

## **CANNERY FLAGS: THE BRITISH COLUMBIA SALMON CANNERIES**

**Harry Oswald**

### **Introduction**

Over 100 years ago, in British Columbia, there evolved in the salmon fishing industry a unique class of House Flags. These flags are called Cannery Flags because they were flown on the cannery boats and represented the different fish-canning companies.

I first became aware of cannery flags in 1993 while transferring from the Alaska Ferry to the British Columbia Ferry in Prince Rupert, B. C. In a small museum at the Visitor's Center, there were several small flags displayed that were labeled "Cannery Flags". I contacted Kevin Harrington of the Canadian Flag Association to see if he knew anything about them. He knew some existed but was otherwise unfamiliar with cannery flags of the West Coast. I tried unsuccessfully to get a museum curator to write something about them. Later in 1993, before the NAVA 27 meeting in Portland, Maine, I visited the Maritime Provinces of Eastern Canada. I failed to find anyone with knowledge of cannery flags in any of the maritime or fishing museums. In 1997, before ICV 17, Robert Watt, the Chief Herald of Canada, wrote a letter to the Canadian Flag Association describing a flag he had seen in the museum at Delta, B.C. It was a B.C. Packers flag from the Saint Mungo Cannery. He thought his discovery might lead to some wider study in Canadian fishing fleet company flags. When Victoria was selected for the site of the next International Congress of Vexillology, I decided that Victoria would be the perfect place to present a paper on cannery flags.

The Pacific Salmon have long been an important food resource in British Columbia. Twelve thousand years ago, that part of North America that is now Canada, was covered with ice. As the polar ice cap receded, some of the aboriginal people of North America followed along in search of the Pacific Salmon, then found in abundance in the coastal streams and rivers of the Pacific Coast. Because the salmon runs were cyclical, the aborigines preserved the fish by sun drying and smoking. Beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, European mariners started sailing along the British Columbia coast. Preserved salmon, obtained from the aborigines, was an important part of their diet. Later, overland explorers and fur traders were fortunate to obtain preserved salmon from the native people, which kept them from starving in the severe winter weather.

### **History of Canning**

A brief review of the history of canning is appropriate. In 1795 General Napoleon Bonaparte convinced the French Government to offer a 12,000 Franc reward to anyone who could develop a satisfactory method of food preservation. In 1809, Nicholas Appert, a Parisian confectioner, was awarded the prize. His method, later called the Appert Method, consisted of sealing food in glass containers and cooking them in a boiling water bath. Sir Humphrey Davy, a British chemist, raised the boiling point of water to 240 degrees F by adding sodium chloride. In 1810 an English patent was issued to Peter Durand for the preservation of food in sealed tin canisters, later called tin cans and then simply tins or cans. It wasn't till 1860 that Louis Pasteur discovered that the heat of the boiling water bath killed the microbes that caused the spoilage.

The first salmon cannery in Canada opened in Saint John, New Brunswick in 1838. Forty-two years later, in 1870, British Columbia's first salmon cannery opened on the Fraser River across from New Westminster. By 1880 eight canneries were operating on the Fraser River and two on the Skeena River near Prince Rupert on the Northern British Columbia Coast. Nearly 300 canneries would eventually be built. The peak year was 1917 when 84 canneries operated. Each cannery owned several dozen rowing skiffs that held the nets and two hired fishermen. The skiffs were towed to the fishing areas by steam tugs or tenders. The skiffs were marked so the tug pilot could identify his cannery's boats. The markings consisted of different coloured paint on the bow or sides of the

boats. The skiffs were replaced with Columbia River Sailboats. The shrouds and stays provided places to fly identifying flags.

### Cannery Flags

The first documented evidence of a cannery flag is a 1912 photo of many sailboats at the Claxton Cannery 1. Many of the sailboats are flying a dark pennant with a white border. This flag next appears in a 1920 photo of the Glory Hole 2 near the mouth of the Skeena River. Boat No. RK2170 is flying the same dark pennant with a white border low on the forestay. During this period the Claxton Cannery was owned by Wallace Brothers Packing Company Ltd.3 No one has been found who could name the pennant's colour. All who might have known are probably dead.

The next fishing industry flag found was on a 1926 letterhead of the British Columbia Fishing & Packing Co. Ltd. 4 It was a blue swallow-tailed house flag with a white cross. In the canton was a white shield with a red cross. It is not known if this flag ever flew on any fishing boats. The only other written or printed documentation that could be found was a commercial vessel brokers advertisement in 1979 that showed 12 B.C. Fleet Identification Flags in colour.5 Another source of information on cannery flags has been through personal contacts with people in the fishing industry, flag collectors, and museum curators.

