

HISTORY of the JACKSON/THEODORE CANNERY



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A Report Prepared for the Port of Friday Harbor

February 2026

Purpose

On Thursday, October 30, 2025, the Port of Friday Harbor purchased the property that includes the former Jackson/Theodore Cannery. The purpose of this report is to explore the history and cultural background of the property, including the cannery, and to assess its overall significance to local and regional history

Methodology

An examination of the history and cultural background of the property purchased by the Port of Friday Harbor was conducted from November 2025 to February 2026. The work entailed research into the geologic, natural, and cultural history of the property, and the construction of various buildings and establishment of multiple operations at the John C. Jackson/J. J. Theodore Cannery. The size, composition, and jobs of the cannery workers were explored. The overall significance to local and regional history was assessed.

Historical resources included historic maps and charts, title records, historic photographs, newspaper stories, and property records. Three oral histories were conducted with people involved with the history and operations of the cannery.

Product

This report, illustrated with reproductions of historic maps and photographs, summarizes the research to date. It includes pertinent references and makes recommendations for future study.

Preface

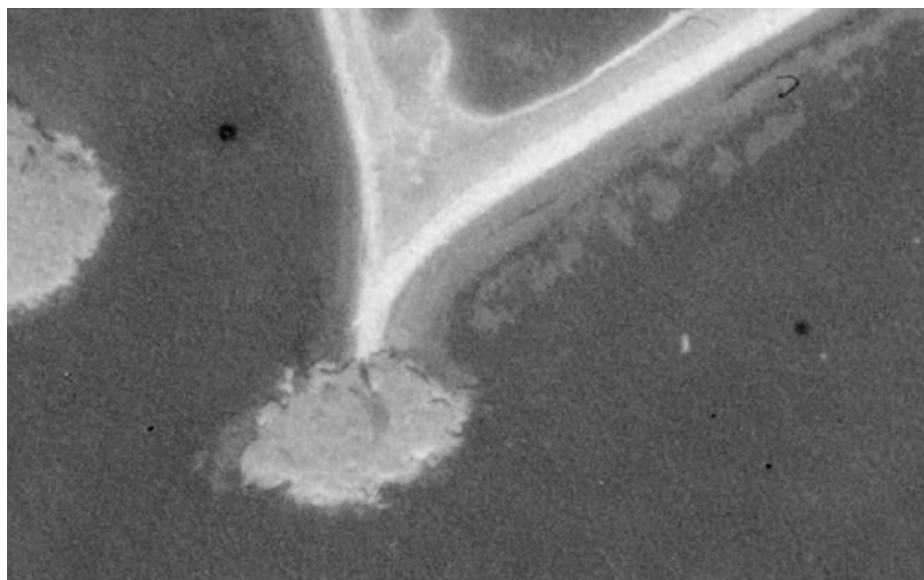
The area that encompasses Little Island, Argyle Lagoon, the spit out to the island, and Jackson Beach was formed over millennia by the currents shifting material from the Bald Hill bluffs. Indigenous peoples have gathered the rich resources of this area for several thousand years. In the mid nineteenth century, Euro Americans used the land for crops such as sheep and cattle and orchards. At the turn of the last century, the town of Argyle was formed around the nucleus of a post office and warehouse/store; soon a grist mill produced flour from barley and wheat and dried plums into prunes. Other developments, such as the establishment of a gravel quarry and a sawmill, further industrialized the area. In 1948, John C. Jackson bought the subject property and built a smokehouse for kippering and hand-packing salmon on Little Island, which he connected with a road to Argyle Spit. Two years later, he built Jackson Cannery and improved the road. The 40-50 workers were mostly women, who did all the hand packing and were paid per can. After slowing down due to competition from other canneries producing fresh frozen salmon, Jackson sold the property to J. J. Theodore in 1972. Theodore continued running the cannery, with both $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. canning lines. By 1981, the cannery employed some 60 workers. In the mid-1980s their products included salmon caviar, frozen salmon, and even dogfish processing. By the mid-1990s, however, operations slowed down and eventually ceased, and the cannery was closed. Since that time the property has been largely unused. The Port of Friday Harbor first considered purchasing the property in 2001.

Physical Setting

The John J. Jackson and J. J. Theodore Cannery is located on Little Island, at the end of the spit between what is now called Jackson Lagoon and Jackson's Beach. Roy D. McLellan, in *The Geology of the San Juan Islands* (1927), describes it as “a small rocky knob situated near the village of Argyle. It is no longer isolated for it is connected with San Juan Island by the long sandspits that enclose Argyle Lagoon.” It should be noted that the name of the lagoon has changed over time: Argyle Lagoon, Jones Lagoon, and Jackson Lagoon. McLellan stated that Little Island had an elevation of ten feet.

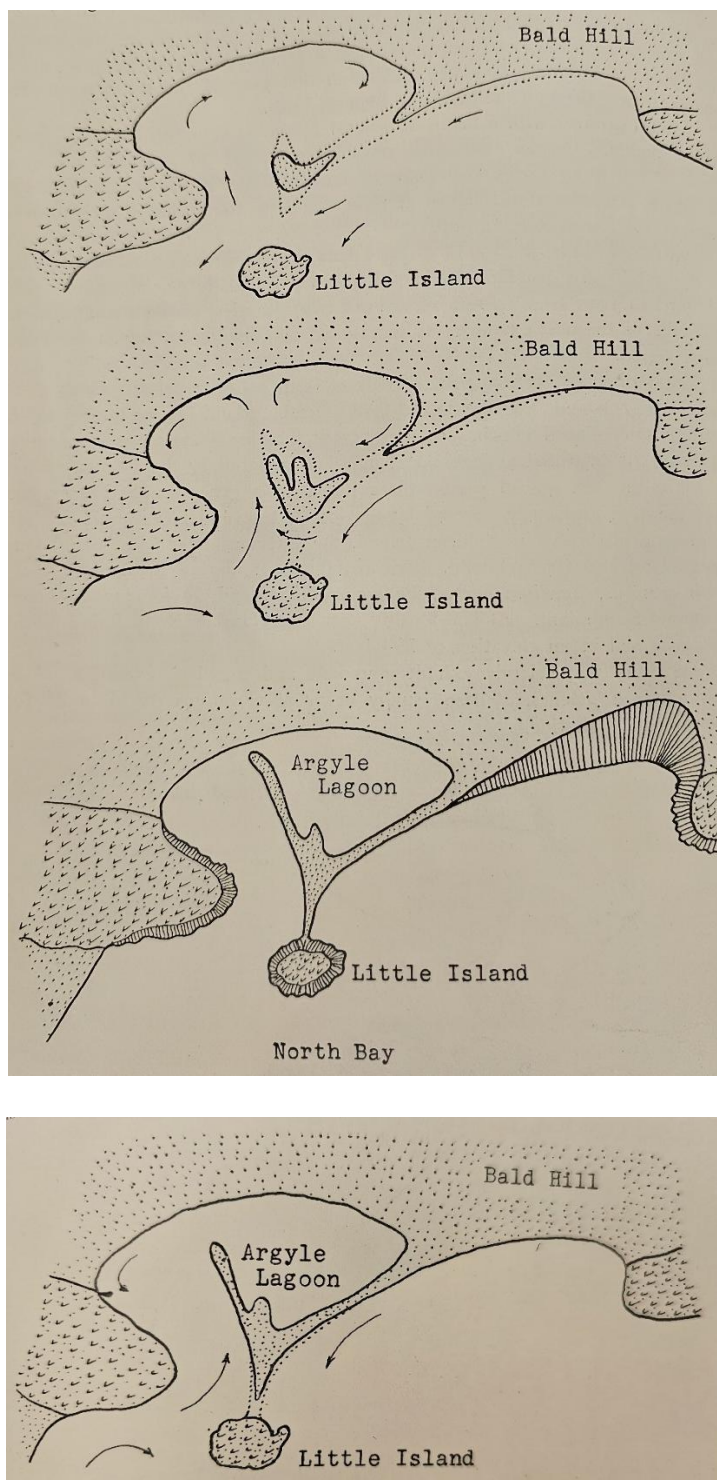


Little Island and Argyle Lagoon (courtesy of the San Juan Historical Museum 78497)



1932 aerial of Little Island and the sand spit (sjcgis.maps.arcgis.com)

By means of a series of illustrations, McLellan indicated the conjectural formation of the spit and the lagoon. The arrows indicate the predominant currents, which move the material that he maintained came from Bald Hill to form the spit, which is then attached to Little Island.

