a lot of abuse on that?

WC Well, nobody wanted to believe that there was a vacuum in the cans, because if there was a vacuum in the can, it meant the seam leaked somewhere along the way. Well, if the seam leaked, then the fella that made the cans was upset that that might be his fault, and the fella that was running the retort was upset. He didn't know anything about it--he was the guilty one, but the fella running the sealing machines, he thought, "Well, maybe they think I did it." And so I wasn't very popular for quite a while. But we finally found out what was happening and we added water, and when the hand started dropping down toward the vacuum, we put air in--we kept pressure on the cans all the way through. It was fun.

KJL Tell me about the last day at the cannery before it closed.

WC It was a sad time

PC What was it like?

KJL Yeah.

PC After you watch a hundred and thirty people lost their jobs? Wasn't fun. It was pretty sad. There was a lot of tears shed that day. And all of the management and myself

lined up and gave everyone a hug when they went out through the door. It wasn't fun at all. A lot of them are coming back, and they've been anxious now for the last four or five months to get back. [] That day, April 15th, 2010.

WC I had been retired quite a long time and I felt like crying when they shut the-- when they shut those plants down. It was just--we had a personal attachment to the sardine industry. To see them close down, it was a sad day.

KJL You've both been very generous with your time. I appreciate you taking so much time for me.

[Interview ends with photographs.]