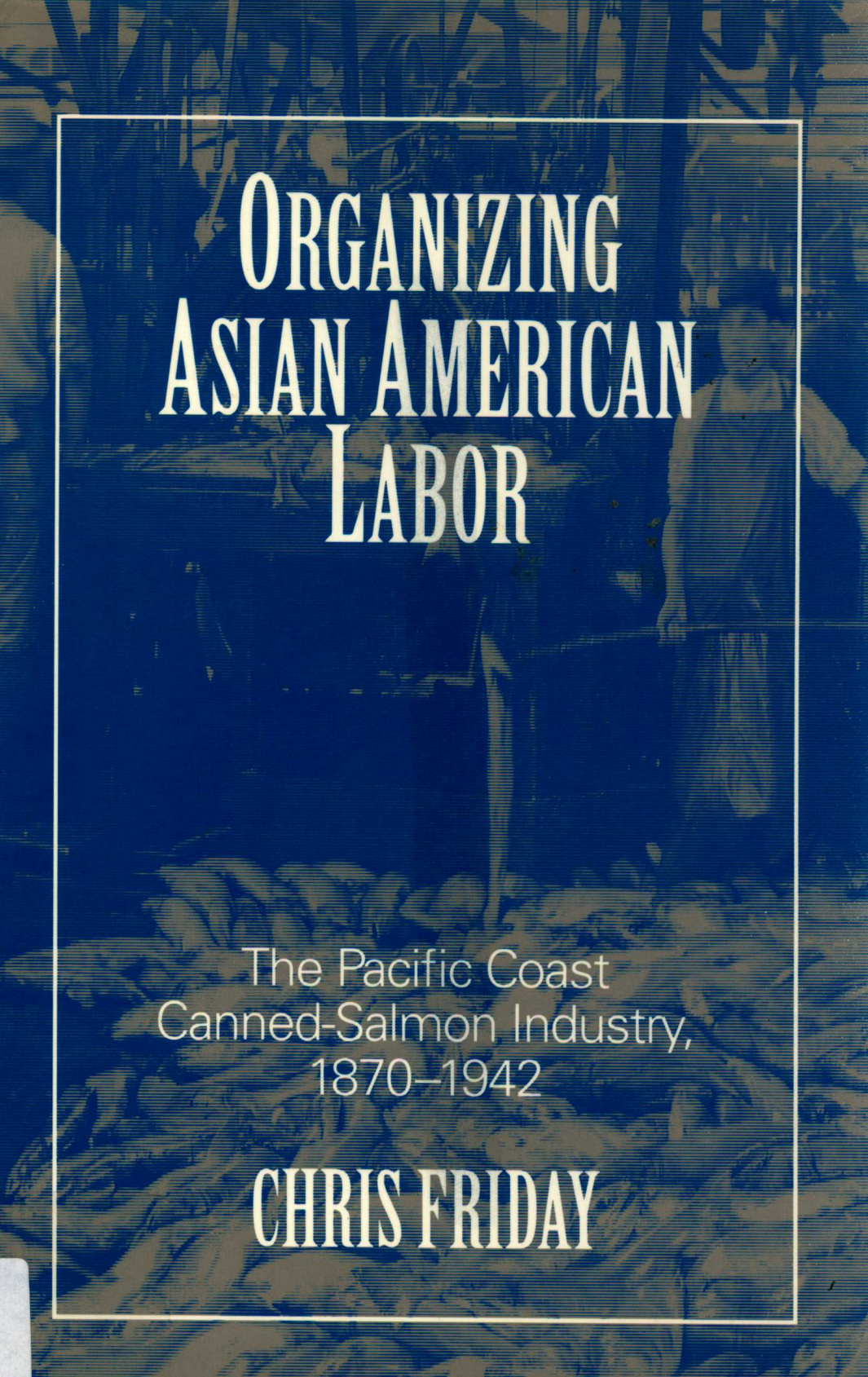
ORGANIZING
ASIAN AMERICAN
LABOR
The Pacific Coast
Canned-Salmon Industry,
1870–1942
CHRIS FRIDAY

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Finally, my greatest debt is to the men and women who labored in the canneries. Their stories provided me with an opportunity to puzzle over the meaning of history. If I have failed to capture the richness of their lives or to portray their actions appropriately, the responsibility is mine, not theirs or those who have influenced my thinking since I began this study.