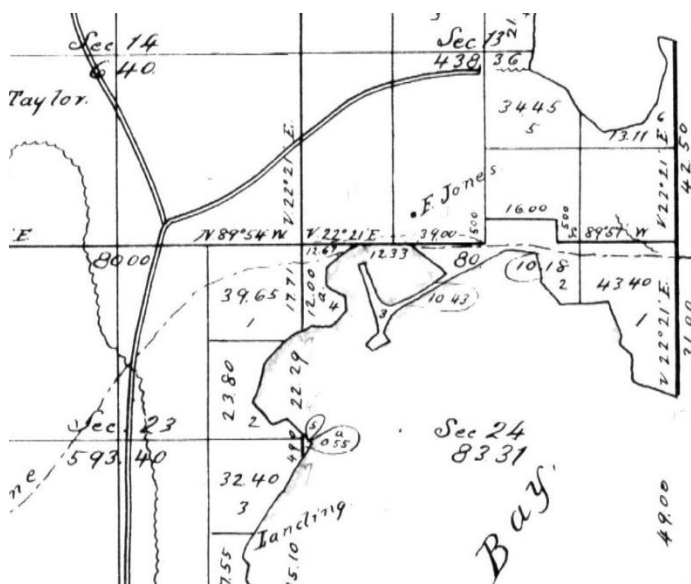


Formation of Argyle Lagoon and Spit (McLellan 1927 Figures 7,8,9, and 6)

The earliest written record of the area was when George Gibbs together with Henry Custer of the US Northwest Boundary Survey conducted a brief geological survey of the area in 1860.

Feb 26th Saty Took boat with Mr Custer & went to the terraced hill called Park Mtn. Dredged in & [?] the lagoon at its foot—mud & sand & but little adult. Rocks everywhere trap—The terraces on this hill [?] as horizontal as well characterized as at Mt. Finlayson. Like they [?] the south & the [?] of the hill is steep—a number of granite boulders on the south face of the hill--& others lodged on the bare rocks on the bay—As there is no granite on the islands they must have been transported from a distance, probably the northward marine range. A heavy [?] out of the face of this hill which is formed of sand & gravel. [?] say 4500 feet high [note: “?” indicates illegible word or words]

In the *Journal* of Robert Firth, the last manager of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Belle Vue Sheep Farm, calls the area “ball hill,” probably a corruption of “Bald Hill” (the area where the gravel pit is now); the Farm used both this area and Park Hill to the southwest as winter stations for sheep.



Detail, Township 35 North, Range 3 West, 1874 Township and Range Survey
(Bureau of Land Management General Land Office cadastral sheets)

In the 1874 Township and Range Survey to determine the layout of the Public Land System in the islands, John M. Whitworth surveyed along the east/west line between section 13 and 24 of Township 35 North, Range 3 West. After leaving the “fence of Fred Jones Field,” he ascended a “high steep prairie” along the edge of a “very steep & high sliding bluff,” eventually coming to Jones’ cabin. He summarized the area as “Soil 1st quality prairie land high & sidling [middling?] soil, sandy. Good pasture land, this prairie is known as “Bald Hill”.” For the corresponding meanders along the shore, he noted a sand spit and tide marsh, as well as a “rocky knoll at the end of sand spit.”



Detail, 1897 US C&GS T-sheet, indicating Little Island

In the 1897 US Coast and Geodetic Survey supervised by Captain C. C. Gilbert, the *Narrative Report* noted

West ward from the bluff [Bald Hill] is a long gravel spit—probably composed largely of material from the bluff. The spit extends to a small island, rocky and bare, and then makes an acute angle toward the shore.

The spit encloses a large lagoon, which owing to the small outlet never runs bare.

There is a shallow bay to westward of the small island and spit: most of it is bare at low tide.

These would later be called Little Island and Jones Lagoon, after Fredrick Jones who homesteaded in the area, or Argyle Lagoon, after the settlement in 1873 of Argyle at the south part of North Bay. The survey placed a marker on Little Island, which was indicated on the “T sheet”—topographic map—for the area (Descriptive Report 2301, *Pear Point to Eagle Point*). This marker was moved in 1978 at the request of J. J. Theodore, who wanted to expand the cannery.

Historical Context

There was undoubtedly Indigenous use and settlement of the area, particularly because of the rich resources of the lagoon. Roy Carlson reported on prehistoric sites at Argyle Lagoon (45-SJ-2 and 45-SJ-407 [“Argyle Lagoon West” or the “Willows Site”]).

Argyle Lagoon 45-SJ-2

This large site was tested by the UW Field School in 1951 under the direction of Carroll Burroughs (Carlson 1954, 1960). The excavation consisted of a series of disconnected test pits that revealed an upper shell midden and a lower cultural layer lacking shell. Smith (1907:383) noted that this site was 300 meters long by 60 meters wide. Gary Wessen (2005) conducted further excavations at what is probably another part of this same site although numbered 45-SJ-407. Wessen obtained three radiocarbon dates but these seem to date a later occupation since none of the artifact types from the previous excavations were found in his tests.

In October 2006 Amanda Taylor and Julie Stein reported on their sampling of four small areas of the site and collected two cores:

At both locations we found 10YR 3/1 very dark gray sandy silt throughout and dense shell deposits from approximately 20-50 cmbs [centimeters below surface]. At 20-30 cmbs in Core 2 we noted a medium-sized bone with cut marks that can be most closely identified as a floating rib of a harbor seal (*M[i]rounga angustirostris*).

The shell in Core 1 was dated to 2320-2120 BP (Before Present, set at 1950).

Euro American settlement began with the farm of Frederick “Fred” Jones (1835-1912), a German immigrant, who became an American citizen and claimed an 1884 homestead of 152.61 acres that included most of the southern shore of the peninsula. (The 1897 US Coast and Geodetic Survey mentions both Jone’s cabin and fenced field.) Jones married Ellen Thloynnock Yackship (1840-1918), a Mitchell Bay; together they raised eight children. There they had an orchard (which can be seen on the 1897 US C&GS T sheet) and ran sheep. After their deaths, the property passed to their children Sara Jones Lampard, Caroline Jones Dailey, William Jones, and Frederick Jones Jr.

Edward Warbass, one of the founders of Friday Harbor, homesteaded north and west of Bald Hill. In 1905 he sold some of this land to Benjamin Jensen, who, together with his four sons, operated a sawmill in Friday Harbor and then established a shipyard. In 1924 Benjamin's son Albert leased the property to two local men and a Seattle contactor for use as a gravel pit under the corporation San Juan Gravel Company. They operated until the 1930s. After lying idle for a period of 20 years or so, the Island Sand and Gravel began operations on the south side of Bald Hill. They sold their operations to Lafarge Corporation of North America, who continued to extract gravel until 1999, eventually turning the 300-foot Bald Hill into a sea-level pit. In the years leading up to the closure of the gravel pit, houses began to be built in the neighborhood.

In the late 19th century, Argyle, located across North Bay from the spit and lagoon, became a depot for agricultural products from San Juan Valley and the rest of the island. A post office, originally called "San Juan" that was moved from the Old Town near American Camp, was established there in 1873, and the small settlement of a handful of residences, surrounded by fruit orchards, included a wharf and warehouse. By 1886, there was enough local grain production to prompt a group of men from Port Townsend to establish a mill there. This three-story mill (with basement and superstructure for accessing equipment) was powered by steam and ground the various grains—barley, oats, and wheat—on millstones; later, it even processed split peas. The town of Argyle was platted in 1892 by Clarence M. Tucker, postmaster and one of the founders of the Argyle Milling Company. The plat encompassed four blocks of eight lots each. The mill closed in 1909 due to lack of business and the post office was closed in 1912. The town plat was eventually vacated in 1937.

In 1899 John L. Murray purchased the tidelands near Argyle Lagoon from the State of Washington. Murray joined with C. M. Tucker, who lived at nearby Argyle, to develop the potentially rich tide lands at North Bay. In 1909 the *Friday Harbor Journal* reported that "H. A. Armstrong found a large eastern oyster on his tideflats near Argyle," In 1909 the San Juan Islander reported that "H. A. Armstrong found a large eastern oyster on his tideflats near Argyle," possibly a survivor of the operation to seed eastern oysters in the San Juans. Like many of these operations, the North Bay/Argyle Lagoon did not last.

The sawmill, probably operated in the 1920 and 1930s, was on the west side of the bay by the lagoon. There are remains of a wood drying shed and several concrete foundations for the

machinery, as well as traces of timbers used to drag the logs that were rafted in the water waiting to be sawn.



View from Bald Hill showing Argyle Lagoon, Little Island, sawmill (on right), and Argyle
(courtesy San Juan Historical Museum 7877)

History of Canning in San Juan Islands

Indigenous peoples have been fishing in the Salish Sea for millennia. Salmon was the principal fish available to the Coast Salish peoples of the San Juan Islands. There are five types of Pacific salmon: Chinook, which is also called “king,” “spring,” and “tyee;” coho, also known as “silver;” sockeye, or “red;” pink, “humpback,” or “humpie;” and chum or “dog salmon.” In addition to differing in size and quality of flesh, these salmon have different life histories and migration patterns, and therefore different fishing methods were used to catch them. Chinook are present in the region throughout most of the year, and coho are here from spring through the fall. Both are caught by trolling, and the latter could have been caught through netting or harpooning in the few smaller streams in the islands. Sockeyes migrate via standard routes—principally Haro and Rosario Straits through the islands to the Fraser River—in midsummer. Together with pinks, which also migrate through the area in the summer, but only every other year, sockeye were largely taken by reef netting. Chum come later in the fall.

