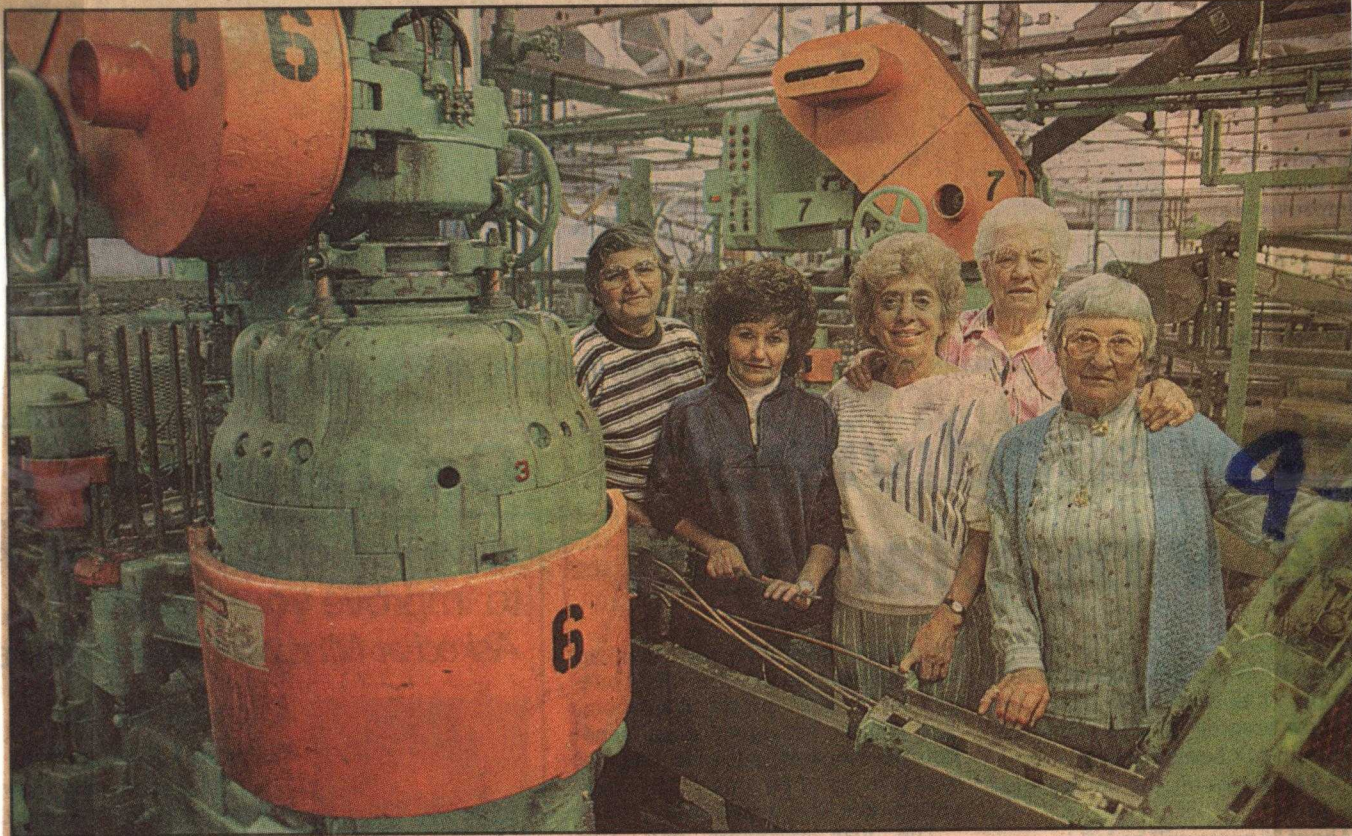


Cannery closing



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Maria Ramos, Nancy Scott, Mary Marsalisi, Minnie Pollastrini and Josephine Silva bid cannery goodbye.

Packing up a bit of history

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Minnie Pollastrini walked through the maze of tracks and sinks and conveyor belts that make up the Pacific Coast Producers cannery Thursday as casually as if the huge building was her home.

She walked past gargantuan tanks that spit steam in a constant roar of noise. She saw a memory on the puddled cement floor.

"That's where I took that spill, right over there," she said, pointing to a spot and then laughing.

Pollastrini can talk about the function of every machine in this place. She knows where the pears were cored, she knows where the cans were labeled. She worked in this plant for more than 40 years.

Now it's closing after 75 years in the canning business.

The property on Bronson Street near Seabright Avenue just became "too valuable" to hold a cannery, according to plant manager Boyd Stevens. A group of local investors, including real estate investor Jim Foster, the George Ow family and skateboard manufacturer Richard Novak, bought the land

in March and plan to use it for a light industrial facility.

Thursday, workers packed the last of the pears. Then Pollastrini and other longtime workers joined the crew for a potluck lunch to commemorate the end of an era in Santa Cruz.

"We're having a sort of last supper," said Stevens. "This is the end of the canning business in Santa Cruz."

The cannery was started in 1914 as the Santa Cruz Fruit and Olive

Canning Co. In the 1920s it became the Santa Cruz Fruit Packing Co. Pacific Coast Producers bought it in 1971.

By then, Pollastrini had already spent more than two decades at the plant.

"When I first came here it was just a hole in the wall," she said.

"There were houses all across the front here and the bosses all lived in them," said Mary alisi, who retired last week after working 30 years at the cannery.

For the past few years, the cannery has been packing mostly pears and mushrooms. This year more than 9 million cans of pears came out of Pacific Coast, and that was less than half of the plant's usual production.

Stevens figured that the cannery has turned out some 800 million cans of pears over the past 40 years. It can process 3,000 pears a minute, according to Stevens.

But pears were only part of the picture when Marsalisi came to work in the 1950s.

"We did apricots, beans, peas, asparagus....," she said.

"Those were the days when we had to cut them by hand," Pollastrini said. "Before all the machines."

Pollastrini remembered cleaning and cutting vegetables and fruit during World War II. "During the war we worked seven weeks once without a day off," she said. "Then one day there was a whistle they blew that told us the war was over. You should have seen how everybody threw things up in the air and cheered."

Pollastrini and Marsalisi and Maria Ramos (30 years) and Nancy

Scott (30 years) walked around the machines one last time Thursday with Josephine Silva. Silva worked at the cannery 60 years before retiring.

"Josephine and I stood across from each other here for more than 20 years and we never had one bad word," Pollastrini said.

The women described the machines, how they chopped and cored the fruit. They pulled freshly canned pears out of a tin and judged them. They outlined the different jobs they had done at the plant.

Six hundred people worked at the cannery in its prime. Three hundred people worked there Thursday. Most of those people received their final paychecks before the potluck lunch.

Even new owner Foster was a bit saddened by the cannery's closing.

"It's sort of sad to see the end of all those people working," Foster said. "Hopefully we'll be able to employ as many people as were employed there in the past."

REFERENCE