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Smith-Layton Archive presents:

Santa Clara Valley Women Cannery Workers

by Margo McBane

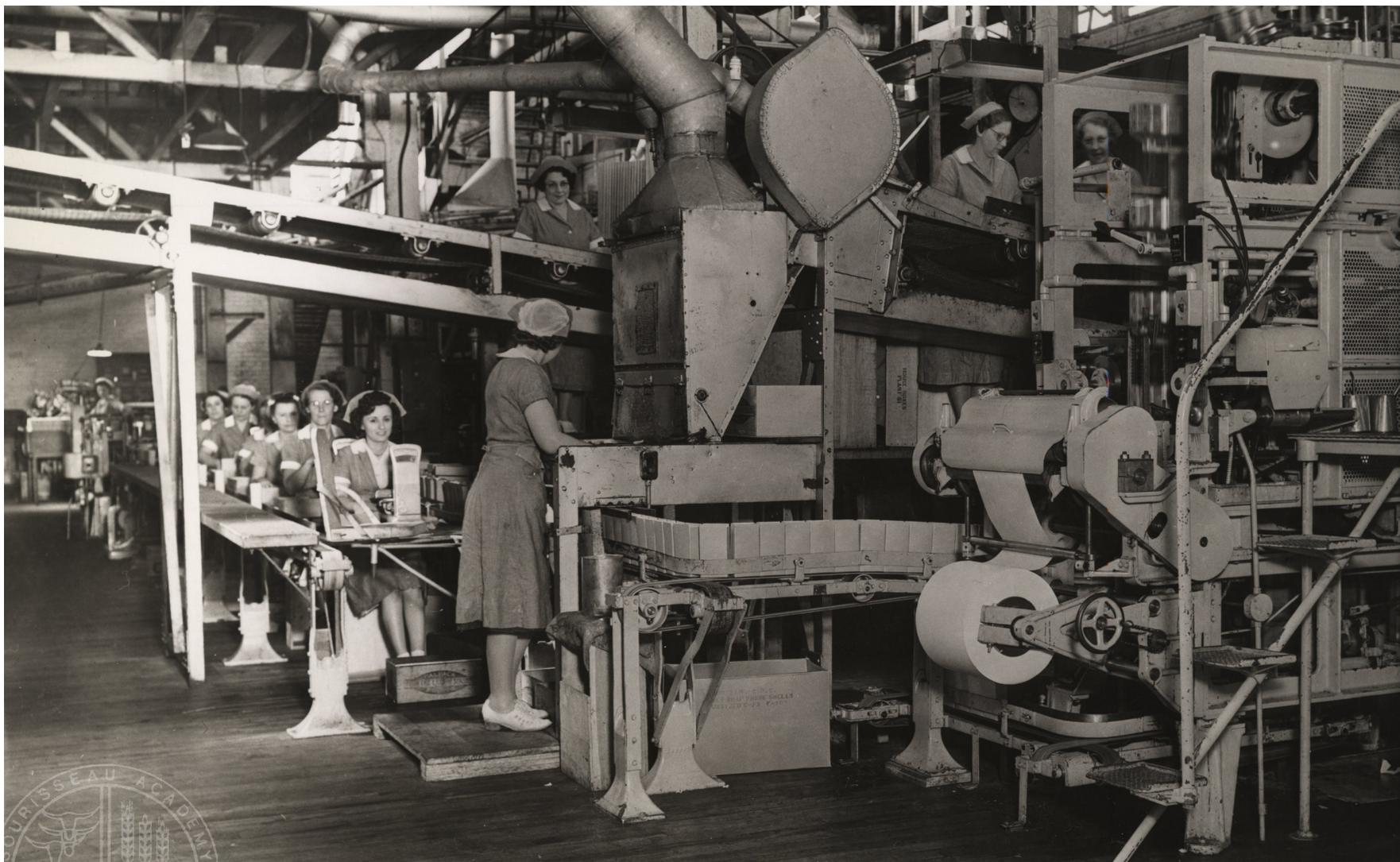
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[72] **Valley of the Hearts Delight.** Santa Clara Valley, proudly referred to by 1915 as The Valley of the Heart's Delight, grew an abundance of fruit, specializing in peaches, apricots, pears, prune plums, and cherries. Farmers faced the problem of how to deal with bumper crop years, as well as to make their product available after the fresh fruit season. To serve distant markets, growers preserved their fruit through canning and drying. In 1871, a local physician and grower, Dr. James Dawson, formed Dawson & Company in his home on The Alameda. In 1875, the name was changed to the San Jose Fruit Packing Company, shown in this photo, located at the southeast corner of Fifth and Julian Streets. In 1893, the plant was relocated to the west side of the Guadalupe River, south of Auzerais Street, and was the largest cannery in the world. By 1900, canned food production became the second largest industry in California, with Santa Clara Valley in the lead.



