

Dubois County tomato canneries

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canneries. At the time, Elnora was between the ages of 12 and 14. “Those two were married and I was a kid yet,” she smiles. “I wanted to make some money too!”

“That’s what they did in the fall of the year,” Elnora says of homesteading women. “The mothers would go, ‘cause kids were in school!”

Many young women without children and lots of young girls also worked in the canneries and were involved in nearly every process from picking tomatoes in the field to rolling cans into labels. (As previously noted, the cannery business was a favorite enterprise among early 4-H’ers.)

Elnora worked at the Shamrock Canning Company, where she peeled and cored.

“I thought about that peeler while ago,” she smiles. “It’s somewhere in this house.”

“It was like a spoon,” she continues. “It was real pointy. It was about this shape.” Her thumb and forefinger extend as though she were making an alligator finger puppet. “So you reached in there and you got that core out of that tomato with that. And see, they were scalded. Then you could get the peeling off real easy. We cored em and peeled em.”

Elnora recalls that “maybe close to 20 women” worked inside the cannery in her line of sight. Some women worked in multiple canneries, and Elnora herself worked at Daniel Boone (Portersville) as well as Ireland. “I think just one day,” she tells, “they needed help at that cannery there by K-mart.” (She refers to Break O’day, which she calls the “Ho-

chgesang cannery.”) “I worked there one day because [Shamrock] didn’t have no tomatoes, and they was running too many tomatoes.”

Inside the cannery, tomato processing was a slippery, squishy, acidic job that led to red-stained fingers. (Between the juice, the steam, the cooking and the washing, a lot of water was necessary to run a tomato cannery.) “I mean you *held* your tomato,” nods Elnora of the soggy work. “Those tomatoes in those days — the tomato was *good*. They’re not like they are now. Now-a-days it’s got so much white stuff in there you have to cut out!”

THE LID POPS

In 1935, the total value of the year’s tomato crop, as reported by C. A. Nicholson, was \$140,000. (This would be a substantial amount of money today, but would have gone much farther for a consumer in 1935. In that year, the cost of a loaf of bread was 8 cents; a gallon of gas cost 10 cents; a new home cost around \$3,500. Ken and Leo’s \$75 per season wage really was a lot of money for a youngster.)

Nicholson reported that tomato growers were paid \$50,000, and local labor was paid \$25,000. Supplies cost \$65,000, leaving a project gain of \$75,000 at the end of the season. From that point forward, the cannery business bustled.

Until...

Dubois County tomato canneries closed abruptly in the early 50s (all within a few years) and for reasons that weren’t explicitly

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4-H member, Martin Hasenour, adds salt to cans and operates the Morning Star “capper” (1935).



Hand-made crates held tomatoes, which were loaded onto horse and buggy and brought to canneries (1935).



Clara Seger poses with crates. In 1935 she was the county champion 4-H tomato grower. She was awarded a \$15 cash prize. Should she label 300 cases a day, she would earn a day’s wage of \$3.