The principal means of the Coast Salish for fishing salmon is reef netting, whereby an artificial reef is produced to lead the migrating salmon into a net suspended between two boats. Indigenous fishers also used hook-and-line as well as gill nets. Euro Americans introduced fish traps—long lines of ‘fencing’ used to lead the salmon into the hearts, and then the pot of the trap—to the Salish Sea from the Columbia River area, the first being located at Point Roberts in 1880. At first the Coast Salish, mainly Lummi, tolerated the imposition of this new type of fishing in their traditional fishing grounds. However, the Euro American owners soon began placing their traps so as to intercept the fish before travelling into the reef nets, as well as forcing the Lummi from their nearby fish camps. While the epicenter of this conflict was the rich fishing grounds near Point Roberts, which directly intercepted the sockeye runs to the Fraser River, fish traps were built on other prime reef net sites in the San Juan Islands, including Open Bay off Henry Island, and Andrews Bay and Pile Point off San Juan Island. Until it was banned by state law in 1934, traps produced huge quantities of fish to supply the canneries. Purse seining, in which schools of salmon are entrapped in a large ‘purse’ net, and gill netting, in which a long, floating net was strung out to catch salmon by their gills, were the two other principal means of capturing the salmon. After fish traps were banned in 1934, reef netting, with modern boats and gear, was reintroduced to the islands. Purse seining, gillnetting, and reef netting emerged as the principal sources of salmon for the canneries.

People have been preserving fish for a long time in the San Juan Islands. Indigenous peoples dried and smoked salmon over open fires. Euro Americans used smoke houses to produce both hard and soft smoked salmon. One form of smoking salmon was kippering, particularly for Chinook. This light-colored fish was cut into one-pound pieces—about six inches long and three inches wide—and soaked in a vegetable dye to give it a reddish appearance—a concession to public expectation. The pieces were placed on trays of ½” wire mesh; these trays were placed on racks that could be wheeled into the smokers. They were smoked for 16–18 hours over a medium fire and then, the fire having been fed, they were back for 25–35 minutes at 250–275°F. The product was perishable, so it had to be refrigerated if kept for a long time.

Canning became the principal method of preserving seafood during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It began on the West Coast in 1864 when a cannery was established on the Sacramento River. After depletion of the runs there, in 1866, the operators moved north to the Columbia River in Washington Territory. Only a few canneries—mainly in the southern portion of Puget Sound—operated in the Salish Sea region prior to 1890. With the introduction and subsequent success of fish traps in the Port Roberts area, a cannery was built at Semiahmoo in 1891, followed by another at Point Roberts two years later. By 1900 there were 19 canneries, six of which were in Anacortes and 11 in Whatcom County, another at Point Roberts, three each at Blaine and Fairhaven, and one each at Chuckanut and Lummi Island. In 1905, the *Pacific Fisherman* noted that there were 139 canneries in Alaska and Puget Sound.

The first cannery in the islands was the Island Packing Company (IPC), established in 1894 near the current ferry dock in Friday Harbor. After improvements in 1896 and 1898, the Pacific American Fisheries Company (PAF) bought the IPC, renaming it the Friday Harbor Packing Company (FHPC), and built a new cannery building 50 by 100 feet and two stories high. In 1908, William Shultz, George J. Willey, and W. E. Persell incorporated the FHPC and leased the facility from the PAF. Four years later, the FHPC rebuilt the cannery into a huge, 300' x 250' structure. William Shultz ran the cannery until his death in 1925; George Willey took over as principal owner and manager until his retirement in 1935. The cannery closed intermittently in the 1950s. It was used for canning peas and strawberries during late 1950s and early 1960s, and was closed permanently in 1964.

Soon after the construction of the Friday Harbor Packing Company, several canneries were established on Lopez. On October 23, 1895, R. C. Kinleyside, J. A. Gould, and C. A.

Phelps filed for articles for incorporation for the Oceanic Canning Company, proposing to build a cannery at Richardson, Lopez Island. The buildings included a 40-by-100-foot house for storing the nets, a 30-by-60-foot mess house, and a wharf that measured 50 by 200 feet. Several more canneries were built on Lopez Island about the same time. In 1901, Irene Weeks sold land to “Anacortes parties” for a 40-by-75-foot cannery, principally for fruit, but also clams and crab. In 1907, S. M. Bugge, who had taken over the Island Packing Company in Friday Harbor, organized and incorporated the Tuana Packing Company on Lopez in 1907. The principal pack were clams, which were obtained from the surplus brought to Friday Harbor by indigenous peoples from British Columbia, as well as from Port Townsend.

Two other canneries—the Hodgson-Graham and the Hidden Inlet Cannery—were built at Richardson, Lopez Island, in 1913. The Hodgson-Graham Cannery, also called the Salmon Bank Cannery, was built in time for the fishing season that year; the two-line cannery with a capacity of 1,400 cans a day, the main building was 80 by 100 feet with an adjacent building measuring 40 by 66 feet; there was also a boarding house for workers. The Hidden Inlet Cannery, owned by a company of Englishmen and managed by F. J. Comeau, was built in the summer of 1913. The cannery itself, constructed on rock, was 30 by 150 feet, and ran two lines (although in 1914 the May 14 edition of *The San Juan Islander* noted that it would only operate one line that season). Apparently, it shut down in 1922, soon after the Hodgson-Graham Cannery burned down.

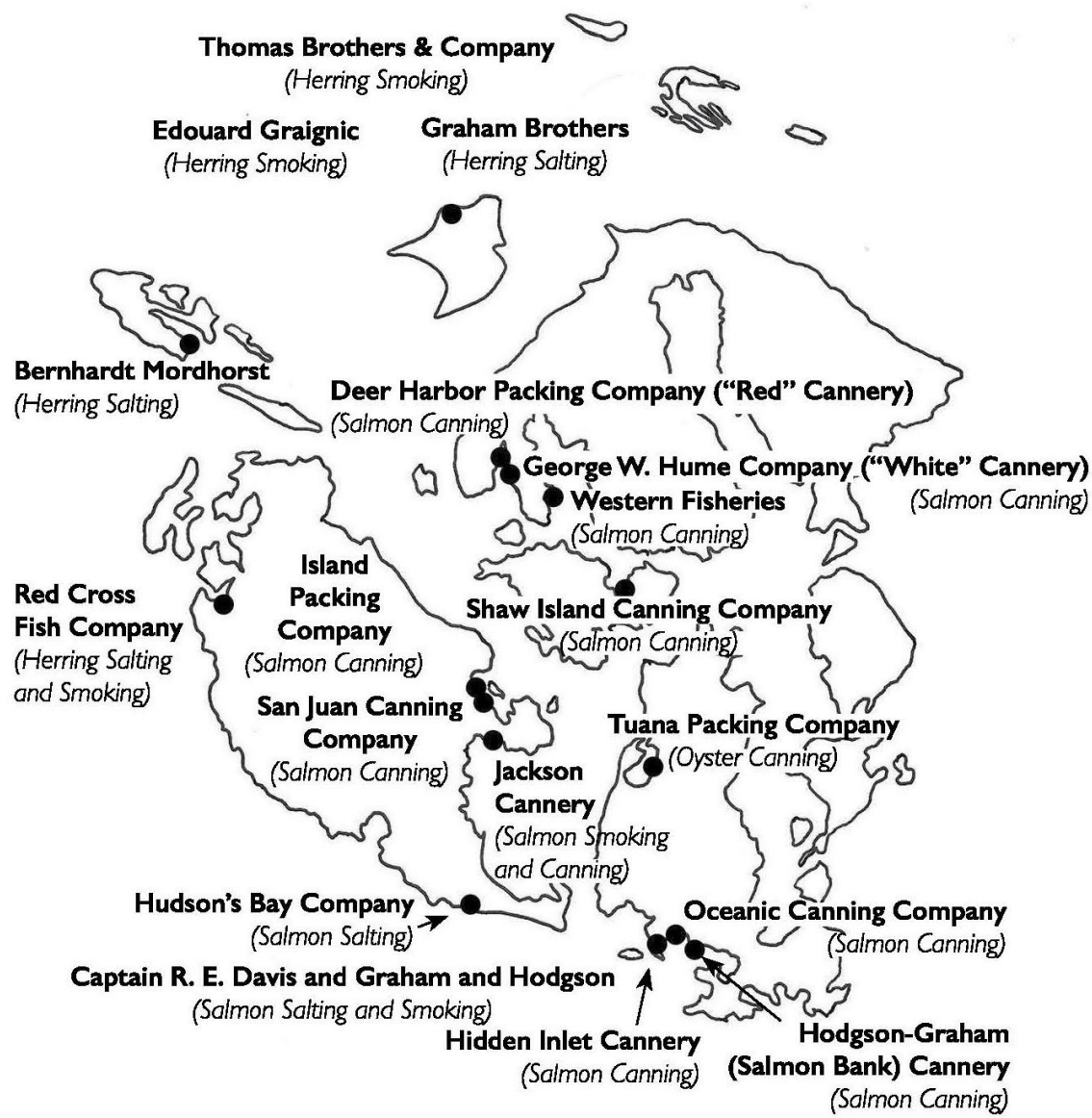
The Tyee Fish Company, which incorporated in East Sound, Orcas Island, in 1912, operated fish traps on the west side of Orcas Island. In 1913 they contemplated erecting a cannery near Double Island in West Sound. William J. Norton of Deer Harbor, one of their partners, bought property (located near Camp Four Winds) as well as water rights from them; these interests were sold in September 1913, to the Deer Harbor Packing Company. In 1918 Northern Pacific Fisheries Company built a cannery on land purchased from William Norton and Henry Cayou at West Sound. Western Fisheries was operating this cannery when it burned down in August 1920; the next year, Western Fisheries leased the Deer Harbor Fisheries cannery.

