



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
Walter H. Hume, 1882-1974

March 28, 1957



[MP3 Audio File](#) [Length: 00:10:39] (4.88 MB)

Interviewed by: Edgar Hastings

My father's name was D. H. Hume, who was originally from Nova Scotia. He went to San Francisco, California, in the early days, then on to the Columbia River, and from there to Puget Sound and the salmon canneries. Then we came to San Diego in 1906 and built a fish cannery. We tried to get a location in town but the City Council would not grant us a location because they felt that the smell of the fish might interfere with the tourist trade, but they did give us a permit to build a cannery at La Playa at the foot of Owens Street on Point Loma, where there was a colony of fishermen.

We built there in 1907 and operated until we moved to the foot of Hawthorne in San Diego. The cannery was built of 1 x 12 boards on end with battens and a shake roof. We had a dock built out and the cannery was built on pilings. The processing in those days was much more crude than it is now.

At first we had to dry the sardines in the sun which was not a good drying process. Afterward we built a dry room. When the fish were dried, we fried them and canned them. Our first cans were hand soldered. Later, when we got a sanitary closing machine and a different can, the work went much faster and we canned more cases per day than we did with the old method of soldering cans.

We had to build a bunk house. We couldn't get help way out on the Point otherwise. I think we had at one time ten people living in the bunk house who worked in the cannery. There was no other way to get help.

The sardines were fried in cottonseed oil in a fryer that was quite long; they were fried in wire baskets. There was a steam coil in the fryer that heated the oil and the baskets were laid on the coil. After the sardines were fried they had to cool before canning or packing. Our first method of cooking sardines in a can was an open tank of water with a steam coil in the bottom. We didn't have a retort until later on. It took three hours to cook sardines by the tank method. After we got a retort, we used to cook them in about fifty minutes.

The City Council found out that there wasn't any particular odor to our operation and allowed us to build another cannery in town, which we did in 1910, on the fill made at the foot of Hawthorne. This was the Neptune Seafood Company. We had automatic closing machines, dry rooms, flaking machines, steam boilers--all modern equipment. We also had more room. We used to pack about 300 cases a day after we got into town. Before that, if we packed 40 to 50 cases a day in La Playa, it was a very good day's work.

We had more employees, up to 200 people at one time. In later days we had as many as 500 to 600 people.

Our capital was short, so we had to incorporate and sell stock. It was sold to only three individuals: a man named Risser from Los Angeles, and Johnson and Sprague, two local men.

A third cannery was built by other interests at the foot of F Street which, afterward, was moved to the foot of 23rd Street, owned by Cohen and others. Then A.J. Steele and his two sons built a cannery also at 23rd Street, which was called the Premiere Packing Company. A Portuguese from Roseville built a small cannery in that locality but he went out of business. At one time he operated a cannery at the foot of Dickenson on Point Loma before he moved to town.

I don't remember any of the names of the early boats that used to fish for us. They were all Italian. Still, I do remember one man, Ghio, and he and his boys now have a fish market at the ferry landing. There was one Portuguese by the name of Cabral who fished for us for awhile. He lived at La Playa when we had our cannery there. We bought fish from individual fishermen.

We paid what I recall started at \$30 a ton for sardines and it went higher afterwards. That was for what we called the quarter oil sardine. The oval sardine, which was the large sardine in the oval one-pound can, I think we paid \$18 a ton for [them]. In those days, tuna or albacore was selling for either \$30 or \$35.

We started canning albacore and tuna in 1908 or 1909 near the beginning of canning operations. It was considered a success. There was a cannery in San Pedro that canned tuna before we did, and that was the Halfhill Cannery. They were canning both sardines and tuna at one time.

END OF INTERVIEW
