

Cannery Products went Worldwide

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

“Baraboo corn, peas have world-wide Market”. So proclaimed a headline in the News-Republic in 1946, when our nation attempted to feed a starving world after WWII. Moreover every can carried the word “Baraboo” in bold letters. Apparently the products were labeled Baraboo Peas and Circus or Devils Lake Corn.

The canned peas and corn and some tomatoes were a product of a nearly forgotten local industry, the Frank Herfort Cannery. Significant then, it employed as many as 100 persons during the three month corn and pea canning season, and up two dozen or so employees the rest of the year.

In its time, the output was significant. In 1946 the Herfort Cannery produced 170,000 cases of peas and corn, and there were 24 cans per case, or a total of 2,389,000 cans. This may not seem significant when we reflect today that the local Seneca plant reportedly can manufacture up to a million cans a day. These empty cans are sent to packers, to be filled with countless varieties of food products.

Herfort’s Cannery payroll of \$5000 a week during the peak season seems paltry when compared to today’s dollar, but it was a significant addition to the local economy then. The corn season brought another \$5000 into the local economy. The average

hourly pay per workman was less than a dollar in those uneasy postwar days of 1946.

Preceding the Herfort Cannery was the Gem City Canning Company, formed in 1899 just south of what is now the Broadway Bridge, on the west side of the street. Actually, there was no bridge or street there in 1899, and would not be until August 9, 1928. John Geoghegan remembers teams lined up then across the new bridge, waiting to unload their corn or peas.

The cannery nestled between the river and the Northwestern railroad. Later there was a rail spur to unload coal and perhaps cans. As was the custom then, the nearby river probably served as a dump for industrial waste. This location is currently occupied by St. Vincent de Paul, in a building built in about 1970 for Pierce’s Grocery.

Idled by 1907, Gem City Cannery was now purchased by Frank Herfort. New machinery, a silo and water storage were added. Each can had a circus theme proclaiming “Baraboo, the Largest Circus City in the World” in honor of the Ringling and Gollmar Circuses. The business was considered to be highly successful, filling a record 71,640 cans one day in 1913.

Fire destroyed the building on April 8, 1915. A frustrated fire department had insufficient hose to reach from a hydrant—there was still no bridge on Broadway. Herfort believed the fire was arson, but no charges were filed, and the rebuilt plant handled the corn crop in the fall.

By 1916 the new plant would produce a million cans of peas, many from land owned by the Herforts. A huge warehouse was added during the 1918 world-wide famine, and Herfort was



Probably the 1916 fire photos. Note red brick school in rear. SCHS Photos





Hertfort Cannery photos

*A north east view of
F. Hertfort Can. Co.*



The 1903 Michigan Car about 1950

*Looking West at
F. Hertfort Cannery Co.*

considered one of the leading canneries in the state.

For a time during WWII, the cannery utilized German prisoners of war for the harvesting season. The government purchased much of the factory's products, and the cans were painted the familiar olive drab army color. An old 1920 telephone book at the Historical Society lists the quaint telephone numbers of the day, which you gave to a live telephone operator. One Herfort farm was reached by 1643-F2, a party line. Number 484 was sufficient for the operator to connect you with the Cannery itself.

As the national cannery industry consolidated, local machinery was sold and the property utilized by others, particularly Peck's and also Alexander's Hatcheries. The Herfort enterprises came to an end in December, 1966 when much of the remaining property was destroyed by fire, reminiscent of the 1915 fire.

We are indebted to Joe Ward, author of the copious "Baraboo, History of the commercial and Retail Districts" for some of this material. Also, the Sauk County Historical Society provided files for our use. Incidentally, the Frank Herfort in this article was the second, not first owner of the rare and sporty 1903 Michigan automobile recently donated to the Historical Society by the Gordon Caflish family.

John Geoghegan, local raconteur, states that Henry Roick was the first owner, selling to Herfort. The Society has photos showing the car parked near the cannery. Only three such autos remain, and the Historical Society is very pleased with this new acquisition



Frank Herfort