

Interviewee Name: Elaine Lowell

Project/Collection Title: The Last Sardine Cannery - Prospect Harbor, Maine

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Keith Ludden, Oral History & Folklife Research Inc.

Interview Location: Prospect Harbor, Maine

Date of Interview: July 30, 2011

Interview Description:

Elaine Lowell

Prospect Harbor, Maine

Former Cannery Worker Interviewed by Keith Ludden

Elaine Lowell describes some of her experience working at the sardine cannery in Prospect Harbor, Maine. She describes cutting the fish and canning them, quality inspection and driving co-workers to the hospital when they cut themselves. Notable experiences include multiple fires at the cannery and making her way over snow berms on her way to work in the winter.

Collection Description:

Interviews with workers who remember the heyday of the last sardine cannery in Maine to shut its doors.

Citation:

Elaine Lowell, The Last Sardine Cannery - Prospect Harbor, Maine Oral History Interview, July 30, 2011, by Keith Ludden, 12 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcription by: Edith Mari, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries

[00:00:00.00]

KL: I am sorry, when they took the fish off the table -

[00:00:05.00]

EL: They had to put how many they've taken off on the table number so you know how many the girls had. How many they packed.

[00:00:23.00]

KL: You said you were born 1915, right? You said you were born in 1915, is that right?

EL: 1950?

KL: 1915.

EL: Yes.

KL: Okay. Was that here at Prospect Harbor?

[00:00:40.00]

EL: No. I lived in Steuben until I was married.

[00:00:43.00]

KL: Ah, I see. And what year were you married?

EL: 1933 in October.

KL: 1933.

[00:00:56.00]

EL: Then they - I work quite a while putting the cards up with the names on them. Then they sent me around checking the sardines out that they put in the cans, to see how they was. I was on that for quite a while.

[00:01:37.00]

KL: Now the cards, were these the cards they punched every time you finished a case?

[00:01:43.00]

EL: Yes. When they finished a case - four trays, twenty-five cans on a tray - they had to punch that every time they took a case off. Yeah.

[00:02:02.00]

EL: Then after that - I did that for quite a while. And then they get some other girls and put on and they took me and put me in a restaurant to work. And I worked there. But in between times, if anybody got hurt, cut, or anything and they had to go to the doctors, I had to take them. Or have to go to the hospital.

[00:02:36.00]

KL: Were there very many accidents?

[00:02:40.00]

EL: Well they cut their fingers quite a bit. Yes they did. One man was working downstairs in where the cans was going down the sleuss and it took the end of his finger right off. I had to take him to the hospital.

[00:03:05.00]

KL: So it was your job to take people for medical attention if they needed it?

[00:03:12.00]

EL: Boss would come and ask me, but I wondered why they think I was leaving. But you take the boss's orders. Doctor wanted to know where the end of his finger was. It was down there amongst the cans. You can't pick them up, going and going like that.

[00:03:49.00]

KL: Did you enjoy the work?

EL: Yes.

KL: What did you enjoy most about it?

[00:03:58.00]

EL: Cutting fish I think.

[00:04:00.00]

KL: Why did you enjoy that?

EL: Pardon?

KL: Why did you enjoy that?

[00:04:05.00]

EL: I don't know. But I just did. Then when we got through working there at night, we used to go over, another woman and I, and clean up the offices for him.

[00:04:31.00]

KL: So you did clean up afterwards? That must have kept you busy.

EL: Yeah.

KL: Was it pretty long hours?

[00:04:40.00]

EL: No. It took us about an hour. Yeah. But if any of them was sick, then I had to take them home, too.

[00:04:57.00]

KL: How did you get to work?

[00:05:02.00]

EL: Get to what?

KL: How did you get to work?

[00:05:06.00]

EL: I just walked down over the hill.

KL: Okay.

EL: Yeah.

KL: Was there a way they let you know that you needed to come into work?

[00:05:20.00]

EL: Yes. I have to call - I had to call all of the packers and let them know. I start four o'clock in the morning.

[00:05:37.00]

KL: So you're the person they called to let the others know.

EL: Yes.

KL: I see.

[00:05:45.00]

EL: I had to call Jonesport and here in town. It was a struggle.

[00:06:01.00]

KL: Pardon me?

EL: It was a struggle.

KL: It was. Yes I imagine so. There's a lot of calls to make?

[00:06:08.00]

EL: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:06:12.00]

KL: What Prospect Harbor like in the '40s and '50s?

