

Tomato canning history in Dubois County

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CRATE TO CAPPER

Leo Blessinger, Jr. (son of the aforementioned Leo Blessinger) and cousin, Ken O. Blessinger, both of Jasper, remember the Blessinger cannery well. They worked there seasonally, canning tomatoes as boys in the late 1940s.

“Back at that time, it was a lot of money really,” Ken says of the \$75 or so he made each autumn for cannery work. He recalls a summer during which his father gave him a choice between working in the cannery or camping with his Boy Scout troop. “I would go out there and camp with them overnight, walk in and work in the cannery all day,” he laughs, “turn around, walk back out there again — because I knew that was our spending money for the year.”

Margie (Wehr) Jeffries of Schnellville, retired co-founder of Green Thumb Landscaping and Garden Center, explains the planting process. Entire tomato plants began in the ground and were then pulled and “mudded” into buckets. “The roots would start growing right away,” she tells. “It wasn’t buying like we do now in little six packs.” More mature plants were then distributed in rows across farmers’ fields and allowed to lay on the ground, uncaged.

The use of field-hardy varieties of tomatoes was important. “I think Margold and Rutgers were two varieties that were really popular,” says Jeffries, “and we still can get those varieties here to this day.”

Ken adds that two-row horse planters were used to mark fields vertically and horizontally. The planters were fitted with tapered steel wheels, resulting in definitive ground markings. Workers staked tomato plants where two lines crossed. Later in the season, scraggly-looking tomato vines entangled themselves in straight rows.

Prior to September (canning season), co-op members would gather to tack crates. The Blessinger cannery rested next to the family’s saw mill, and the slats of the crates would already be “sawed-off by Uncle Leo,” (meaning pre-cut) according to Ken. “Two of the [Ed Blessinger family] boys,” tells Ken, “they

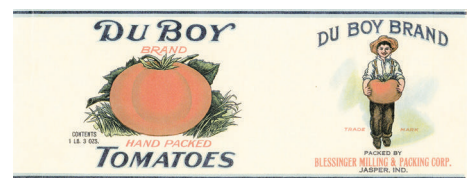
would go down in the river and haul fish. Then after the evening they’d fry fish for everybody that helped nail the crates together.”

“You had your own tomato crates,” Leo informs Margie of her grandfather, Martin Wehr’s farm. “They had MW on them.”

“We had lots of them at home,” she tells him. “MW was Martin Wehr then?”

“That’s right.”

“And you can still find them around,” adds Ken of local families’ stamped crates.



Tomatoes are part of the nightshade family of fruits (as are eggplant, chilies and potatoes). Tomato plant foliage has a spicy, nose-tickling aroma, a natural defense against many pests. Folks that

spend any amount of time around the plants are bound to have their fingers stained vivid, yellow-green: the color easily transfers to skin and clothes. Field picking was done under the orange, late-summer sun. The business of tomatoes was therefore hot, sweaty, dirty and smelly — even before the fruit made it to the cannery.

In the days of the Great Depression, tomato crates were ‘picked full’ by youngsters and hauled to co-op canneries by horse and buggy. Rural folks grew nearly everything they ate right on their homesteads. Devoting an acre or two to a cash crop like tomatoes allowed many families to pay their taxes. “Kept many a person from losing their property,” tells Ken.

By the late 40s, growers were hauling



their crates in motor vehicles. At the Blessinger plant, entire crates were unloaded, dumped into washing vats, washed and carried to a scalding. “My second year,” nods Ken, “I carried them from the washer to the scalding.” He also recalls carrying “the slops” (the peelings and cores) to dumping barrels. “At night, they’d take it on the wagon, haul it back in the field and dump it.”

By the time Leo and Ken were helping in the cannery, a large boiler in the family’s sawmill allowed not just for scalding but also for the steaming of tomatoes. “So they peeled easier,” Ken explains.

Steamed tomatoes were then carried to peelers. After filling a bucket with peeled and cored tomatoes, workers at the peeling station punched a tag worn on their collar. Ready tomatoes were carried to a filling station and placed in cans by hand. A conveyor system carried filled cans to the “capper” (a machine), and a worker would place one spoonful of salt in each can before it was capped.

Capped cans were cooked. Later, labels were pulled, washed with glue, and cans were rolled into labels, ready for market. At the Blessinger plant, workers received a kernel of corn per case of cans labeled, so that labeling pay was settled by the kernel. “Dad couldn’t figure out why the women always had too much corn for what they labeled,” jokes Leo.

In their early canning days, Ken and Leo were responsible for sending cans down a shoot from the second floor to the first toward the canning station.

“Him and I were

always the pranksters of the bunch,” tells Leo. “We always had a tomato up there to throw.”

He shakes his head: “I broke a lady’s glasses. She said something looking up at the steps, and I let one fly down and it broke her glasses.”

Ken smiles, “Yeah. I was there.”

The cousins share a hearty laugh when Leo says, “I worked that summer for *nothing*.”

CAN DO

In fact, it wouldn’t be difficult for a thrown tomato to make contact with a woman in an early 20th century cannery: almost every cannery job was performed by women.

At a time when society aggressively defined gender roles, the cannery was one place where women (usually confined to the locations and occupations of ‘homemaking’) could earn a salary.

Elnora Eck, of Haysville, soon-to-be 94 years old in November, remembers traveling with her sister-in-law (Matilda Eck) and neighbor (Hildie Sendelweck) to work in the

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