

LOCAL FISH CANNING INDUSTRY BEGINNINGS – Part 3

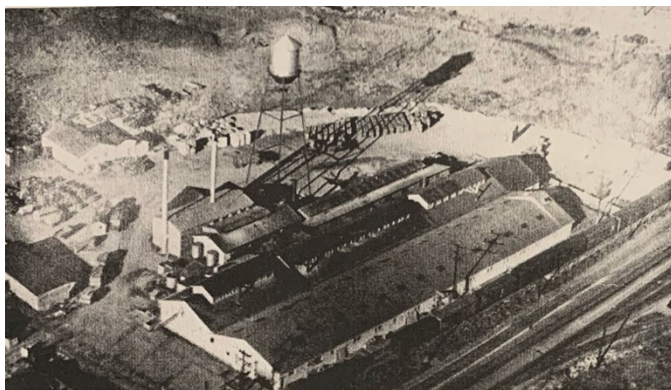
By Vince S. Ferrante
October 1, 2021

MARTINEZ CANNING, PACKING & FISH BUYERS

Commercial fishing had become a major Martinez activity with the influx of Italian immigrants who had recently begun arriving in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Many had been fishermen in their native land. Pollution and years of overfishing the east coast rivers of the U.S. had greatly diminished the catch of salmon in the eastern states. Discovery of a new supply in the Pacific Coast waters brought the industry west. In 1870 only one cannery operated on the Pacific Coast. In 1882 there were a dozen, two of them in Martinez.

The salmon cannery of Joseph Black was established in 1882 in a building two hundred feet by eighty feet where 80-100 hands processed 80,000 cases per month. The cannery contained two retorts for the pressurized steam cooking of canned fish. The goods were shipped to Europe, the eastern United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Honolulu. The Martinez Packing Company also commenced in 1882. It employed 60 hands with a capacity of 350 cases per day. The President of that company was George Shiel.

Years later, the Costanza Brothers, Oratzio, Andrew, Leo, John and Rocco purchased the old Black's cannery that had been utilized as a plywood manufacturing plant for some time and converted it back to a cannery, known as Martinez Food Canners. The Costanza's already had fish reduction plants in Port Chicago, the Red Rock area of Richmond and then in Port Costa. They canned shad and salmon which they bought from local fishermen. The cans were then sold to wholesalers. They utilized two large flat barges to pick up fish for the cannery and also to pick up sardines in San Francisco for the fertilizer plant in Port Costa. The motorized barges were like big floating tanks. They measured about 150' long, with a pilot cabin in front.



Martinez Cannery owned by the Costanza Brothers
Known as the Martinez Food Canners, Ltd.
Courtesy of Rocco H. Costanza

Upon the banning of commercial fishing by the state of California in 1957, the cannery continued processing fruits and vegetables into the early 1970's. Martinez Food Canners was heavily employed by the local Sicilian/Italian-American populace living in Martinez's "Little Italy" Shoreline neighborhood. Women played a major role as well in the cannery, such as my great Aunt Francis DiMaggio-Davi, who served as a "Floor Lady" or boss.



Operations Inside the Costanza Brothers Martinez Cannery
Courtesy of Rocco H. Costanza

My Nannu Ratzi Ferrante, who worked there seasonally in between fishing seasons, was offered a Foreman's position if he agreed to give up fishing in Alaska during the summers and "stay put". He accepted. As you would expect it was truly a family affair.

My father Vince began working there in high school and continued until its closure. It was a rite of passage to work there for many of the young men during summers and when home from college. Members of our FOI (Friends of Isola delle Femmine) in Martinez and participants in its events, with names such as Costanza, DiMaggio, Lucido, Pellegrini, and Ferrante, could share with you the hard work and experiences from those bygone cannery days.

The following are excerpts by John Costanza, first Italian to become mayor of Martinez who wrote several columns of reminiscences for the Martinez News Gazette:

“My father Rocco Costanza Sr. was a fish buyer. Martinez had about six buyers in the early days, but from the 40 [Martinez] boats, some of which were ours. The boats we had were pick up boats. We would go around to various fishing grounds and pick up the catches to bring in. We had a scale on the boat; we would weigh the fish and give them [fishermen] a receipt so that at the end of the week they would come and get their money ... My family handled the business of go-between. We’d pick up the catch, bring it in and ship it to San Francisco to Paladini Company. We also shipped to Sacramento and to International Fish Company on the stern wheeler river boats ... They [fishermen] also came ashore on weekends to get their money. Our bookkeeper was Amy Morgan. It was our custom on those weekends, when the banks were open on Saturdays, to get \$500 to \$600 in cash, gold and silver, put it into a sack and bring it to our house where the fishermen would gather and we would pay them in cash.”

Fish Buyers, most of them agents for San Francisco fish brokers, acquired warehouse space on Granger’s Wharf in Martinez and later on the city wharf. Among them were Giuseppe Sparacino, Rocco Costanza, Vincenzo Lucido, Giovanni Flores, Pete Amato, and Peter B. Davi. Luigi Pellegrini established his own family business and delivered fish by horse and wagon in the early days. Later, he also supplied San Francisco firms. His place of business is still standing at the foot of Berrellesa Street.



Label for Sardine Canes from the Costanza Martinez Cannery
Courtesy of Rocco H. Costanza

Fish were used as barter for fruits and vegetables from the truck farmers on outer Alhambra Ave. in Martinez, while many old-time residents remember going to the wharf area to buy fish off the incoming boats. Many of the fish buyers’ grandchildren are members of FOI from the Martinez area and continue to work to support keeping the history alive.



Pete Amato fish buyer at far left at work with his crew cleaning fish
Can you recognize anyone else?

Courtesy of the Amato Family

Sources:

1. 1882 History of Contra Costa Co. by Slocum & Co.
2. Martinez News Gazette
3. Martinez, A California Town, Martinez Historical Society