[00:06:21.00]

EL: Well, I'll tell you. I was working and then I didn't know what was going on outside. Austin may have something that his book will tell you. But I just kept on working through my mother dying in '56.

[00:06:52.00]

KL: Did she work for the cannery as well?

EL: No. She lived in Steuben.

[00:07:00.00]

KL: It sounds like a lot of families did work for the cannery though.

[00:07:05.00]

EL: Yeah. Well we did have as many as a hundred packers. So you see, we had a lot. We did. And in 1956, I had to leave off. Doctor Cooper told me that I had arthritis of my body. Not to work anymore. I think I could work more, but I done what he said, so...

[00:07:45.00]

KL: You left in 1956.

EL: Yeah.

KL: What about the '40s? Did you pack a lot of fish for the troops?

[00:08:00.00]

EL: I don't know. I don't know that. So they'd send them overseas, didn't they, Austin? They sent them across somewhere. Different places.

[00:08:16.00]

KL: You had different labels?

[00:08:18.00]

EL: I guess so. See, I wasn't on that apartment downstairs.

[00:08:26.00]

KL: You stayed in the packing room all the time?

[00:08:31.00]

EL: Yeah. Then the restaurant. When I went in the restaurant work I went in there and worked. Yeah.

[00:08:47.00]

KL: It sounds like some of the workers worked some pretty long hours.

[00:08:51.00]

EL: Yes. We might go to work at seven o'clock in the morning and we might get through at ten o'clock at night. And sometimes we wouldn't go that long. We packed the fish until they were gone anyway.

[00:09:31.00]

KL: At one time there were lots of canneries up and down the coast here.

EL: Oh, yes there was.

KL: Why do you think there aren't as many now?

[00:09:46.00]

EL: Well, I don't really know. There's none now. Well, we may be up to Belfast. Is it, Austin?

[Austin: I think this one was the last one to close.]

[00:09:58.00]

I thought they had one up the west.

[Austin]

EL: I'm not sure whether there's still one up the west end or not. But they did have a lot when we started.

[Austin: At one time there was over a hundred.]

[00:10:34.00]

EL: They said there was over a hundred at one time.

KL: Was there a lot of interaction between the businesses in town and the cannery?

[00:10:42.00]

EL: Yeah.

[00:11:02.00]

KL: Was there a lot of competition for the workers with so many canneries open?

[00:11:12.00]

EL: Yeah I think there was, wasn't there Austin?

[00:11:18.00]

KL: Pardon me?

[00:11:19.00]

Yes. There was.

[00:11:23.00]

KL: If you didn't like it at one cannery, you could go to another, huh?

[00:11:27.00]

EL: Well, you would have to go too far. There was - I don't know where another one - well there was one in Belfast. And there were some down east. They were quite far apart. Down there, they were closer. But up here, it wasn't.

[00:12:05.00]

KL: Can you describe how you packed the fish?

[00:12:10.00]

EL: Just cut the head and tails off and pack them in the cans.

[00:12:17.00]

KL: You cut the head and tails off.

[00:12:20.00]

EL: Sometimes we had some like that and other times they may be big as that [gestures]. Of course you couldn't put too much of those big ones in the can. Just for the tail part and then part of the body. The ends wasn't about like that [gestures]. You got anything to tell him, Austin?

[Austin: This is your interview.]

EL: I can't hear you.

[Austin: This is your interview.]

[00:13:10.00]

KL: Did you enjoy working with the people there?

EL: Oh, yes.

KL: It sounds like everybody got along pretty well.

EL: Yes they did.

[00:13:20.00]

KL: I heard a story about somebody's tie getting nailed to the floor.

[00:13:29.00]

EL: Yes.

[00:13:33.00]

KL: [Laughter] You know that story?

[00:13:36.00]

EL: Yeah, I was there when she did it.

KL: Pardon me?

EL: I was there when she did it.

[00:13:42.00]

KL: [Laughter] What happened?

[00:13:44.00]

EL: One of the girls - do you have to have the name?

KL: No.

EL: She took him and put him on the floor and nailed his tie to the floor. She was full of it.

[00:14:14.00]

KL: Were some of the packers pretty fast?

[00:14:16.00]

EL: Yes. A lot faster than I was.

[00:14:24.00]

KL: This was piecework, wasn't it?

EL: Yes.

KL: How much did you get paid for a case?

[00:14:35.00]

EL: That all depends. When I wasn't packing, I was doing something else and I was running here, there, and everywhere.