Diesel engines became available for the fishing boats just before World War I. This changed the fishing process. Tugs were no longer needed to tow the fishing boats from the canneries to the fishing grounds. However, packers or collector boats were used by the canning companies to take the salmon from the fishing boats and deliver to the canneries. Cannery flags were used to identify both the company fishing boats and its packers .

The packers flew bigger flags than the fishing boats. If there had been refrigeration on the fishing boats, cannery flags might have gone out of existence. Eventually the fishermen obtained their own boats but still fished for a certain cannery. They still flew the cannery flag and the cannery packers still picked up the salmon. It is believed that most canneries or companies had an identifying flag. The canneries and sometimes the boats were painted in the colours of the flag. At least one, Canadian Fish Company, had its flag painted on the bow of its boats. The flags didn't last long and the remnants were used as rag or float flags. The flag designs of many of the old companies or canneries have been lost. Some have been preserved by collectors that were involved in the industry. Some have been preserved by museums.6

Most older cannery flags were of a simple design resembling maritime signal flags. They were easy to make and identify. Small sized cannery flags 40 to 60 cm high were used to indicate ownership or affiliation of fishing boats. Larger sizes with hoists over 80 cm were used by the cannery owned packers and tugs. The proportions ranged from 1:1 to 1:2. Until the last quarter of the 20th century, most flags were pieced or sewn. J. H. Todd's was a simple applique. With the exception of two quartered designs, there were no vertical divisions. The fishermen seemed to know that flags with horizontal and diagonal divisions were easier to identify. Some of the older flags did not have a canvas or taped heading. They had cord or light rope sewn into the fly edge seam. Most flags had two brass grommets in the heading. In the last 20 or 30 years the design of some of the flags has become complicated. Some might be called logo flags. These designs are made by means of screen printing or dyeing. Some have halyard loops sewn in the heading. This might be the result of not having a grommet press rather than desire for variety of choices in attaching the flag to the halyard. Little is known of the reason for or significance of the design of the cannery flag.

Two cannery flags deserve special mention or description; Canadian Fishing Company and British Columbia Packers Ltd. The Canadian Fishing Company flag looks like the flag of Austria. A tribar of red over white over red. I have been told it predates the Flag of Canada, but have not found any supporting evidence. The flag of British Columbia Packers, usually called B.C. Packers is a combination of two flags: Nelson Brothers and B. C. Packers. When the two companies combined in the 70's, the flag of Nelson Brothers was orange over green divided with a rising diagonal. The flag of B. C. Packers was divided with a rising diagonal with white over green and sometimes green over white. The combined flag consisted of a rising white diagonal stripe with orange above next to the hoist and green below next to the fly. Later the colours were reversed. When this happened the older

fishermen loyal to the Nelsons flew the flag upside down with the orange up. Later a white outline shamrock, used on one of B. C. Packers' canning labels, was placed in the green.

#### Flags displayed

(At this time I will display the following flags not necessarily in this Order)

Aero Trading, Orange over Yellow (Fig.1)  
Aero Trading, Logo (fig. 2)  
Anglo-British Columbia (ABC), Rising diagonal red/white (DC) (fig. 3)  
Babcock Fisheries, Tribar, green / yellow / green (DC) (fig. 4)  
British Columbia Fishing & Packing Co. Ltd. (fig. 5)  
B C Packers, rising diagonal, white over green (DC) (fig.6) and variant (fig. 6b)  
B C Packers, First generation; ascending white stripe orange over green (DC) (fig. 7)  
B C Packers, Present design with shamrock (fig. 8)  
Canadian Fishing Company, Tribar, red, white, red. (fig.10)  
Cassiar, Yellow (fig.12)  
McMillan, J. S. Red diamond on yellow. Red diamond on yellow orange (DC2) (fig.16)  
McMillan, J. S. Logo (fig. 17)  
Nelson Brothers, Ascending, Orange over green. (fig. 19)  
Ocean Fish, Pointed waves (figs. 22, 23, 23b)  
Port Simpson Cannery (DC) (fig. 24)  
Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-op, Black over red (fig. 26)  
Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-op, seven-stripe rainbow. (fig. 25)  
Seafood Products, Quartered, yellow red over red yellow (fig.30)  
Unknown, Diagonal Blue/yellow (fig. 39)

#### Association and Allied Flags:

BC Fisheries Survival Coalition (fig. 43)  
Canada Fisheries & Oceans Dept. (fig. 40)  
Canadian Coast Guard (fig. 41)  
Central Native Fishing Co-op (fig. 44)  
Native Brotherhood (fig. 46)  
Northern Native Fishing Corporation (fig. 42)  
United Fishers & Allied Workers (fig. 45)

