

## LOCAL FISH CANNING INDUSTRY BEGINNINGS – Part 1

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This two-part article will look at the local fish canning business in Pittsburg, Martinez and Monterey. Part 1 in this issue will focus on the early beginnings of the fish canneries in Pittsburg, following them into the 1920's. Part 2 will highlight early Martinez and Monterey canning. The canning industry started during the gold rush era in 1852 along the Sacramento Delta. William Hume began a salmon canning venture on a barge near Sacramento. The early canning process was a cumbersome manual one. Chinese laborers kept busy in these early canneries making tin cans by hand, tapping each can with a hammer to see if they leaked. With the advent and development of machinery, canneries soon began to spread throughout the northwest, wherever the fish were being caught in large numbers.

The size of early Sacramento Delta commercial fishing is provided in the 1882 History of Contra Costa County:

There are employed in the salmon fisheries between San Francisco and Sacramento about 800 boats. Each boat is manned by two fishermen. There are, therefore, one thousand six hundred men employed in catching salmon between the two points named or in a distance of one hundred and twenty miles. There are two hundred and fifty boats in the Straits of Carquinez alone. There are nine canneries along the river and Suisun Bay [west of Pittsburg] and several in San Francisco averaging between 60-80 men in each establishment. There are, therefore, no less than two thousand five hundred men employed in taking salmon and canning them for home and foreign consumption.

### PITTSBURG

The Sacramento River Packers Association built two canneries both managed by J.P. Haller. One was located in New York Landing at Black Diamond (present day Pittsburg) in about 1875 started by Sydney Booth. The other was across the river on Chipps Island owned by Sol Wangenheim. Early on, these two canneries competed against each other until they formed a Trust. The Sicilian fishermen were known to drive a hard bargain when negotiating price. The Trust allowed the cannery owners better leverage with which to negotiate. The article in the first issue of *Il Notizario* stated that the Aiello brothers arrived in Black Diamond about 1878. The newly found work of R.S. Dondero corrects this to be 1870. Significant immigration from Isola and other Sicilian villages then started in mid to late 1870s, coinciding with the start of Booth's cannery. Eventually, the Chipps Island location was closed and operations were consolidated at the Black Diamond plant. In the early years, operation was mediocre until more careful and systematic processes were put in place with William Croxson as Superintendent. Other early canneries in Black Diamond included the Limberger Cannery canning turtles (who knew?) and the Pioneer Canning Company owned by King Morse of San Francisco. The water tower for the Black Diamond plant also supplied the city with water through its state-of-the-art filtration process.



Original Booth Cannery  
with River Barge Docked in Foreground  
Building at the Extreme Left  
Later Replaced by a Concrete & Steel One  
Source: Fishing II Binder, Pittsburg HSA Library

F.E. Booth (1863-1941), the son of Sydney, arrived in Black Diamond in 1881 to assist his father and was initially in charge of sales and marketing for the Black Diamond plant. By 1889, at the tender age of 26, he was made manager of the whole consolidated operation and became President of the Sacramento River Packers Association. He was also the first secretary of the North Alaska Salmon Company. He came of age at the Black Diamond Cannery, and in 1905, he formed his own company, which ultimately took over the Association's Black Diamond plant. By 1909, the cannery employed 400 persons, shipping its output to all parts of the United States as well as many foreign ports. Women played an integral role in the fish cannery work force. In later years, Marie Grillo Gibson was cited as being the best fish butcher at the A Paladini cannery. (Pittsburg Press article dated 25-Sep-1974, found in the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum Archive)

To assure his supply of fresh fish, three boats would work the delta collecting the catch directly from the fishing boats. By 1925, he employed 25 men in and around the Pittsburg Plant and contracted the catch of fish from about 150 fishermen. The plant also mild-cured shad and salmon, preserved by smoking, to be sold in New York and Germany. Booth reportedly owned the first steam ship on the Sacramento Delta, named the Napa City, to haul fruits and vegetables to the cannery under special contracts with growers at various ports up river. His cannery became one of the largest packers of California fruits and vegetables and the leading operator in California fresh fish.

From an article in the Pittsburg Post, dated 1927, found in the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum Archive:

Approximately 85 carloads of fish equivalent to 3,000,000 pounds leave Pittsburg for the east every year from the six fish companies in this city. These companies are the Standard Fish Co., The San Francisco International Fish Co., the Davi Fishery, F.E. Booth Co., the Western California Co. and A. Paladini. [Not mentioned was that the San Joaquin Fish Cannery founded here by Frank Cardinali joined forces with the Paladini Co. of San Francisco in 1922, an association that would last until 1957 when the local commercial fishing was outlawed.] ... The chief volume of business comes in the spring when the salmon and shad are running in local waters. Although salmon is the most popular kind of fish handled by Pittsburg concerns, there is a huge annual catch of several other kinds, ... Sardines are also becoming an important local product. These are canned exclusively by the F.E. Booth Canning Co. which began putting up sardines last year as an experiment, meeting with such success that there will be three times as much production as last year ...

My father Vince often shared stories of his father Ratz Ferrante and Uncles Joe and Tony on their 85' purse seiner The New Admiral, home port Monterey. On occasion the sardines fishing grounds would take them to the Farallon Islands. They would then offload their catch at the Pittsburg Booth Cannery as opposed to going back to Monterey.

More from the 1927 article:

There are about 60 men that may be called steady fishermen in Pittsburg. These are men that have their homes and families here and who stay here year around, instead of going to Alaska or San Pedro as some men do. Those who travel from place to place [principally Alaska, San Pedro and San Diego] number 200 more men, ...

This predominantly Sicilian-American workforce provided the catch for the local canneries for over 80 years.

By 1929 F.E. Booth built a new state of the art concrete plant expanding his sardine operations, adding 225 employees to total 500. He then had a fleet of nine purse seiners extending his sardine fishery to beyond the Golden Gate.

From a humble beginning, working with a wash boiler and a hand soldering outfit in the Sacramento Delta, the Booth operation grew to be a major part of the Delta economy until commercial fishing was outlawed here, but his operation in Monterey continued to grow larger earning him the title "The Sardine King" as we will see in Part 2.

His integrity and fair dealings with his employees earned him great affection and respect throughout Pittsburg.

Sources:

Looking Back III "Tales of Italian Fishing Pioneers of Pittsburg, Monterey and Alaska" by Earl Hohlmayer (2002).  
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R.S. Dondero, "The Italian Settlement of San Francisco", Masters Thesis, University of California Berkeley (1950).