[73] **Producer Exchanges Define the Industry.** Cannery and growers merged to form producer exchanges beginning in 1899. San Jose Fruit Packing Company joined with seventeen other companies (including half of the canning establishments in California) to form the California Fruit Canners' Association (CFCA). Within four years, CFCA was the world's leader in fruit and vegetable canning and drying, offering 50 Del Monte-branded products. By 1916, the CFCA merged with five other canneries to form California Packing Corporation (Calpak), further developing the Del Monte Brand, the first national brand in the United States. By the 1930s, Calpak was the largest canner in California, and Santa Clara Valley had become the fruit processing capital of the world. This photo shows women packing prunes at Calpak Plant No. 51 on Bush Street, south of The Alameda.

July 2017



[74] **Women Dominate the Cannery Workforce.** The need for cannery workers grew with increased fruit orchard acreage. Cannery work was divided along gender, ethnic, and race lines. Chinese men and Anglos filled the initial cannery jobs during the 1870s and 1880s. Following this early workforce, the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish immigrants then dominated the Valley cannery labor force to WWII. By the 1930s, Santa Clara Valley's 38 canneries were the largest employers of women in California. The above photo of the workforce of Richmond-Chase Plant #4 at 380 Stockton Avenue shows the predominant number of women. These women did the "semi-skilled" seasonal hand labor of peeling, cutting and slicing.



[75] **Unpredictable Work and the “Shape Up”.** Canning was a seasonal industry, hiring and then laying off workers in response to harvest needs. As each type of fruit ripened, they had to be processed immediately to ensure high quality. During each season, canneries operated around the clock, with three shifts of workers per day. Employees were hired seasonally through “shape-ups” of workers who gathered in front of the cannery office. It helped to have a connection within the cannery workforce in order to get hiring preference. Seasonal workers maximized their income while the jobs were available, by working every day they could. This might mean hiding pregnancy (because pregnant women were not hired), coming to work sick, or staying at work even after an injury. This photo shows the George E. Hyde Cannery Cutting Room in 1920. The Hyde Cannery was located at 99 Central Avenue, Campbell.



[76] **Hard Times, Rotten Fingernails.** Before the 1930s, women cannery workers would work up to 18 hours a day, or 96 hours a week. Historian Matthews states that in 1913 the federal Industrial Welfare Commission formed to protect laboring women and children, but excluded workers in “perishable materials.” Women stood for hours working with acidic fruit. Many women reported severe damage to their hands; not from traumatic injuries but from the small nicks and cuts from cutting fruit by hand. Women canning spinach suffered burnt hands and rotting fingernails from canning spinach while it was still hot. Other injuries included catching fingers and hands in the processing machines or slipping on wet floors. Noise was also a problem in a building the size of four football fields, with machines running and cans rattling along conveyors. This photo shows workers canning tomatoes about 1930, location unknown.



[77] **Divided by Gender.** While race and ethnicity provided one layer of work division, gender provided another. The canneries rigidly restricted some jobs only to men and other, lower paying piece-rate jobs for women. Men were assigned to do the higher paying, year-round work including supervision, heavy lifting, warehouse work, line deliveries, and tending and repairing the machines. These job assignments rested on two assumptions: only men were capable of the physical strength required and men needed full-time year-round work to support their families. Men are shown above assembling fruit crates at Felice and Perelli Cannery in Gilroy, c1930. Women were assigned to the food preparation tasks on the production line, including peeling, cutting, sorting and filling cans. These types of seasonal jobs reflected the domestic work that women did in their own kitchens, and it was thought women were only working to earn extra or “pin” money. In the above photo, women are shown operating fruit slicers at a Calpak cannery c1930.



