

Interviewed: March 2, 1976

FORMER MANAGER OF A.B.C. PACKING CO.

Mr. Malcom Robertson,
1425 West 49th Avenue,
Vancouver, B. C.

- Was born in 1902 in Ontario.
- As a boy of 6½ years, moved to Vancouver in August 1909.
- Attended school until the age of 13, because of the war had to start work.
- Mentions different jobs he worked at.
- Moved to Victoria in 1919.
- Went to Wadhams Cannery in February 1919.
- Boarded a Union Steam Ship in Vancouver with a roll of blankets and personal belongings.
- Went to work in Wadhams Cannery factory in Rivers Inlet.
- Originally built by Billy Wadhams.
- I started out as a machine operator in the can factory.
- In those days there were a few of these small canneries at various points.
- The reason being it was cheaper to ship the tin plate up there and make the cans in the area rather than ship up the made cans.
- They were so bulky and took up so much room in the ship.
- We had the tin plate shipped up with the lids which were made in Vancouver.
- We employed a number of people in the plant including some Chinese.
- The Chinese did such things as feed the tin plates into the body maker.
- Explains the exact process of making the cans.
- Also had box making machines for the wooden boxes.
- The can operation always took place in the spring.
- Was a fish collector at Wadhams Cannery for a while.
- Became assistance store keeper in 1922.
- It was just a general store; it was the only one around those parts.
- Next year became store keeper at Brunswick Cannery.
- Then became store keeper at Rivers Inlet Cannery.
- In 1927 became bookkeeper for the Strathcona Cannery.
- Spent four years at Nootka Cannery as a accountant until 1934.
- Started at Phoenix Cannery in 1934 as a bookkeeper.
- Salmon were all hand butchered then by the Chinese.

- The cans were all hand filled by the Japanese women mostly.
- Mostly Japanese fishermen up until the war.
- The Japanese were very hard working people.
- Their business was to work hard and raise a family.
- At that time there wasn't that many White fishermen.
- At that time there was a Japanese fish contractor who dealt with the canneries and looked after everything.
- Started canning herring in 1944.
- Speaks on the Chinese labour contractor.
- The canneries paid him so much a case out of which he had to pay the labourers.
- Remembers as many as 74 canneries on the Coast.
- During 1930's the Japanese were all gillnetters.
- Just about all the Japanese during the 30's owned their own boat.
- Fished mostly five days then.
- Fish came in every morning and were processed right away.
- The fish were really fresh then.
- At that time the collectors went out and got the fish from gillnetters.
- The fishermen fished 20 hours a day, they didn't come into the canneries.
- The Phoenix had five or six collect boats that came in every day by noon.
- Explains the process of the fish getting from the boat to the inside of the cannery.
- Thinks sockeye was about 50¢ a piece then.
- All fish then was brought by the piece.
- Believes counting the fish was easier than using the scales.
- Tells funny story of collecting fish from a fishermen.
- A lot of the social conditions in those days consisted of drinking.
- Speaks on the barn dances in Steveston at that time.
- Steveston was dead during the winter season.
- Once we started herring, we first started canning them, then into the reduction plant we worked all year round.
- Companies didn't like the union coming in.
- We had some tough battles with them.
- In 1934 or 1935 don't believe the canneries were making a great profit.
- A case of sockeye with 96 half-pound flat cans in it, was around \$12-\$15.
- We had more hourly paid people than monthly paid people.

- There was no over time then.
- Once the union came in and the wages went up then the price of canned salmon went up accordingly.
- The better the machinery became, the more people were employed because the more fish were processed.
- The sanitations of the 1930's were pretty good.
- Every afternoon at the close of the days' operations, the machines were thoroughly washed and scrubbed and then they would turn the steam hose on them, really steam them down good.
- The smaller canneries were more likely to give out bonus than the larger ones. Explains why.
- The canneries had no lunch room then.
- Everybody went home for dinner or else you sat down on the nearest box you could find.
- The monthly people had a bunk house and a cook house where they all ate their meals.
- In the 20's up at Rivers Inlet you were not allowed to use any power boats for gillnetting.
- If you wanted to gillnet there, you rented a skiff or a Columbia River round-bottom boat from the cannery for which you paid \$25 for the season.
- You couldn't rent a net that was brand new or one that was one or two years old.
- The fishermen who worked for the Phoenix Cannery fished from Woodward's Slough down to the mouth of the River.
- There's not as many boats on the water today as there was 20 years ago.
- There was no pollution at all back in the 30's.
- We have had reduction plants since the 1920's.
- Speaks on the times when fishermen had to throw their fish away because the canneries had too many fish and wouldn't take any more.
- A.B.C. Packing Co. was founded in 1891 in London, England.
- Majority of its shareholders were people that lived in England.
- They appointed H. Bell-Irving Co. out here as managing agents.
- Bell-Irving was the first man who rounded up a shipment of canned salmon from Vancouver to London, England.
- The head office of A.B.C. Packing Co. was in England, but all fishing operations were out here.
- The company had at one time three canneries at Steveston.
- Speaks on the history of the A.B.C. Packing Co.

- Fish was exported to England mostly, sometimes to France and Italy.
- Mentions the labling process at the canneries.
- All canneries rent their machinery from American Can Companies.
- Mentions the Continental Can Company but they didn't get very far in B.C.
- It was cheaper to rent the machinery because it didn't require a large capital for the cannery.
- And the canneries could write off all the rentals against the costs of operation.
- Recalls the early fishing concessions the canneries had on the West Coast
- Names the different canneries on the West Coast.
- Talks on the Japanese saltery that salted dog salmon and herring.
- Speaks on the bad points of the bottom trollers.
- Discusses the American and Canadian fishing treaties and rights.
- Also discusses the buy-back program.
- Used to have 40-50 Chinese labourers at A.B.C. Packing Co. that were handled by a Chinese contractor.
- Believes the quality of salmon was better during the early 1900's than now.
- Salmon was fresher then, and much better when it was hand filled.
- Believes there's not as many people employed to-day as there was in the 1930's.
- Remembers the union coming in during the war when they were canning herring.
- In those days different canneries paid different prices for their fish.
- When the union came in it cost the companies more money because of the wage increases and different workers benefits.
- But then the canneries just raised their price of canned salmon more.
- Discusses the maintenance of the fish boats.