Around 1914 Henry Cayou built a facility on the west shore of Deer Harbor, called the “Red Cannery” to distinguish it from the “White Cannery” across the harbor. The cannery was first operated under the name of *The Orcas Island Canning Company*; later it became known as the *Deer Harbor Packing Company* and the *Orcas Packing Company*. A 1943 real estate contract lists, in addition to the cannery facility itself, an office, blacksmith shop, boiler room,

superintendents building, a large rooming house, and a cook house. Laborers included Chinese, Filipinos, and Hawaiians. In the 1940s there were several liens upon the cannery for equipment and materials; eventually the mortgage company foreclosed on Joseph N. Dion and Sidney Blutreich, co-partners of Deer Harbor Packing Company, and the property, then owned by Sigmund Einstoss and the Orcas Packing Company, underwent a sheriff's sale against.

Around 1917 William J. Norton and the Northern Pacific Fisheries built a cannery on the east shore of Deer Harbor for the George W. Hume Company, subsequently called the "White Cannery" to distinguish it from Henry Cayou's "Red Cannery." The Deer Harbor Fisheries Company was packing salmon at its cannery in 1919. A year after the Western Fisheries cannery at West Sound burned down in August 1920, they leased the Deer Harbor Fisheries cannery, which was then owned by the Yokohama Specie Bank. The cannery must have closed down and been demolished several years later.

Most of the canneries in the San Juan Islands had ceased operations by 1949 when John Jackson constructed his cannery. The Friday Harbor Packing Company continued operations into the 1960s, but soon closed, with the structures being demolished in the 1970s. This left the Jackson Cannery as the sole remaining cannery operation in the San Juans.



Canneries in the San Juan Islands (Boyd C. Pratt, Island Fishing 2024)

The John C. Jackson Cannery

John Cogswell Jackson (1911-2001) was born in Sunnyside, Yakima, Washington. He moved to San Juan Island in 1930 and three years later married Merle McCutcheon (1914-1997). John purchased property on Egg Lake Road in 1933, where they ran a mink farm; the animals were fed with offal from salmon canneries. As early as 1946 the Jacksons were involved in kippering salmon. On July 19, 1948, the articles of incorporation for John C. Jackson, Inc were filed by John C. Jackson, Merle B. Jackson, and Elmon A. Geneste and approved by the Washington Secretary of State. Article III states that:

The object of this corporation and the business in which it proposes to engage is the acquisition of fish or other seafood, either by catching the same or by purchase, the preparation of the same for human consumption either by dressing or other processing, the operation of machinery, gear and other equipment necessary thereto; ...and to acquire and operate boats either for the catching or transportation of fish, either in natural condition or processed.

Included in the object of incorporation was dealing with “all kinds of property, real, personal or mixed” and the company, run by family members, dealt in many real estate transactions.



John and Merle Jackson (Good Old Days)

After developing the salmon cannery, Jackson went on to develop the San Juan Golf Club. He divorced Merle in 1973. The John C. Jackson Corporation was dissolved on April 10, 1985, by directors Jay T. and Merle Jackson. In 2001, John C. Jackson died in San Jacinto, California, at the age of 89.

On March 27, 1946, John and Merle Jackson bought property in Section 13 and Lot 3 of Section 24, Township 24 N, Range 3 West, from Florence Steinle, “a single woman.” The portion of Lot 3 included Argyle Spit and Little Island. Jackson also purchased the tidelands in front of Lots 3, 4, and 5, Section 33, as well as some further east on Pear Point, amounting to 104.99 lineal chains. (Following its incorporation in 1948, John and Merle conveyed their portion of Lot 3 to John C. Jackson, Inc., noting that “This conveyance shall also be a bill of sale of all personal property, machinery, equipment and supplies, situated in or upon structures located on the afore-mentioned lands.”)



Little Island with Jackson Smokehouse (courtesy San Juan Historical Museum)

That year (1946), Jackson built a smokehouse for kippering and hand-packing salmon on what was known as Little Island, connected to Argyle Spit at low tide. A September 12, 1946, article in the *Journal*, under the headline *Kippered Salmon Plant Being Developed*, noted that

During the early summer Mr. Jackson constructed a small but modern cannery building on his property south of town in which he is packing a special and high

grade of kippered salmon. He says at present he can pack about 100 cases per day, and has standing orders for all he can pack.

Apparently, the cannery was used for other purposes, because a November 20, 1947, *Journal* article reported that the Berger & Son Company had leased Jackson's facility for the winter and were processing scallops there. The article noted that 3½ tons of scallops were hauled to Seattle by James Brown and that there was a "large crew of men and women working daily to get the scallops ready for market."

A November 10, 1949, article in the *Journal* described the growth of cannery operations. Telling how the Jackson at first experimented with kippering salmon in their home, they eventually built a cannery facility and expanded operations to a "regular canning business." The article went on to describe how an average of 30 people packed 20,000 half-pound cases of salmon that year. Interestingly, the article claimed that most of the salmon were obtained from reefnet fishermen. This facility operated until its replacement with a new cannery the next year.

In 1950 construction began on a new cannery, reached by an improved road to Little Island. A *Journal* article in March noted that Wilfred Rouleau was leveling the site, and on July 27th it reported that:

Work is progressing rapidly on the new John Jackson salmon cannery, south of town, with the expectation that all equipment will be installed and ready for operation by August 1st. The new building is several times larger than the old cannery and is modern in every respect.

Another person who worked on the construction of the cannery was Oliver Sandwith (1911-1992), continuing as canning foreman for the next nine years.

The 40-50 workers were mostly women (at a 3-1 ration) and they did all of the hand packing and were paid per can. Cannery operations lasted as long as there was a catch; in August of 1966, for instance, Monday and Tuesday night catches of 100-600 fish per boat were brought to the cannery, and the crew work until 2:30am to process the catch.

Workers at the Jackson Cannery, along with the Friday Harbor Cannery while it still operated, were initially represented by the Cannery Workers Union, Local 20754. Originally

established in 1933 in Seattle by Filipino cannery workers, the A.F.L. Cannery Workers' and Farm Laborers' Union eventually merged with the C. I. O. Cannery Workers Union No. 19, which had been chartered by the United Fishermen Union. In 1939 they published notice in the *Friday Harbor Journal* that they had entered into a working agreement with the Friday Harbor Canning Company for the 1938-9 canning season. The Union continued to hold meetings and elect officers through the 1950s and were known for their donations to local causes. By the time that J. J. Theodore purchased the property, the workers there were no longer unionized.

The J. J. Theodore Cannery

Jackson put the cannery and its property up for sale in early 1971. This included 3,000 feet of the peninsula with a sand beach as well as 57.12 chains (3,770 feet) of tidelands and a 150' by 200' building on concrete floor. On March 25, 1972, John G. Jackson, Incorporated sold the cannery with its equipment (see *Appendix* for list) and the land and tidelands, to John J. Theodore.

John Joseph Theodore (1917-2010) was born in New York City. He earned a degree in economics and business from the University of Washington in 1946 and established several businesses, including the Northwest Trading Company and Okinawa Plywood Corporation, and managed garages and parking lots in downtown Seattle, in addition to eventually running the salmon cannery. He incorporated the John J. Theodore Company on January 20, 1961, with the purpose of canning and freezing salmon. The company headquarters were in Seattle, where John and his wife Georgiana were the President and Vice President, respectively, along with Secretary Richard H. Riddle and Treasurer Stimson Bullitt. The corporation was dissolved on November 29, 2000.