#### Other Flags on Colour Plates

J. H Todd (fig.32-36), Walcan (fig. 38), Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-op (fig. 27), & Seas, Ladner (fig. ), Quality (fig. 28), Satric & Sons (fig. 29), North Sea Products (fig. 21), Norpac Fish (fig. 20), Francis Millerd (figs.13, 14), Icicle Seafoods (fig. 15), Canoe Pass Co-op (fig. 11), Cameron Fishing (fig. 9), Millbank Industries (fig. 18), Tulloch Western (fig. 37)

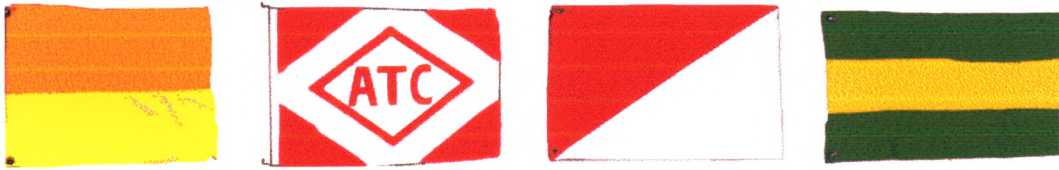
#### Update

The salmon fishing industry has undergone much change in the past few years, due to the large decrease in the salmon runs. In the U. S., although the decrease started before the first dam was built on the Columbia River the decrease is blamed on dams, logging, and cattle grazing. In Canada the decrease is blamed on the Americans. The decrease can only be blamed on overfishing by everyone. Until this year the dominant company was B. C. Packers which over the years had purchased most of the canneries in British Columbia. This year B. C. Packers labels were sold to Bumblebee and its boats and plants to Canadian Fish. In 1980 B. C. Packers had purchased the North Pacific Cannery from Canadian Fish. There are only five large companies remaining in the British Columbia canning industry; Canadian Fish, Seafood Products, Great Northern, Ocean Fisheries, and Bella Coola. At least one company no longer uses a company flag. As the fish are now usually purchased at the cannery, all cannery flags will probably become historical artifacts. There were almost 300 salmon canneries. Some existed for many years; others for just a short time. The ownership of some canneries changed frequently. We may never know how many canneries or canning companies had individual flags. There seems to be no literature on the subject. The way to find out anything about these flags may be through collectors, museums, and talking to old commercial fishermen, cannery owners and their descendants. It is hoped the presentation of this paper will encourage further research that results in the identification of additional old cannery flags and possibly the design criteria.

#### Notes

- 1 Prince Rupert Archive photo: File No. WP996.67.11034.
- 2 British Columbia Archives 31216.
- 3 Gladys Young Blyth, *Salmon Canneries British Columbia North Coast*, 1991, p. 158.
- 4 Doyle Papers, University of British Columbia, Special Collections Library.
- 5 *Western Fisheries Magazine*, September 1979, Vol.98 No.6 : B.C. Packers, Canadian Fish, Cassiar, Central Native Fishermen's Co-op, East Pacific, Francis Millerd, J. Griffin, Ikari, Kiwood, Ocean Fish, Prince Rupert, Fishermen's Co-op, Quality Fish, Seafood Products, Transpacific, Westpine Fish.
- 6 North Pacific Cannery Museum, Port Edward; Gulf of Georgia Cannery Museum, Steveston; Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria;

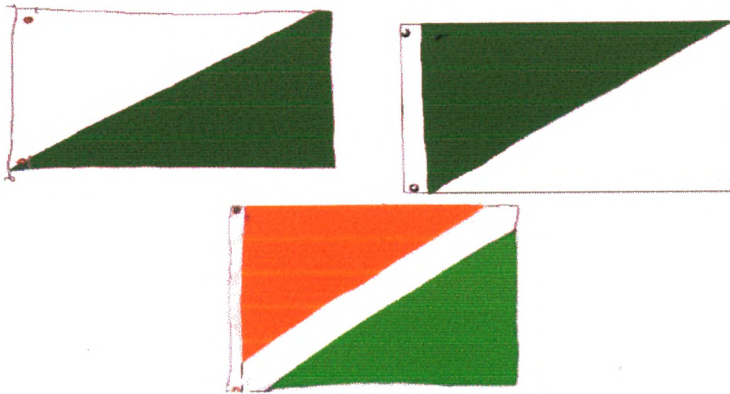
Harry Oswald : Cannery Flags of British Columbia, Col. Plate I



Figs. 1-4



Fig. 5 (with Dios Tuazon and Don Flynn of the Flag Shop, Victoria, B.C.)