[00:15:05.00]

KL: Do you remember when the factory burned?

[00:15:08.00]

EL: Oh yes.

[00:15:09.00]

KL: Can you tell me about that?

[00:15:12.00]

EL: Is that in your book, Austin?

[Austin: No, I didn't mention it.]

EL: You didn't mention it? I don't know what started the fire. Do you, Austin?

[Austin: I have no idea.]

EL: I don't know what started the fire but it was terrible, that first fire.

[00:15:37.00]

KL: I imagine you could just about see it from here, couldn't you?

[00:15:40.00]

EL: Oh yeah. My husband had traps on the wharf and his father did, and they had to run down in case it came that way. If it did there was gonna push the traps in the water to keep from burning up. That was in the winter. Cold winter when that happened. The other one, we had the thunder and lightning storm and I don't know if that hit it or not.

[00:16:25.00]

KL: There was another fire?

[00:16:28.00]

EL: Wasn't there, Austin? Another fire.

[Austin: I don't remember.]

EL: You don't remember the one when they had to take the stuff out the building and the offices?

[Austin: No, I don't.]

[00:16:44.00]

EL: They said that - I don't know - because they know what happened, what started it. There was no one around I guess. Just the nightwatchman, and of course he couldn't be in one place all the time. He had to go all around the building and everything.

[00:17:35.00]

KL: What did you not like about the job?

[00:17:42.00]

EL: Nothing. No. I liked it all.

[00:18:02.00]

KL: Were you sad to see it close last spring?

[00:18:08.00]

EL: Yes. Probably put so many people out of work. They try and get it ready now. For August, but I don't know how much longer before they'll get it done.

[00:18:43.00]

KL: Is there anything else you want to tell me about that I might not be thinking about, that I might overlook?

[00:18:55.00]

EL: No, I guess not.

[00:19:01.00]

KL: Okay. I appreciate you taking time for me.

[00:19:08.00]

EL: I sit here a lot and don't do nothing because I can't get out. Unless there's somebody with me with that walker. Because they said if I fell and did anything and you know, hurt me in any way, I'd have to go to a nursing home after. I've been in one once and I don't want to go again. I'd rather sit at home and rock in my rocking chair and knit or crochet, something like that.

[00:19:52.00]

KL: I appreciate you taking time for me. I have been learning a lot from talking to people about this. You have been very generous with your time.

[00:20:04.00]

EL: I could tell you the things that I had to do like that.

KL: Pardon me?

EL: I did a lot of the what - I liked it. But you have to earn a living.

[00:20:35.00]

KL: Yes, we all have to do something.

[00:20:43.00]

EL: Just as soon as the boys got old enough to go with their father lobstering, I went to the factory. I got a daughter that I talked to the other day, Silvia Smith, over there, you asked her. She stayed and watched her grandfather.

KL: She did what, excuse me?

EL: Stayed home and watched her grandfather while I worked.

[00:21:21.00]

KL: What did you do during the winter?

[00:21:25.00]

EL: We worked winters, the last of it.

[00:21:30.00]

KL: You worked through the winter?

[00:21:33.00]

EL: One morning, it snowed the night before, and there was about a six foot pile of snow out at the road, and I started to go over it, to get up over it to go to work. And I opened the door in the back to a snow bank. [Laughter] But I got up, I got out and I went to work.

[00:21:53.00]

KL: You got up over that six foot pile of snow?

[00:22:00.00]

EL: Yeah. Yeah. Couple down here in the next house was waiting for me down there. I got over there and they started to come over and help me, that time I got out of it.

[00:22:20.00]

EL: Yeah, the last of it they did, they worked winters.

KL: Pardon me?

EL: The last of it, they did work winters.

[00:22:28.00]

KL: I see.

[00:22:32.00]

EL: I don't remember how many years we worked in the wintertime, but I know we worked.

[00:22:44.00]

KL: When do you think the peak of the packing was? When do you think things were at the peak?

[00:22:54.00]

EL: That's hard to tell. Because in the summer, I would say that's when they got the fish. Most of them.

[00:23:12.00]

KL: Did they blow the whistle sometimes to call in the workers, too?

[00:23:16.00]

EL: Yes they did. Let them know here in town, those work.

[00:23:35.00]

KL: Okay. Well I will let you rest here some. I appreciate you taking time for me, alright?

EL: That's all right. I wasn't doing nothing.

[0:23:52.0]

END OF RECORDING