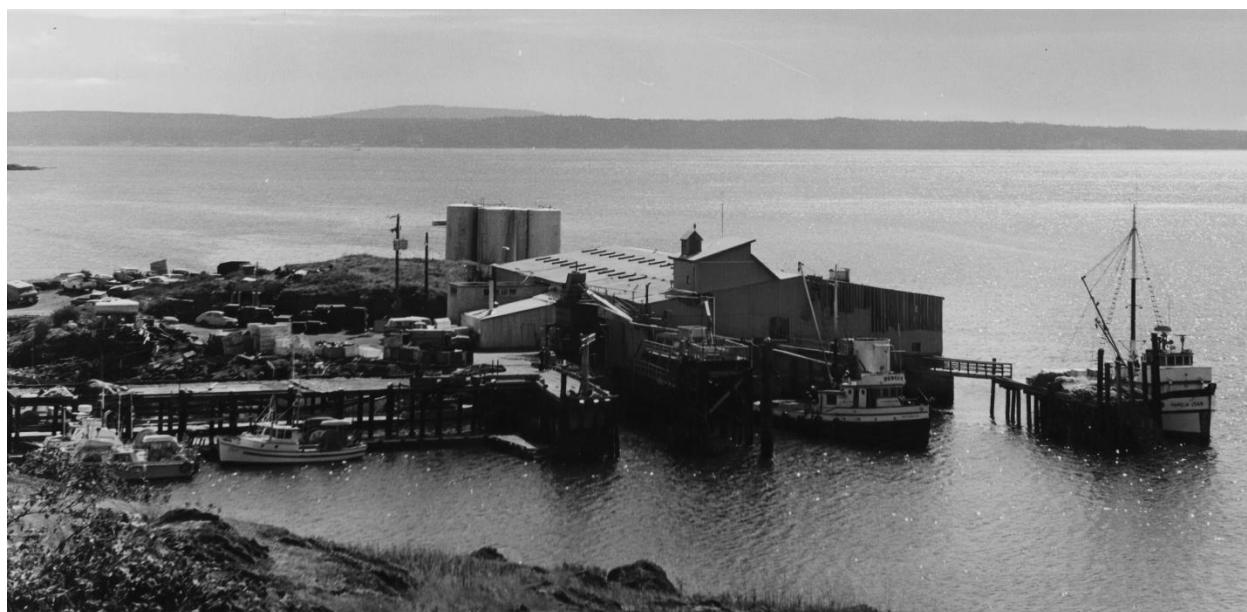


John J. Theodore (courtesy Holly Finan)

The canning season usually started in July of each year, coincident with the opening of the fishing season. In November 1972 the *Orcas Island Booster* reported that the 1/4 and 1/2 can lines were closed for the season, but fresh salmon was being processed for shipping. The article

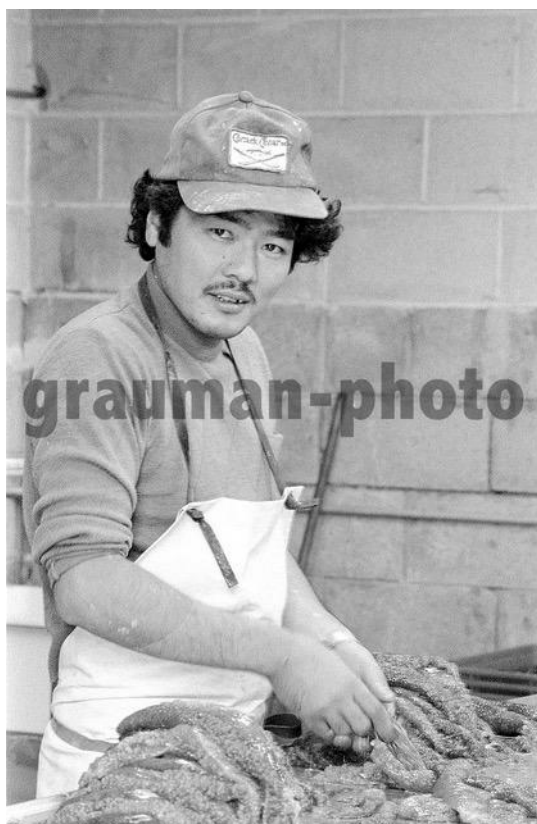
states that the silver run was small that year, and that “Most runs [were] about 2/3 Chum and 1/3 Silver, about 1,500 pounds per day.” The work force depended upon the size of seasonal catch: in 1983, Cecil Beauchamp, the general manager, noted that they had hired 148 workers for the season; the next year the caption to an *Islands’ Sounder* August 15th photo noted 75-80 workers.

A year after the purchase, the Boldt Decision changed salmon fishing in Washington State. In 1973, 13 western Washington tribes brought suit against the State of Washington regarding their treaty rights to fish. In February 1974 federal district court Judge George Boldt decided that the wording of the treaties guaranteed to the tribes an allocation of salmon, which he set as 50%. In the period from 1974 to 1978, the Boldt Decision was challenged in court 35 times. After lackadaisical enforcement by the State of Washington, in July of 1978 Judge Boldt stepped in and assumed jurisdiction over the fishery. Finally, in 1979, the United States Supreme Court reversed its 1976 decision not to hear an appeal and upheld the Boldt Decision, with some modifications. The State of Washington, which was charged with managing the resource, had to comply. The local reaction among white fishermen was one of outrage; at one point they prevented the Washington State Ferry *Kaleetan* from leaving the Friday Harbor landing by blocking its course with their gill net boats, and photos of protesting boats were featured in the *Seattle Times*. Conflicting information was received from various sources on how the Boldt Decision affected cannery operations.



J. J. Theodore Cannery (courtesy Holly Finan)

In 1977, the cannery expanded their products to include salmon caviar. Contracting with the Cossack Company in Seattle, the facility bought dog, silver, and king salmon and removed their eggs, which they then placed in containers. A float plane would then fly the 500–1200-pound load from the Port of Friday Harbor to Kenmore, where it would be transported to the Cossack Company for processing. Each of the containers held about 45 pounds of eggs, and there are roughly 2,000 eggs per pound. In 1978 the J. J. Theodore Company requested that the marker for Station Little Island, placed during the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1897, be moved so that the hill could be lowered in anticipation of expansion of the Cannery building.



Egg Technician and Marty Castle (courtesy Tom Grauman)

The Theodore Cannery was featured in a “*Pictorial*” insert in the *Seattle Times* edition of Sunday, October 8, 1978, which included a description and several photos of the cannery production as well as fishing operations. The narrative spotlighted Marty Castle, who started as a bookkeeper for the cannery and worked her way up to plant supervisor—apparently the only

female superintendent on the West Coast. Three tenders owned by the company gathered the catch from Point Roberts, Mackaye Harbor on Lopez Island, and Fish Creek at the south end of Griffin Bay, where boats brought their catch from Salmon Bank off the south coast of San Juan Island. With that year's focus on fresh fish, the article emphasized that no pughing or spiking occurred in the transfer of fish so that the salmon remained unmarred. One of the photos shows several "Japanese technicians" grading eggs; the caption noted that roe from chum salmon were bigger than those from sockeye and were favored in Japan. Another newspaper article at the time noted that the cannery was closed until 1st week of January 1979, for "dogfish processing."



J. J. Theodore Cannery (courtesy Holly Finan)

The caption to an aerial photo in *The Island's Sounder* dated Wednesday, July 15, 1981 ("READY FOR ACTION") talked about the July 4th opening of that year's commercial fishing season. The article noted that the cannery's new freezing and storage systems were "checked and operational," and went on to describe the freezing process:

A blast-freezing chamber takes fresh salmon to minus-60 degrees F, and, following glazing and boxing, they are stored at minus-40 in two permanent freezer vans, or loaded aboard a mobile van for shipment.

The salmon catch in the years in the early 1980s varied considerably: 0.466 million fish in 1980, 1.29 in 1981, 2.87 in 1982, and then falling to 0.370 in 1983, which was blamed on an El Nino that sent the fish north of Vancouver Island. Surprisingly—because predictions were dire—the catch jumped to 1.6 million in 1984, and the cannery had to hire twice the number of workers from the year before. They processed some 300,000 pounds of fish, compared to 50,000 in 1983.

But this also produced a crisis in housing cannery workers, with many of them pitching tents on the beach and using the new constructed shower facilities at the Port. Near the end of the season, the Town of Friday Harbor proposed doubling the Cannery's water rates. Although this measure was deferred, it did shake up the economic situation.