Figs. 6, 6b, 7

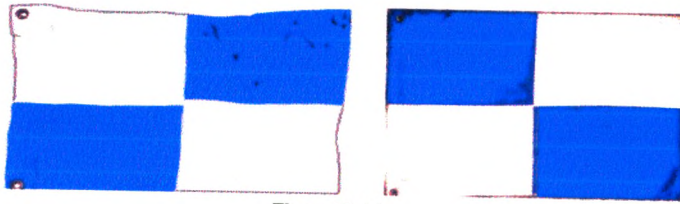


Figs. 8-10

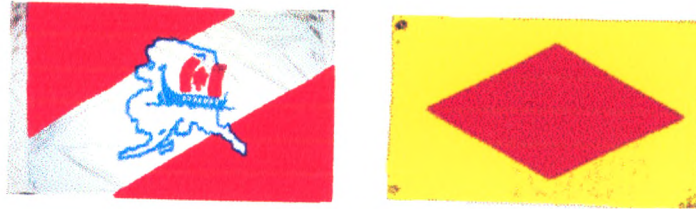


Figs. 11-12

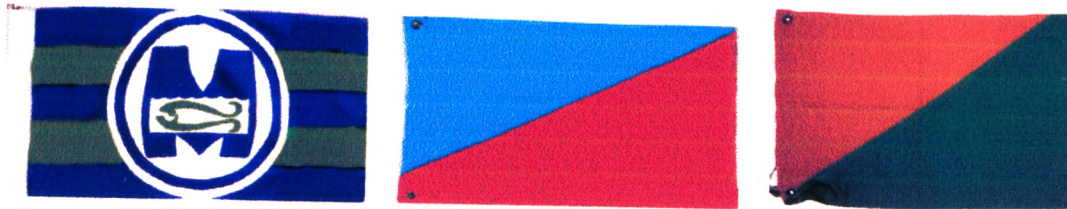
Harry Oswald : Cannery Flags of British Columbia, Col. Plate II



Figs. 13-14



Figs. 15-16



Figs. 17-19



Figs. 20, 21



Figs. 22, 23, 23b



Figs. 24 - 26

Harry Oswald : Cannery Flags of British Columbia, Col. Plate III



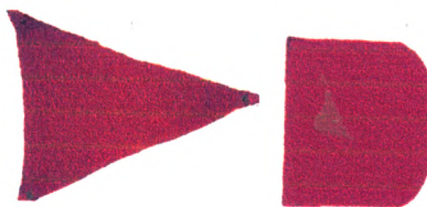
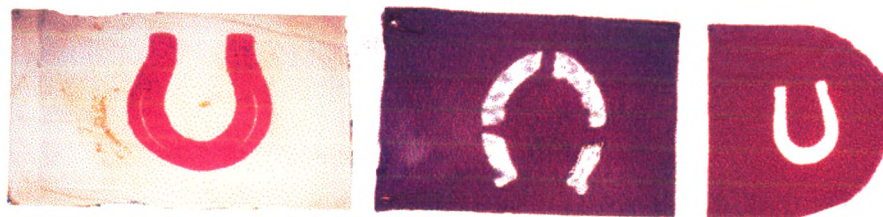
Figs. 27- 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Figs. 32-34 and 35-36



Figs. 37-39

Harry Oswald: Cannery Flags of British Columbia, Col. Plate IV

Flags of Federal Government Agencies in BC Waters



Figs. 40 and 41

Flags of Native Associations, Co-operatives, and Unions related to the Fisheries and Canneries in B.C.



Fig. 42



Figs. 43-45



Fig. 46

## Harry Oswald : Cannery Flags Of B.C.

### Harry Oswald

Harry Oswald is a retired engineer and resides (when he's not travelling up and down the west coast or half-way across the continent) in Portland, Oregon. In preparation for the 16th ICV in Warsaw, Harry created a Viking's raven flag - a beautiful handsewn effort - with which he proudly headed the parade of vexillologists along the streets of the Polish capital as we headed for the museums and castle.



Harry Oswald begins his lecture assisted by Philippe Rault



Harry Oswald with his Raven Flag in Warsaw, 16th ICV, seen with Tamás Rumi, Hungary. Meanwhile back in Victoria, ICV18, below, all eyes are on John Moody of New Zealand as he asks a question of a speaker. Standing in the rear, near the flag of Cascadia, we see Harry Oswald. In the foreground M et Mme LeRoy.

