

Lesson Activity 1: Historical Background

Lesson: Canning Salmon

Over 200 canneries were found along the British Columbia coast by the Second World War. Canneries were usually adjacent to the fishing grounds. The processing of fish such as salmon was long and arduous work sometimes employing several hundred people. Increased technology in the post-war period brought centralization to the industry. There were fewer and larger “fish plants” as smaller ones closed and disappeared from the coast.

Like other work in primary industry such as logging and mining, fishing was a racialized and gendered industry. In the Fraser Valley and Cariboo Gold Rush of 1858 and 1859, for example, at a time when there was an oversupply of white men working as miners, Chinese workers began to cook and do laundry, at the time, jobs considered worthy of women. It is hardly surprising that Aboriginal, Chinese and Japanese peoples were traditional workers in the British Columbia fishing industry. So were women. While men set off on the dangerous, though often romanticized job of fishing, women remained in the canneries. In fact, two-thirds of all “shoreworkers” in the British Columbia fishing industry have been women. Around 1990, First Nations women accounted for 40% of shoreworkers in Prince Rupert while Chinese women made up 49% of workers in Steveston’s fish processing plant.

Cannery work itself was seasonal, noisy, unpleasant, repetitive, “on call” employment. It required long hours on one’s feet in a dirty and foul smelling environment. But the stench of hundreds even thousands of kilograms of cooking fish was, as one woman has called it, “the smell of money.” And so through the late 1900s women put in the “double day” – work at a cannery and then work at home as mothers and housekeepers. Women were considered a “cheap labour force.” Cannery workers usually made incomes below the poverty line. Along both the eastern and western coasts of Canada, cannery workers resorted to Unemployment (now termed “Employment”) Insurance in the fishing off-season in order to supplement the family income when the program became available in Canada after 1941.

By the 1990s work in the fish processing industry was still divided by gender. As described by Jill Stainsby, a woman who worked ten years as a “shoreworker,” women’s tasks were specialized, and “skilled,” but nevertheless underpaid relative to men’s work. Women’s tasks typically called for standing in a single spot for hours, handling fish or pieces of fish through the processes of cleaning, skinning and filleting, to their placement in cans, their work pace controlled by a conveyor belt assembly line. A job unique to women was “fishwashing,” inspecting cans for appearance and proper weight. Men’s tasks, in contrast, called for more mobility. They were less tied to one place. They unloaded and sorted fish on the docks, hosed down docks and boats, drove forklifts, and delivered fish into and fish products out of the plant. Men oversaw, inspected, and repaired machinery. They were the fish graders and inspectors. And it was men who controlled the speed of belts delivering the fish to the women.

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Christina, a woman shoreworker, illustrated the sexual division of labour in a 1994 study of British Columbia canneries:

... men's jobs ... differ so much than women's; even by doing their time you really see the difference. ... we know where the women are every minute of the day. ... they can't be off the line for more than ten minutes ... 'cause usually somebody else is filling in for you. The men are doing the jobs ... like swabbing, they go and pick up fish off the floor and pack it over here and ... they're moving around. They're up on the catwalk or out on the dock and boats — there's no boats to unload, they'll all go sit and have a cigarette and a cup of coffee, and the women, that doesn't usually happen. You're on a production line and it is a lot different (Stainsby, 1994).

By the end of the twentieth century, women and men still received different pay for differing effort. In 1985 full time male workers in British Columbia fish processing plants made an average of \$24,677 per year compared to full time women workers who made \$16,587. This wage differential was consistent across Canadian provinces. Furthermore, men and women performed different types of work in the canneries as illustrated by the following example in which men repair machines while women performed “line work.”

Those men are permitted to stand and watch the process of salmon-canning when it is in operation, and much of their work is trouble-shooting, or fixing the machines when they break. In fact, one machine man was heard saying, "I'm not paid to work!" He was making at least three dollars an hour more than the women who were actually handling the salmon on the line, indicating that his expertise was considered to be worth more to the company than their [women's] labour (Stainsby, 1994).

The differences in men and women's pay have been explained this way: women's work has often been seen as a “second income.” Women have been often been perceived by employers as filling in as a mass of cheap and available labourers, or even as a “reserve army of labour.”

Gender stratification in the fish processing industry appeared to change in 1988, at least at the B.C. Packers Prince Rupert plant. There the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding with the Fish Processors' Bargaining Association entitled "Equal Opportunities for Employment." Among other improvements, the union fought to ensure proper and fair plant procedures including the regulation that “opportunity for employment is equal without regard to gender.” As a result, women began to train as forklift operators and drivers in that plant.

Sources: Jill Stainsby, “It's the Smell of Money': Women Shoreworkers of British Columbia,” *BC Studies*, No. 103 (Fall 1994): 59-81; K. Mack Campbell, *Cannery Village: Company Town* (Trafford Publishing, 2004).

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