CONTENTS

Introduction

THIS BOOK seeks to demonstrate that the working lives of Asian immigrants and their children in the canned-salmon industry are at the center of the history of the Pacific Northwest and the American West.[1] Along with a growing number of historical studies that reassess entrenched ideas about nonwhite ethnic peoples as peripheral to this nation's history, it challenges the notions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration as solely a trans-Atlantic phenomenon and of the era's industrial developments as confined to the belt stretching from Boston and New York to Chicago. *Organizing Asian American Labor* focuses on the roles that people of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino ancestry played in shaping the canned-salmon industry and extracting a resource that was almost as significant to the West's development as timber, minerals, or agriculture. The story of these Asian and Asian American workers shows how labor, resources, and capital are allocated within a world system for the ultimate benefit of those with the greatest political and economic power—a fact that defines the "Western" experience for many.[2] Yet this history also reveals that immigrants were by no means cogs in the wheel of some larger machinery that ground human lives into insignificant dust.

While European Americans and Native Americans in the canneries, on the boats, and on the traps were important elements in the industry's history and deserve careful study, I have focused on Asian immigrants and Asian Americans because their long-standing participation in the industry best illustrates how people consistently negotiated to empower themselves and make their lives more tolerable within large and rather harsh structural constraints. Those limitations included a national U.S. culture that was largely hostile to them; labor in a seasonal, extractive industry; and the relatively weak position of the immigrants' ancestral homelands in the global political economy.

Between the 1870s and World War II, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans formed the predominant body of workers in the salmon canneries that ran along the narrow coastal zone between the Cascades and the Pacific Ocean from Alaska to central California.[3] Although

established in 1864, the industry employed no Asians until 1870 when a single Columbia River plant hired thirteen Chinese. After that date, Asian immigrants entered the labor market with incredible rapidity; by 1880, they numbered nearly three thousand in several dozen canneries on the river.[4] For the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, salmon-cannery jobs remained a significant source of Asian employment.[5]

Although the number of laborers the industry required was no match for the huge contingent of laborers in California's commercial agriculture, which in 1880 had 28,546 farm workers,[6] or the Hawaiian sugar industry, which in 1882 employed 10,243 plantation workers,[7] the number of Chinese in the Columbia River salmon canneries rivaled the number in San Francisco's various industries. In 1880 some 2,148 Chinese worked as laundry operatives, 2,724 as cigar makers, and 2,443 as servants in the city;[8] approximately the same number in each of these occupations worked in the salmon canneries. The economic opportunities for Chinese in San Francisco were more varied, however, and the city's jobs formed the economic backbone of the Chinese immigrant community not only in San Francisco but along the entire Pacific Coast. Still, the large number of Chinese working so distant from the major American Chinatown reveals just how important an employer the canning industry was.[9]

The canned-salmon industry also played a central role in the economic development of the far western states and territories. Canned salmon produced in Alaska between 1880 and 1937 had a greater value than the total value of minerals mined in the territory in the same period.[10] In Oregon and Washington before World War II, canned salmon ranked third behind timber and wheat in value.[11]

By 1900, the industry's demand for labor far surpassed the availability of Chinese immigrants; their numbers had declined because of exclusionary legislation that prevented their immigration and return migration from China.[12] Although Chinese employment in the canneries continued, many Japanese and Filipinos, along with Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans, including women and children, also entered the labor market over the first four decades of the twentieth century. Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, though, continued to make up the bulk of the workers. In 1909 the Columbia River, Puget Sound, and Alaska canneries employed 7,167 Chinese and Japanese out of a total of 12,934 shoreworkers.[13] (Asian American cannery workers had available to them a very narrow range of tasks in the industry, limited mostly to "line" jobs inside the plant. The only data available are for shoreworkers, which

includes transporters. They do not accurately reflect the level of Asian immigrant and Asian American involvement in the canning process.) The number of Chinese and Japanese was equal to more than half of the 12,994 Chinese and Japanese who labored on California's farms the following year.[14] Through the 1920s and into the early 1930s, the Asian presence in the canned-salmon industry remained at roughly the same level, although their activities came to be focused increasingly on work in Alaska. In 1920 Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos in Alaska canneries constituted 5,348 of the 15,376 shoreworkers; in 1930 they made up 6,172 of 22,324 shoreworkers.[15] In 1936, on the eve of the recognition of local unions established by the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 652 Chinese, 1,179 Japanese, and 3,730 Filipino workers out of 15,023 shoreworkers toiled in Alaska canneries.[16] On the Columbia, however, fewer than forty Asians—mostly Chinese and a few Japanese—found employment.[17]

