

A history to keep



Waterfront view of the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, also showing Columbia River boats and steam powered vessels.

(source: Canada Public Archives)

One step over the sill and the smell of fish oil assaults the senses. The old wood of the vitamin oil shed is permeated with the smells from decades of running the herring reduction lines. They bring back the noise of machines and labour of people long gone from the Gulf of Georgia Cannery.

But their legacy remains with us. Thanks to the efforts of the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and Parks Canada, the cannery is now a national historic site.

A big part of the cannery's story is about people and change,

particularly changing technology and needs of the fishing industry.

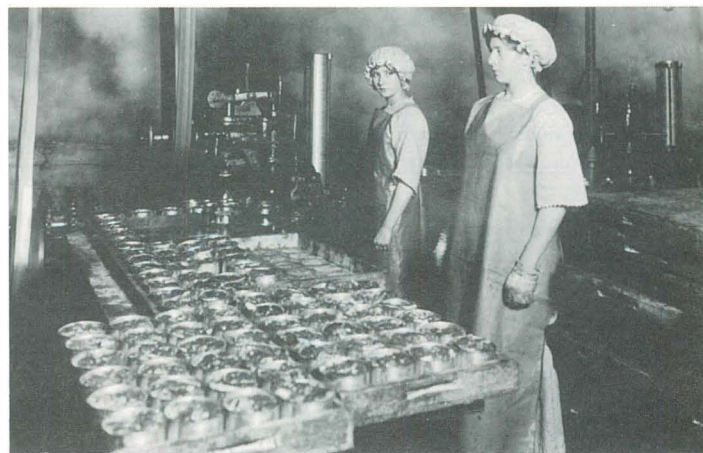
"We wholeheartedly support the museum," says John McNally, regional director of DFO's Small Craft Harbours branch. "It's one way to pay tribute to the hundreds of people in the fishing industry—from those out on the fishing grounds to those working on the canning lines—and the contribution they have made in the development and shape of our west coast communities."

The single salmon canning line started by the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Company in 1894 soon became part of one of British Columbia's largest canneries. The main

building was built on the southwest corner of Lulu Island, a dyked flood plain of the Fraser River delta. It

still stands there today, in the town of Steveston.

Steveston is very much an active fishing



Between 1871 and 1903, the canning processes were essentially manual. (Above) female workers are painting fish cans with a mixture of red lead, turpentine and linseed oil.

(Photo credit: Parks Canada)

community and the Steveston Harbour Authority, which operates the harbour on behalf of DFO, is in the unique position of running a harbour with a historic site in the middle of it. The site is an active one in itself. The Canadian Fishing Company leases part of the buildings for net mending

colourful history. The Canadian Fishing Company (Canfisco) had purchased the buildings in 1926 and when salmon canning operations first ceased in 1930, fish buying, net construction and net repair were the only activities. In the '40s, when the lines started up once again, herring, not salmon,

story about community initiative.

"The Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society was the spark that ignited the move to a museum," says McNally. "The people in the Society are the heart behind the work."

Audrey Matheson is chairperson of the 300-member Society, a non-

Saturday morning before the customers came in," says Matheson. "Today, with the generosity and help of DFO and Parks Canada, we are getting ready to celebrate the cannery's 100th birthday in 1994."

Strong support has been given by DFO, with the transfer of land and buildings in 1984 to Parks Canada. DFO also reconstructed the wharf in front of the cannery in its historic appearance and is now in the process of transferring the vacant lands in the back of the cannery for parking space. Substantial amounts of money were also spent by DFO in building and site repairs and the installation of a fire sprinkler system.

The early world of the cannery is fast disappearing, but the memories are being kept alive. The Gulf of Georgia Society members and park staff are gearing up for a partial public opening of the cannery on June 25, 1994. ■



Today only the memories are alive as the herring reduction cookers stand silent.

and storage. It's not unusual to see a forklift moving one of the hundreds of "totes" (containers which hold the huge and heavy seine nets) within the building.

The cannery has a

were canned. Herring reduction for oil and meal was also in operation, and continued long after the demand for canned herring dropped.

How the cannery became a museum is a

profit organization formed in 1986.

"In the early days, when we first started talking about the old cannery, about a dozen of us used to meet at Dave's Fish & Chips every