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In Maine, Last Sardine Cannery in the U.S. Is Clattering Out

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

PROSPECT HARBOR, Me. — The women in their smudged aprons here at the sardine cannery work together in mesmerizing synchronization. Their hands flying, they fill the empty tins that clatter along the conveyer belt, packing in pieces of cut herring like, well, so many sardines.

On April 18, the clanking will cease. The bells and buzzers that regulate the pace of packing will fall silent. The old plant, the last sardine cannery in the United States, is shutting down.

Once a thriving national industry — and the backdrop of [John Steinbeck's](#) gritty "Cannery Row" — sardine canneries have been dwindling for the last half-century. They have fallen victim to global competition, corporate consolidations and a general lack of appetite, at least in the United States, for sardines, despite their nutritional value and attempts by chefs to give them an image makeover.

Bumble Bee Foods, which has owned the plant here since 2004, attributed the closing to federal regulations that have reduced the amount of Atlantic herring, sardines before processing, that can be hauled from the sea. (Although Bumble Bee is the owner, the cannery is still known as the Stinson plant, after the founding family.)

Maine was once a frenetic hub of the sardine business, starting in the 1870s. The industry reached its peak in the early 1950s, when it employed thousands of workers at more than 50 canneries.

This plant, identifiable by its giant slicker-clad seafarer holding a tin of Beach Cliff sardines, is by far the biggest employer in this pocket of peninsulas more than halfway up the coastline. When its doors close, 128 people will lose their jobs, and the ripple will be felt throughout the local economy. Unemployment in Hancock County, where the plant is located, was above 12 percent in January, already higher than the state average.

State officials have tried to lure other companies to buy the factory, and Gov. John Baldacci, a Democrat, has said he was optimistic that a buyer would be found and that some workers would be rehired. But many are still anxious about their futures.

“Everybody here is in limbo,” said Peter Colson, the plant manager, who has worked here for 38 years. While the state is offering to help workers learn another trade and is making it easier to sign up for unemployment, he said that many would not accept an unemployment check — himself among them. “I’ve never been unemployed since I was old enough to walk,” he said.

The packers, all of whom are women, are the heart of the processing plant, largely because they still work the fish with their hands. They are paid by the number of cans they pack and can earn up to \$18 or \$19 an hour.

In the break room off the packing floor, Nancy Harrington, 70, who has worked here for 44 years, said she did not want to retire. “I could work another 10 years,” she said. Her three daughters have worked here, too, and so has her sister.

“I don’t know how to do anything else,” Ms. Harrington said. But she is not interested in training for another job because she is convinced it would mean working with computers. “I don’t want nothing to do with computers,” she declared. “I don’t have one, I don’t want to learn. No, sir. I’m going to do my scrapbooking and quilting.”

Dawn Lamoureux, 41, said that the closing was “devastating” and that she was “still trying to deal with it.”

Lela Anderson, 78, has been at the cannery for 54 years, starting back when workers used scissors to cut the herring before machines did that work.

“I enjoy being here,” said Ms. Anderson, a tiny woman, adding that she had expected to celebrate her 80th birthday at the plant with friends. “I thought this would be here for generations to come.”

The cannery is one of the last vestiges of Maine's industrial past, and in these final days, various archivists have been granted access to document its inner workings.

Ben Fuller, curator of the [Penobscot Marine Museum](#), was working with a film crew on Monday, gathering material for a historical record intended for the [Library of Congress](#).

"You're bringing to a close 135 years of sardine packaging on the coast," he said over the whoosh of water that cleansed the frozen herring before machines sliced off their heads and tails. "This really built up a lot of the towns here."

He said several factors played into the closing, beyond limits on the haul. Catching techniques are changing, he said, and the new methods can reduce the quality of herring needed for canning. There is also competition from lobstermen, who are willing to pay for the lower quality herring because they use it for bait.

Sardine workers in Maine saw their heyday during World War II, when large orders for American troops kept their canneries clattering.

"After the war, we saw a rise in tuna canning," Mr. Fuller said. "People could do more with tuna. There are a limited amount of things you can do with sardines."

Workers here do not express much interest in eating the catch. Ernie Beach, 55, who operates one of the plant's large pressure-cooker machines, which sterilize the sardines, said that few workers took advantage of company policy allowing them two free cans a day; he takes one home for his cat.

But like the others, Mr. Beach is proud of his work. "I'm not just the operator, I'm the maintenance man, the mechanic, I make all the adjustments, the calibrations," he said. "I'm saving lives here."

When their break was over, the women pulled on new rubber gloves, adjusted their hair nets and returned to the assembly line. They all worked fast, as the job demands, but Mr. Colson, the manager, said with some amazement, as he looked over the daily report, that two of the women, Lulu Orozco and Alma Rodriguez had packed 5,228 cans in 195 minutes, a dizzying rate. It was an extraordinary display of dexterity and focus, if not a little sardine showmanship at the end of the line.

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