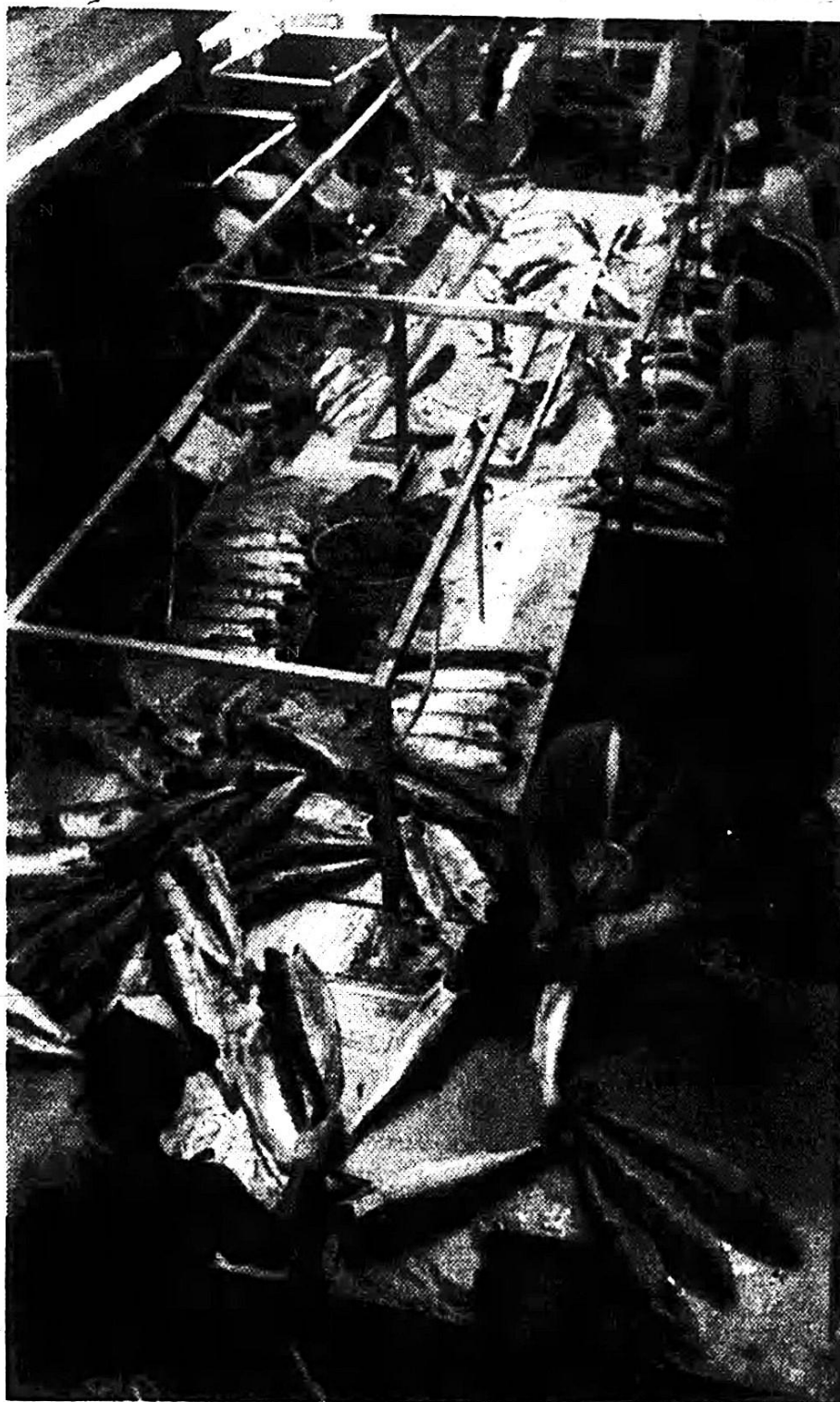
The next year, 1985, was a bumper year for sockeye salmon: U.S. fisherman took an estimated 3 million, while Canadians were expected to take another 7.5 million out of a run of some 14 million fish. One local fisherman reported that he had earned \$63,000 in one day with a haul of 43,000 pounds of salmon. All this was reported in August, with the pinks, who run every two years, just starting to come through the islands. The consequence was a very busy time for the cannery. Jim Theodore, son of John J. and operator of Friday Harbor Seafoods, predicted that the cannery would process some 3 million pounds of sockeye, coho, chum and pink. He said that the cannery was of capable of handling 100,000 pounds of fresh or frozen salmon and canning another 130,000 pounds daily. Theodore went on to say that during the peak three-to-five-week canning period some 110 workers were employed, dropping down to 75 during the rest of the season. In addition, during the post salmon season, bottom fish such as cod and sole are canned there. Wages started at \$5.50 an hour, with most employees earning \$8 per hour plus overtime. About 60 percent of the workers were women. Most of gillnetted fish supplied to the cannery were from local boats, as opposed to only 2 of the 20 purse seiners.



Steel Retort with Can Baskets (courtesy Holly Finan)

During the mid-1980s, there was a proposed farmed salmon operation in Griffin Bay, Sea Farm. Although the cannery supported the prospect of processing farmed salmon, locals opposed the project, and it eventually died.

The Islands' Sounder, August 15, 1984 Page 7



The J. J. Theodore Cannery in Friday Harbor is in full swing now that the fishermen are able to get in a couple of days a week. About 75-80 workers are keeping busy at the cannery processing the fresh fish.

—Photo by Jo Bailey

In 1986, Friday Harbor Seafoods ran into financial difficulties paying the roughly \$100,000 it owed to the Washington State Department of Revenue. In July the State posted a notice of revocation on the Cannery's fence. Negotiations with the State, as well as private contractors such as Royal Pacific Fisheries and Aquarius Seafoods, Inc., continued into the fall, with a settlement of \$67,643 in debts occurring just before the end of the year.

Although many of the cannery workers were island residents, a large portion came for the seasonal jobs and had to find temporary housing while they were working there. The J. J. Theodore Company came under scrutiny in 1989 with concerns about housing conditions for these workers. This was brought to light in July when a fire spread through an old barge that was being used for housing. Luckily, none of the 16 occupants were hurt, but it not only left many workers without lodging but also highlighted sub-standard seasonal housing conditions in general. Many workers had to live in tents pitched on private property.

In March 1992 the J. J. Theodore Company leased the cannery to Pacific Gem Seafood Company, which was a joint venture comprised of Nichimo, Inc. and Pacific Basin Enterprises, Inc. All companies were registered with Washington State. In addition to the structure ("except for the living quarters in the southwest corner of the second floor"), land, and tidelands, there is a list of equipment (see "Exhibit B" below), which was divided into "Fresh Salmon/Canning" (including a dressing/gutting machine, and canning and glazing/freezing equipment), "Salmon Roe" (agitators and brine maker), "Salmon Portioning" (processing tables and tubs), "Crab" (band saws, scoring machines, scales, and packing lime), and "Miscellaneous" (forklifts, pumps, etc.). Two vehicles are listed: a flatbed truck and a "Gut" truck. From 1992 to 1995, the company solicited both crab and salmon processors, at \$8/hour.

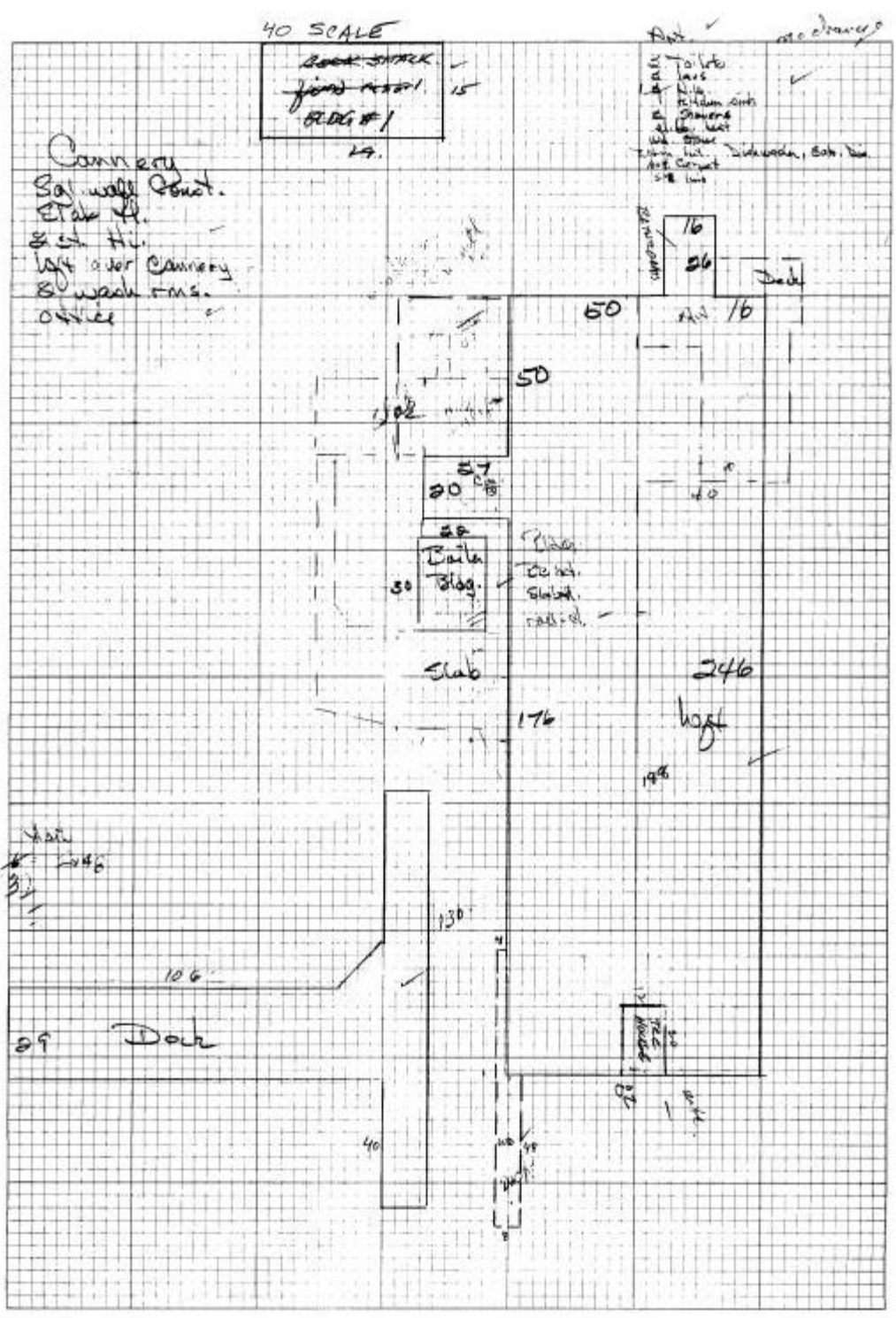
This lease, however, could not stem the tide of personal and economic forces that led to the eventual closure of the cannery. Several factors combined to force the closure: the steady decline in the number of salmon as well as the increasing regulation of the fishing season. (The effect of the Boldt Decision on salmon supplies is hard to assess because of varying sources.) Theodore ended up going as far north as Alaska and as far south as the Columbia River for fish.) The Town of Friday Harbor also raised rates for water usage. The company explored other uses of the cannery building and its surrounding land, even drawing up architectural plans for converting the structure to condos with a yacht basin. The passage of the Shoreline Management

Act and increased restrictions through land use zoning, as well as regulation of the use of the tidelands, stymied the attempts to develop the property into something other than fish processing. This was exacerbated by the growing political influence of the neighborhood overlooking the property, particularly after the closure of the LaFarge gravel pit: growing home construction produced neighbors who were no longer willing to tolerate industrial activities in their viewshed.