[78] **1930s Unions Made Them Stable.** The first Valley cannery strikes took place in 1917 with the American Federation of Labor's Toilers of the World. The Toilers signed a two-year contract that only benefitted male workers. It was not until the 1930s that organized women cannery workers found a union voice. Their first strike took place in 1931 under the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (CAWIU). This photo shows women striking at Calpak #39 at Jackson and N. Seventh Streets. This strike, the worst riot in San Jose history, took place in St. James Park between police and strikers, ending with the demands of the strikers being met. Since the 1935 federal Wagner Act covered cannery workers, northern California canners joined the California Processors and Growers to seek out "a responsible union" in 1936. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) union filled the need, replacing the "shape up" hiring system with "secure seniority hiring," providing women with job stability and higher earning power.



[79] **World War II.** World War II was a profitable period for American growers, packers, canners, and workers, as the war had destroyed European cropland. The mobilization of hundreds of thousands of military personnel generated a huge demand for canned goods around the world. Over half of the Santa Clara Valley canning production was needed for the war effort. At the same time San Jose canners saw an acute labor shortage due to the absence of men from the workforce, and the shift of ethnically white women to “Rosie the Riveter” jobs. In response to this labor shortage, new workers were brought into the canneries. Mexican women and bracero men filled the greatest number of cannery jobs. This John C. Gordon photo shows women unloading boxes of glass jars at a Calpak cannery during the war.



[80] **The Post War-1970s, Women Cannery Supervisors.** From 1948 to the 1970s, Mexican-Americans were the largest ethnic group of women cannery workers. In general, the only Mexican women able to move up to office work or supervisory jobs from the 1940s through the 1970s were those born in the United States and who were fluent English speakers. After WWII, cannery managers primarily promoted Italian and Portuguese women to become “floor ladies” to supervise Mexican women line workers. Supervisors could dismiss workers at will. The forewomen were constantly on the move on the shop floor, enforcing rules, instructing workers, and pushing for faster and more accurate work. Most importantly, forewomen had complete discretion in assigning workers to workstations. Relations between forewomen and their workers could be especially strained if they were of different ethnic backgrounds or spoke different languages. This photo shows women sorting fruit at United States Products Company at Race and Moorpark.

July 2017



[81] **Women's Double Work Day.** Women found themselves in the difficult position of juggling the jobs of cannery work and mother. Most cannery women were mothers who chose seasonal work because it fit in with their family commitments. Like all working mothers, women working in the cannery faced the challenge of finding appropriate and affordable childcare. Calpak, between the 1940s through the 1950s, operated a nursery at their Plant #3 site. The nursery provided basic childcare during the day shift and the second shift. Women who worked at other canneries left their children with family members or neighbors; others paid for babysitters. Many women worked out complicated shift arrangements with their husbands. This photo shows cannery workers at the Santa Clara Valley Growers Association, Plant #2, located at Tenth and Taylor Street.



[82] **Decline of Canneries and Women's Employment.** After World War II, demand for canned fruit rapidly ramped down, leaving cannery owners holding loans that had been taken out to expand productivity holding the bag. Then with the urban sprawl of the 1960s, the Valley's orchards began to be replaced with housing, further causing canneries to close. Changes occurred also when the Teamsters Union took cannery representation away from the AFL; and by 1967, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act required that jobs could not be classified as "male" or "female" work. By 1976, because most cannery jobs were unionized, women were receiving wage, medical, holiday, and retirement benefits. Although cannery women's benefits were still lower than men's, cannery work offered women stability, allowing many women cannery workers to become homeowners. Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers (UFW) then created a legal project "The Cannery Workers Committee" to protest Teamster Union discrimination and won their case, winning a number of higher paying jobs for women. But by 1987, only eight canneries remained in the Valley. The Santa Valley cannery era ended in 1999 when and Del Monte closed its largest cannery, Plant #3, which was the site of the 1893 San Jose Fruit Packing Company.