From the late 1870s to the mid-1930s, an elite group of Asian labor contractors recruited and managed the Asian and Asian American cannery crews. The system provided minimal benefits for workers, though contractors and canners gained much more. In the early 1930s, some Filipino laborers in the Northwest began to push for unionization in the Alaska canneries in order to place labor recruitment and management in the hands of workers, rather than contractors. In a parallel development, Asian Americans and other waterfront workers in San Francisco formed their own local. By 1937, the two regional locals had joined forces, pushed aside contractors, and begun to represent the broad coalition of Asian and Asian American workers' interests in negotiations with the companies.[18] After that initial success, shifts in company headquarters, the start of the Pacific war, and the consequent internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans limited union activity largely to Filipino workers. With the loss of many Chinese and all Japanese workers, the multiethnic and racial alliance encouraged by the union crumbled.[19]

Shifts in the ethnic makeup of cannery labor and the causes and consequences of these changes provide the themes for this study. Chapters 1 through 4 discuss how Chinese, between 1870 and 1900, entered the cannery labor market and participated in the building of the labor contracting system; how they responded to the seasonal canning process by establishing a set of formal and informal rules of behavior; and how they coped with life at the plants through the creation of various workers' communities. During that era, the canned-salmon industry provided a site where the capitalist transformation of the American West interacted with international labor migrations. The process

also illustrates how workers, particularly Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, learned to better their lives despite the many constraints on their efforts.

Many authors have discussed this early period of the industry and have mentioned cannery laborers in their studies, but few have examined them in depth.[20] Among the latter, Robert A. Nash, in his pioneering article "The 'China Gangs' in the Alaska Packers Association Canneries, 1892–1935," reveals the exploitative nature of labor contracting.[21] His focus on the contractors brings to the fore much valuable information, but he did not examine how Asian and Asian American workers negotiated with the seemingly omnipotent contractors for better working and living conditions or the relationships that developed among owners, contractors, and workers in regions outside Alaska.

Jack Masson and Donald Guimary, in "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry, 1880–1937" and "Pilipinos and the Unionization of the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," expand on Nash's study.[22] They suggest that until the late 1920s, ethnic antagonisms deeply divided workers, allowing contractors and owners to exploit them ruthlessly. Their studies provide a thorough analysis of Filipino activities in the industry, but, like Nash, they replicate the argument regarding contracting set forth by the economist Lloyd Fisher in *The Harvest Labor Market*. Fisher notes that in California agriculture the Chinese initiated labor contracting and that it was "one of the few organizing influences in a disorganized market. It . . . provided an element of stability and regularity in a chaotic market."[23] Fisher points out that Chinese contracting was "a primitive form of organization compared with that achieved by the Japanese," and later by the Filipinos, who had cultural tendencies toward a "'club' organization."[24] Fisher's analysis rests on work done by the Federal Writers Project during 1938,[25] which took observations from the 1930s and read Chinese activities of the twentieth century back into the nineteenth, as do Masson and Guimary. Moreover, those studies neglect to analyze ties—kinship, emigrant district associations, and friendship—that linked workers and contractors.[26] We need to examine in detail the evolution of labor contracting among the Chinese from its beginnings and to trace changes in its form as Japanese and Filipinos moved into the labor market. The canned-salmon industry provides a case study for such an investigation.

Chapters 5 and 6 analyze how Chinese workers dealt with restrictive immigration legislation and the canners' push to harvest salmon that led to the implementation of new canning technology and in-

creased ethnic divisions in the labor market; how a few Japanese began subcontracting and then emerged as contractors; how Issei[27] men and women and their Nisei[28] children created spheres of influence within the industry; and how Filipinos attempted, but largely failed, to follow the path laid down by the Chinese and Japanese. Chapter 6 ends with Filipino immigrants searching for alternatives to the contracting system.