In 1995, the 58-foot cannery tender *Rover* sank at the cannery. A year later, after having been raised, it was rafted north to Yakutat, Alaska. The cannery ceased operations around that time.



Can Labels (courtesy Holly Finan)



San Juan County Assessor Drawing of Cannery (SJC Assessor website)

Adjacent Lands

The University of Washington leased Argyle Lagoon, which was tidelands property, from 1965, purchased the property in 1984, and now manages Argyle Lagoon as one of the five Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WADFW) fisheries preserves established in 1990, known collectively as the “San Juan Islands Biological Preserves.” This 14-acre property includes all of the Argyle Lagoon tidelands (the 12.3 acres tidelands are classified as “oysterlands” by the State) as well as part of a tidal creek, and a 1.7-acre upland parcel that borders on Argyle Lagoon as well as on Pear Point Road.

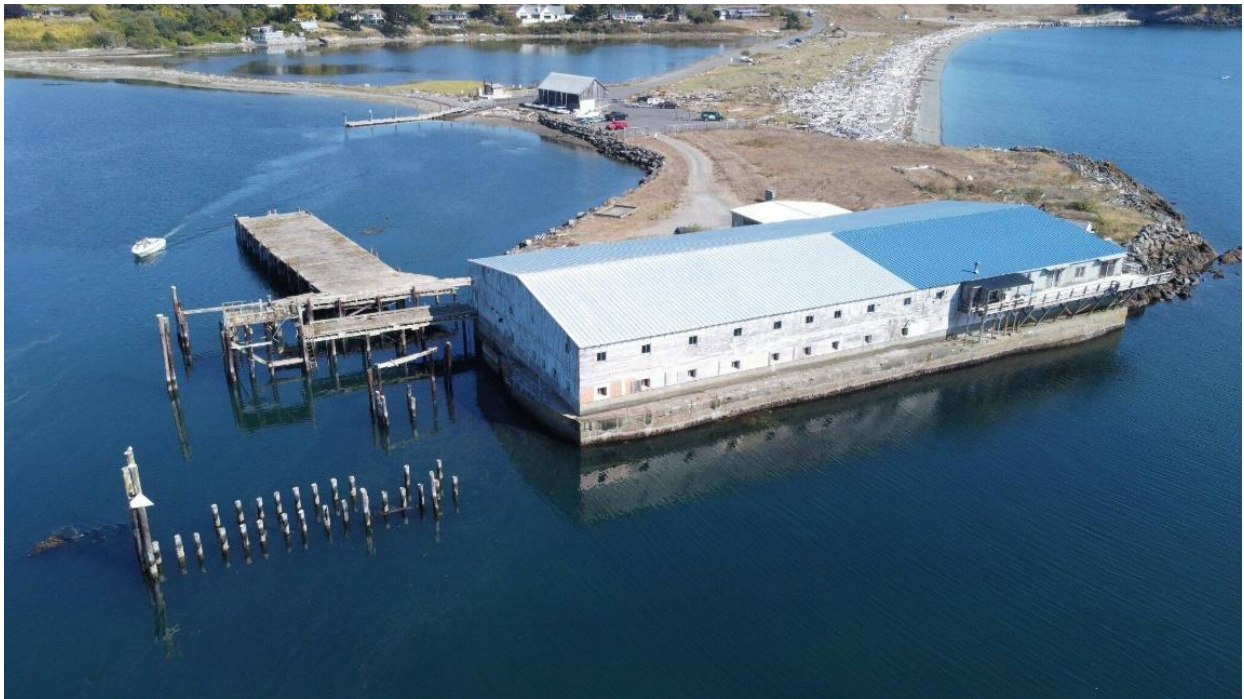
In 1996, the Port of Friday Harbor purchased Jackson Beach and the boat launch at the end of Argyle Spit. The Port currently allows launch access to commercial kayak companies as well as public boat and kayak launches.

The last employees of the LaFarge gravel pit were laid off in 1999. In 2006 the Lafarge Corporation of North America donated the 55-acre former gravel pit (commonly known as “The Gravel Pit”) to the San Juan Island Park & Recreation District for eventual development of a public park. San Juan County kept the eastern part of Jackson Beach as a public barge landing site; by agreement, landings are limited to three per year (Jackson’s Beach Barge Access, San Juan County Public Works Department, Policy and Procedure Directive 2006-03). In 2023, the San Juan County Department of Environmental Stewardship and the Marine Resources Committee removed 117 creosote pilings that made up the old gravel operations pier at Jackson’s Beach.

Sale of the Cannery

In 2001 Theodore put the cannery and property, which included the two-acre spit of land as well as 1,180 feet of shoreline and ownership of the tide lands, up for sale, asking \$5,000,000. At the time, the Port of Friday Harbor included the purchase of this property in their Comprehensive Plan. However the Port did not have the funds to pay that price. In 2004, the Port used a rural feasibility grant to explore options for use if the property were it to be purchased. At that time (2004), the property was assessed at \$2,169,950 and listed for \$3.2 million.

In October 2025 the Port of Friday Harbor purchased the cannery structures and surrounding 2.14 acres for \$1.44 million. The Port conducted extensive photo documentation of the site and exterior and interior of the Cannery.



Aerial photo of Cannery (courtesy Port of Friday Harbor)

Significance

The Jackson/Theodore Cannery is significant to the natural and cultural history of the area and the San Juan Islands. Its location was an important factor in its history from the time of John C. Jackson's smoking facility to the construction and modification of the cannery building. The building is significant as the last remaining fish cannery in the San Juan Islands. Although no longer filled with the machinery used for salmon canning, roe processing, and freezing, the structure itself is largely intact from the time when it was an operating facility. Located next to Jackson Beach, the Argyle Spit, and Jackson Lagoon, all of which are significant recreational and educational sites, the Cannery offers a unique opportunity for the potential reuse of a historic structure for economic development, public educational, and/or recreational purposes.

Recommendations

There are two categories of recommendations: further documentation of the Cannery and its site; and studies needed to identify potential future uses.

Due to limitations of time and resources, this report could only review some of the historical material associated with the Jackson/Theodore Cannery. It is recommended to:

- Conduct research in regional archives.
- Identify historical Indigenous use of the property and its surroundings.
- Gather a comprehensive archive of maps, photographs, real estate deeds, business records, and governmental reports relating to the cannery and its history and operations.
- Research the influence of the Boldt Decision on cannery operations.
- Conduct more oral histories with people who worked there.
- Locate architectural and structural drawings of the Cannery building; if not available, do rough measured drawings.

Within the scope of the Port's goal of economic development, explore options for the repurposing of the structure, including as an educational and/or recreational facility:

- Conduct a structural and engineering analysis of the existing building.
- Study relevant federal, state, and county regulations for the site and its use in order to determine the potential for future uses.
- Explore options for development of the property through a needs assessment and a cost/benefit analysis of the repurposing of the existing site and structure.
- Analyze predicted sea level rise and make recommendations for mitigation.
- Evaluate the environmental benefits of removing the creosote pilings and decking of the wharf and consider options including grant funding for removal.
- Solicit input on future development options from the UW Labs, Island Rec, San Juan County, and nearby neighborhoods.
- Publicize the history and significance of the cannery and its site both virtually and through onsite interpretive signage.
- Prepare an essay for HistoryLink or a publication.

EXHIBIT A to REAL ESTATE CONTRACT

[March 25, 1972]

- 1—Cleaver Brocks Steam Boiler, 150 H.P.
- 1—Oildilt Steam Boiler, 60 H.P.
- 1—Hot Water Boiler, Upright submerged tubes
- 2 Steel tanks, 30,000 gal. capacity
- 1 Steel Tank, 20,000 gal. capacity
- 1—40 Ton Ice Storage Room
- 2—compressors
- 1—blower
- 4—thermo plate units
- 1—60 ft. fish elevator and Float
- 1—20 ft. Fish bin elevator
- 1—10 ft. Fish table elevator
- 1—50 ft. Ice Conveyor
- 1—12 ft. Screw Conveyor
- 2—12' x 10' Fish Holding Bins
- 1—1/4 pound cutter, all metal, aluminum buckets
- 1—1/4 pound hand pack table
- 1—1/2 pound cutter, bucket type
- 1—Fish Scrubber
- 1—1000 gal. Fuel Tank
- 1—500 gal. Fuel Tank
- 1—Clark Fork lift
- 200—4' x 4' pallet boards (Located in Port of Anacortes)

Jim Lawrence
Description of Canning Process

The summer passed into fall and work at the cannery was all consuming when the wild sockeye salmon were running. Large vessels known as tenders swaggered, with their sterns dragging low, into the cannery at any hour of day or night bulging with fish. These boats were hired by the cannery to buy fish in the sheltered waters of the fish grounds and deliver them to the cannery, when full, where they were unloaded into brailer bags or conveyor belts and sluiced into the caverns of the canning facility.