The role and aspirations of Filipino workers in the twentieth century, especially in Hawaii's sugar plantations, has been studied.[29] The labor history of other Asian immigrant and Asian American groups has received little attention. The relations among Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos have received even less treatment.[30] This book provides a balanced assessment of each group's role as well as how the groups interacted.

Masson's and Guimary's study of Filipinos and unionization is the only available work on the topic. It ends with the important "big event" of union recognition in 1937 and portrays the contract system as grinding to a sudden halt with unionization.[31] What happened after the achievement of union recognition and how certain features of the contract system continued in new forms within the new union Masson and Guimary leave unexplored. To fill this gap, Chapters 7 and 8 delineate the creation, triumph, maintenance, short-lived expansion, and final destruction of a broad union program led by many Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. These chapters reveal how the contract work culture evolved into a union work culture, and how class, ethnic, and political affiliations affected workers' actions. They also demonstrate how government intervention influenced the course of events.

Industrialization, or the capitalist transformation of the American West,[32] and international labor migrations[33] provide the contexts for this book. Before World War II, the conjunction of money from local, regional, and national investors, labor from outside the United States, and the area's natural resources made the region a player, albeit a peripheral one, in the global economy.[34] European Americans saw in the West opportunities to extract natural resources.[35] Concentrations of wealth and power, dependency on outside political support, recruitment of workers, and racial and ethnic antagonisms attended the removal of that wealth. Such an approach to exploiting the economy and ecology was made possible by an oligarchic control of finances and the exercise of political power. The canned-salmon industry epitomized the extractive process so common to the American West—the provision, through the transformation of nature's bounty into commercial

products, of wealth for a relative few and toil for the comparatively many.[36]

Resource rich though it was, the American West before World War II lacked sufficient indigenous labor to carry out that extraction. Owners of the region's enterprises had to rely on voluntary and coerced migration from labor-rich areas within and outside the continent to fill their crews.[37] International political developments, the commercialization of agriculture, and the expansion of capitalism thus tied the region into a global economic system that pushed and pulled people around the world. Immigrants and seasonal migrant workers nevertheless did not simply become mere commodities of an international trade in labor. As Ewa Morawska has explained in "The Sociology and Historiography of Immigration," "immigrants and their families creatively coped with the structural limitations by maneuvering within them and playing against constraints in an effort to bring their environment into closer conformity with their purposes." In short, they were "playing within structures."[38] As I show in this book, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans participated in the creation of work cultures—sets of formal and informal rules of behavior and action that softened the harsh conditions they faced.[39] While they tacitly accepted the boundaries set by economic, political, and social forces beyond their control, in their immediate surroundings they sought to function as actors, not mere subjects. To study the West as a place and a process, as "an evolving human ecology," in Donald Worster's words, one must consider the ethnic histories of the residents, migrants, and immigrants involved in the extraction of the region's great natural wealth.[40]

In many ways, salmon fishing was akin to buffalo hunting.[41] Both were semirenewable resources. The millions of animals in the herds, separated and slaughtered, foreshadowed the near-decimation of Pacific salmon by industrial fisheries and the collateral damage done to waterways and spawning grounds.[42]

Salmon canning was a quintessentially western industry. Its employment of wage laborers, segmented by ethnic differences, marked it as a child of the West. As Patricia Nelson Limerick has reminded readers, the region's cultural diversity "could make the turn-of-the-century Northeastern urban confrontation between European immigrants and American nativists look like a family reunion. Similarly, in the diversity of languages, religions, and cultures, it far surpassed the South."[43] The West thus "put a strain on the simpler varieties of racism" prevalent in the larger United States.[44] Its upper echelons of European American owners, managers, fishermen, and machinists, often embroiled in antagonistic relations, and its well-divided crews of Asian and Asian

American, Mexican and Mexican American, and African American male workers, as well as Native American and European American women workers, indeed manifested the diversity of the West.

The use of sources also sets this book apart from existing treatments of the topic. Local newspapers and popular magazine accounts, published government reports, manuscript population census records, as well as some valuable, if limited, business records illustrate nineteenth-century Chinese activities in the industry. Twentieth-century materials are much richer, for they include substantial records of canning companies, government agencies, and union locals. Asian American newspapers, life histories compiled by contemporary social scientists,[45] oral history collections,[46] and my own interviews with cannery workers and union officials complete the roster.

Despite the rather sweeping geographic, chronological, and ethnic scope of this book, it still only scratches the surface of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social relations in the canneries. I have chosen to limit the study, for the most part, to Asians and Asian Americans. I have focused on them because of their long involvement and central position in the industry. More than that, their activities demonstrate that Asian workers were not mere coolies or slaves but active participants in the shaping of their work environment.[47]

1 *The Spawning Grounds*

ANKLE DEEP in the fish gurry, his hands, arms, and front smeared red by the blood and viscera of salmon, twenty-year-old Ah Shing stood on the canning "line," perhaps before a waist-high filling table stuffing salmon into one- and two-pound tins for ten, twelve, sixteen, and more hours at a stretch. In 1870 such a sight was unusual; Ah Shing and fourteen of his countrymen were the first Chinese to work in a salmon cannery. George Hume had hired a dozen Chinese for positions in the canning line, plus two as tinsmiths and one as a cook, to supplant a supposedly contentious "riff-raff and criminal element" of non-Chinese workers. According to an early canneryman, these first Chinese "soon learned the work and liked it, and they were dependable."[1]

Hume's move provided an important precedent in the industry, for shortly thereafter, Chinese made up the vast majority of salmon-cannery workers along the Pacific Coast. It also allowed Hume and other owners to avoid heavy investments in mechanization because they had at their disposal a flexible supply of labor. Labor, together with natural resources, capital (i.e., goods used to produce more goods), and entrepreneurship, are, according to economists, the fundamental factors of production.[2] During the 1860s, vast salmon runs provided the resource. Money pooled by family members and their friends purchased the minimal capital used to produce the goods, and those same people took the risks typical of entrepreneurs.[3] Canning on the Pacific Coast during the 1860s was on such a small scale that the labor, resource, and capital proved sufficient for the few tins of salmon then produced. By the end of the 1860s and into the early 1870s, however, cannery owners' efforts to expand production were blocked at various times by the availability of the resource and the lack of sufficient labor.

Early canners solved the problem of finding enough quality salmon by moving their operations, in 1866, from the Sacramento River to the Columbia River.[4] Finding labor was more difficult. In fits and starts the canners experimented with ethnically diverse workers from nearby

towns and cities, ultimately tapping Chinese labor. Overseas markets and international migrants, both essential to the continued growth of the industry, tied the industry and the region into the burgeoning global economy and aided in the capitalist transformation of the American West.[5]

The choice of Chinese cannery labor was neither easy nor inescapable. Cannery owners and industry observers alike oversimplified explanations of the Chinese "displacement" of "white" workers and their numerical domination in processing by 1880 as the preference for an indispensable and cheap labor force. Such notions of Asian immigrants as docile and dependable persisted for nearly a century,[6] and indeed, the presence of Asian immigrant labor in the American West is generally discussed in those terms.[7] Before the Chinese entered the canneries, owners maintained tight control of every aspect of the industry. By expanding their enterprises, canners recruited workers outside their original circle of families and friends and eventually delegated their authority in the canneries to others. In a widening gap between owners and workers, Chinese found employment and worked well enough to satisfy their employers. In time they created a semiautonomous sphere of action. In small ways, Ah Shing and the others in that first Chinese crew helped set precedents that persisted for the next seven decades.

A "Haphazard Business"

From the construction of the earliest salmon cannery on the Sacramento River in 1864 through its transplantion to the Columbia River in 1866, one family-run partnership constituted the entire "industry." Its owners had little reason or desire to hire Chinese. The original partners believed the most desirable route to success lay in their direct participation and supervision of the work process and their employment of those who shared similar values. The Hume brothers, William, John, George, and Robert (joined later by Joseph), together with Andrew Hapgood, formed the partnership that launched the first two canneries.[8]

No absentee owners, the partners participated directly in all aspects of the work, adding their skills to the task and shaping the direction and mission of the firm. Andrew Hapgood, more than a Hume family friend, had previously worked as a tinsmith and even canned lobsters in Maine. He set up and supervised the canning operations. William Hume, the eldest brother, managed operations at the cannery when he was not out fishing. George kept the books and worked in the cannery. John and Robert fished, and Robert served double duty as cook in the

cannery for a time. Joseph joined his brothers and Hapgood after the Civil War and served as general factotum. The Humes and Hapgood had duties that pulled them into direct contact with the other workers. The Humes and Hapgood constituted nearly 40 percent of the thirteen or fourteen workers in the Sacramento River cannery and heavily influenced employer–worker relations in the small-shop setting.[9]