There were concrete bulk headed rooms that were filled to capacity measuring 4 feet high and 30 feet by 30 feet where workers waist deep in fish pushed them with rakes toward gated troughs. Thousands of pounds of fish lay in these rooms waiting to be processed, their vacant eyes staring at the ceiling, life and spirit left in the ocean.

Sledded through a sluiceway onto a table known as an indexer, the fish were one by one conveyed side by side toward a revolving propeller-like blade that would decapitate each just behind the gill plate. This ghoulis invention would and could cut any finger or body part with relentless precision.

The fish were then dropped on to a table where they were grabbed by any of a dozen workers, known as slimers, and with knives they would clean the fish for the final trip toward cutters that segmented the fish to specific sizes so they would fit into either quarter pound or half pound tin cans.

Lids slid down long tracks and flipped face down onto the fully packed and slated cans of raw fish. The lids were sealed and the cans dropped into large wagon baskets that were wheeled on train tracks into enormous retorts or pressure cookers where they were subjected to extreme heat and cooked through. This process was loud, wet, messy and exhausting and we had shifts that lasted until the fish were all in cans.

There were no breaks except lunch and dinner, no overtime and I think my top wage was in the \$4 an hour range. I remember a shift of 32 hours on the clock and many 18 and 20 hour days.

Jim Lawrence, *Callused Hands Hungry Heart: Memoir of a Fisherman-Farmer* (2011)

EXHIBIT B to Lease

John J. and Georgiana Theodore to Pacific Gem Seafood Company and Nichimo
March 13, 1992

FRESH SALMON/CANNING EQUIPMENT

1 wet pump – TEMPCO
1 canning chink – SMITH BERGER
1 caning sliming table – NO ID PLATE
1 quarter lb. canning filler – ROONEY’S 23
1 quarter lb. canning fille - ROONEY’S 22
1 quarter lb. canning steamer – AMERICAN CAN CO.
1 quarter lb. canning clincher/fish holding bin/fish cutter – AMERICAN CAN CO. 649
1 half lb. canner filler – CANCO ROTATRY FISH FILLER MODEL 2 H.S.
1 half lb. can weight machine – AMERICAN CAN CO. 2117
1 half lb. can seamer - CONTINENTAL CAN CO. 625
1 cooking retort with instrumentation – CANAL BOILER WORKS 2400
1 cooking retort with instrumentation – CANAL BOILER WORKS 2372
1 cooking retort with instrumentation – CANAL BOILER WORKS 2371
1 cooking retort with instrumentation – REID BOILER WORKS 257
1 20/ton day Northstar ice machine – 3344
15 fish carts
150 wood totes
1 diesel boiler – CLEAVER BROOKS 0-8843
1 diesel boiler – CYCLOTHERM 11089
palletizing line
Coastline dressing/gutting machine
grading tables& weight scales
1 Sharp freezer – approximately 10 short ton capacity – B81024323
1 storage freezer – approximately 10 short ton capacity – B81024324
boxing/glazing line
box making equipment

SALMON ROE EQUIPMENT

3 agitators
brine maker
baskets & equipment

SALMON PORTIONING

processing tables

processing tubs

scales

1 Multivac machine – 5070

CRAB

24 bank saws

30 scoring machines

tables

scales

packing line

MISC.

1 forklift -TOYOTA 40FG20-11015

2 forklifts

2 pallet jacks

fully equipped maintenance shop

equipment replacement parts

high capacity sewage pump

OFFICE

desks and chairs

Macintosh computer

software

printer

copy machine

typewriter

fish ticket imprinter

Toshiba telephone system

TRUCKS

1969 Ford Flatbed Truck – Vehicle I.D. No. C75FUE92903

1952 GMC Gut Truck – Vehicle I.D. No. 30234472

Description of the Cannery Process

Excerpt from John J. Theodore, “Dave’s Wild Adventure” (2003)

The salmon are positioned on a moving conveyer at a rate of one fish per two seconds—or 30 fish per minute—and carried to a machine that lops off the head and extracts the eggs. The body travels on to a very large and complicated behemoth called the Iron Chink, so named because of the Chinese workers it replaced after its invention early last century.

An operator places each fish into the Iron Chink at the rate of 30 fish per minute. The Chink cuts off the tail, all the fins, and scrapes out the “guts” with just one man at the controls!

The heads, tails, fins, and guts that fall from the Chink are known as offal. A conveyer carries the offal from the Chink to a large tank that stands about 18 feet high, where it accumulates until our huge dump truck takes it to be processed into fertilizer.

SOURCES

Maps

Bureau of Land Management General Land Office cadastral sheet, *Township 35 North, Range 3 West*, Township and Range Survey (1874)

United States Coast and Geodetic Survey T-sheet and Descriptive Report 2301, *Pear Point to Eagle Point* (1897)

Photos

Aerial View of Jackson/Theodore Cannery (courtesy Port of Friday Harbor)

Little Island and Argyle Lagoon (courtesy San Juan Historical Museum 78497)

1932 aerial of Little Island and the sand spit (sjcgis.maps.arcgis.com)

View from Bald Hill showing Argyle Lagoon, Little Island, sawmill (on right), and Argyle (courtesy San Juan Historical Museum 7877)

John and Merle Jackson (Good Old Days)

Little Island with Jackson Smokehouse (courtesy San Juan Historical Museum)

John J. Theodore (courtesy Holly Finan)

J. J. Theodore Cannery (courtesy Holly Finan)

Egg Technician and Marty Castle (courtesy Tom Grauman)

J. J. Theodore Cannery (courtesy Holly Finan)

Steel Retort with Can Baskets (courtesy Holly Finan)

Photograph by Jo Bailey with caption, The Islands' Sounder, August 15, 1984, p. 7

Can Labels (courtesy Holly Finan)

Aerial photo of Cannery (courtesy Port of Friday Harbor)

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J. J. Theodore Co., Inc., *Annual Reports, Articles of Dissolution*

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Florence Steinle to John Jackson and Merle B. Jackson *Warranty Deed* March 27, 1946 (SJC 36548)

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John C. Jackson and Merle Jackson to John C. Jackson, Inc. *Warranty Deed* June 30, 1948 (SJC 38950)

John C. Jackson and Merle Jackson to Jay Terrance Jackson *Statutory Warranty Deed* June 1, 1953 (SJC 43805)

John J. Jackson, Inc. to J. J. Theodore *Real Estate Contract* March 25, 1972 (SJC 78224)

John J. and Georgiana Theodore to Pacific Gem Seafood Company and Nichimo *Memorandum of Lease*, March 13, 1992 (SJC 92178786)

Hollis J. Finan, as Executor of John J. Theodore, Deceased to Hollis J. Finan *Executor's Deed* Jun 3, 2011 (SJC 2011-0627001)

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"Truck Load of Scallops Taken to Seattle Market," *Friday Harbor Journal*, November 20, 1947, p.1

"JACKSON'S CANNERY PACK 20,000 CASES," *Friday Harbor Journal*, November 10, 1949, p.1

"Wilfred Rouleau...leveling ground for additional cannery buildings," *Friday Harbor Journal*, March 30, 1950, p. 1

"Work on Jackson's new Cannery Progressing," *Friday Harbor Journal*, July 27, 1950, p.1

"UNION MEETING," *Friday Harbor Journal*, October 26, 1950, p. 5

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"Gillnet Fishermen bring in Large Catch to Jackson's Cannery," *Friday Harbor Journal*, August 4, 1966, p. 1

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"BRINGING IN THE CATCH OFF SAN JUAN ISLAND," *The Seattle Times PICTORIAL*, October 8, 1978

"Salmon caviar goes by air," *Friday Harbor Journal*, November 22, 1978, p. 12

“READY FOR ACTION,” *The Islands’ Sounder*, July 15, 1981, p. 1

Photograph by Jo Bailey with caption, *The Islands’ Sounder*, August 15, 1984, p. 7

“‘Tent City’ rises near cannery,” *Friday Harbor Journal*, August 22, 1984, p. 17

Cindy Joy Neff, “Cannery to process 3 million pounds of fish,” *Friday Harbor Journal*, July 17, 1985, p. 17

Allison Arthur, “Local cannery sees six-fold rise in fish,” *Friday Harbor Journal*, August 22, 1984, p. 17

Allison Arthur, “Fishermen savor bountiful catch,” *Friday Harbor Journal*, August 28, 1985, 1,
“Cannery closing?” *Friday Harbor Journal*, June 4, 1986, p. 1 & 3A [see also September 10, 1986, p. 12]

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“Superior Court: Civil Cases—Royal Pacific Fisheries...is suing Friday Harbor Seafoods,” *The Journal of the San Juans*, July 16, 1986, p. 13

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“Workers are homeless after fire,” *The Journal of the San Juans*, July 19, 1989, p. 1 & 2

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