Additional workers hired for the enterprise tended to be like their employers. The new men, often tinsmiths, received relatively high wages and performed the critical function of manufacturing the airtight cans on which the whole operation depended. The partners looked on the tinsmiths as fellow workers, rather than mere employees, as men of a common ilk. The new boys, employed to wipe cans clean, were little different from the younger Hume brothers, who earned less than the skilled workers but probably saw their jobs as an apprenticeship in the fledgling industry. Workers and owners had common stakes in the success of the enterprise. The Humes and Hapgood plants served as the training ground for many future cannery managers.[10]

Built on an old scow, the first plant used small-shop production methods; its size and its finances further reinforced close relations. The Humes and Hapgood used rather crude machinery and methods in canning the salmon so that workers, not machines, dominated the workplace. Since the partners had little capital, their shoestring operations required them to become directly involved in the work and strengthened owner–worker unity.[11]

The results of the first year did not encourage the partners to seek any sizable additions to their labor force. Their minimal capital, untried canning methods, and limited facility and crew allowed them to produce only two thousand cases of canned salmon. Other problems plagued the enterprise. Salmon decomposed in the hot California summer weather faster than the Maine-raised partners had anticipated, and when they at times packed spoiled fish, they rendered their product useless. The tins posed additional problems. Andrew Hapgood and his crew of experienced tinsmiths proved unable to make containers that consistently remained airtight throughout the cooking process; one of the partners claimed that faulty seams in tins caused "at least fifty percent" of the pack to spoil. The remainder was not well received in local markets, where consumers were skeptical about the quality of canned meats, especially fish, and fresh meat was available in abundance.[12]

The partners at first took an active role in marketing their product. Unable to find an immediate buyer, William Hume and Andrew Hapgood for a time unsuccessfully attempted to peddle their goods from door to door in Sacramento. Luckily for them, a San Francisco mer-

chant agreed to buy and market their canned salmon in Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America. Major markets did not emerge until 1871 when merchants in Great Britain began to sell canned salmon to industrial workers as a cheap source of protein; even then, canners had to wait for nearly two more decades for the development of substantial domestic markets for canned salmon. Still, the promise of at least a limited market encouraged the partners to continue.[13]

Their second year was a disappointment. When the scow on which the Humes and Hapgood had built the first cannery sank, they were able to salvage the machinery and stores, but the loss of the vessel foreshadowed their immediate fate on the Sacramento. Silt from hydraulic mining, pollution from increased human population, and several years of drought gave Sacramento River salmon a "peculiar flavor" that not only hurt sales but also adversely affected future salmon runs in the area. In its second year, the cannery produced only two thousand cases of questionable-quality salmon.[14]

Frustrated by this "haphazard business," Robert Hume estimated that "a few hundred dollars would have purchased all their interests in the business." In an attempt to salvage their investment the partners scouted for a new location and in 1866 settled on the Columbia River with its huge salmon runs, which during the 1860s reached record highs—in part a result of the decimation of local Native American groups. Ravaged by diseases in the first half of the century, the Native American population of the Pacific Northwest had significantly decreased, particularly along the lower Columbia River, and consequently, they harvested less salmon. European American activities had not yet caused substantial disruptions in the number of Columbia River salmon or in the quality of the spawning beds.[15]

At the outset of the Columbia River operations the partners sought to re-create the work culture of their Sacramento River cannery, including a common owner–worker identification and their direct involvement in the canning process. They transplanted men and machines from the original cannery and continued their established methods. Just as he had on the Sacramento River, Andrew Hapgood did all the cooking in order to keep the process secret and prevent competition. He shut himself in a small, windowless room with a large cast-iron kettle for boiling the packed salmon cans. He passed the cans in and out through a slot in the wall to prevent casual observers from discovering the "secret process," which amounted to little more than the cooking time and the amount of salt added to the brine solution in which the partners boiled the salmon. The higher boiling point of the brine solution cooked the salmon more thoroughly and softened the