

# A History of Connors Bros.

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The sardine industry has thrived in Blacks Harbour, New Brunswick for eighty years, ever since 1893 when the first Connors Bros. Limited company was incorporated. In that year, two brothers, Patrick and Lewis Connors expanded their business operations to including canning of sardines. Before this time, Patrick Connors was involved in the canning of calms, scallops, clam chowder, strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. Lewis Connors carried on a dry and pickled fish business and general store. Their father, James Connors came out from Ireland and settled in Blacks Harbour and is listed in McAlpine's New Brunswick Directory of 1889 as a farmer.

This area had some early settlements, attracted no doubt by the fishing and lumbering resources available. In 1784, Doctor William Paine, a Loyalist of the American Revolution, was granted what is known now as Frye's Island. Writing to a friend in that year he stated, "I have reconnoiter the adjacent country which at the present is an immense forest. Our situation is equality eligible for carrying on the fishery; as a convincing proof of this there are at this time not less than twenty sail of fishermen from New England in this Bay industriously employed in catching fish."

Another Loyalist, Samuel Bliss, a merchant of Greenfield, Massachusetts, was granted a smaller island at the mouth of the harbour, still known as Bliss Island. Several of our older citizens have come from families which had settled and were born on these islands.

Herring fishing in the Bay of Fundy appears to go back to these early settlements in this region. The method used in catching herring was with torch lights and dip nets. The use of weirs for catching was known to the Acadian French who first settled in Nova Scotia but was not adopted in Passamaquoddy Bay until 1820. The adoption of the weir in Charlotte County progressed slowly up to 1850. In that year there were 60 weirs in the county – 27 at Grand Manan, 21 at Campobello and 12 in the inner part of the bay. In 1919 there were 507 weirs counted in this area. By 1957, there was only 280 and fewer still in the 1960's when the seining fleet of boats was greatly increased to harvest the abundant supply of herring.

A first attempt at sardine canning was made by George Burnham of Eastport, Maine, in 1867. He had observed small pilchards being canned in France and he conceived the idea of treating the small herring in the same manner. It was not until 1875 that sufficient success had been achieved to attempt a commercial canning operation which also took place at Eastport. It failed, but the interest had been started.

In 1900, there were five canneries in Charlotte County – Connors Brothers in Blacks Harbour, Lewis Holmes in Beaver Harbour, Sutton Clark at L'Etang, Lord's at Lords Cove, Deer Island, and Simpson's at Richardson, Deer Island. Other early canneries included the MacDonald Packing Company at Fairhaven, Deer Island, which took over the sardine business of Lord's at Lord's Cove when Mr. Lord moved to Lubec, Maine. The MacDonald business failed in 1918. In 1928 the Farris's at Fairhaven operated a sardine factory. George Eaton's factory started in 1935 at Fairhaven. In 1936, these two factories incorporated under the name of H. W. Welch Limited.

In the early 1920's a conflict of interest of the two families of Patrick and Lewis Connors affected the proper management of the company. Through the company auditor, Arthur E. Cox of Saint John, he

arranged for new capital and management assistance through a group of Saint John businessmen. A new company was incorporated on October 23, 1923 but retaining the same name, Connors Bros. Ltd.

The first meeting of shareholders of the new company was held at the home of Bernard Connors, the son of Lewis Connors, on November 26, 1923. The shareholders present were: A. Neil McLean, Cyrus F. Inches, Allan McLean, H. H. Scovil, Burton M. Hill, J. M. Robinson, C. H. Easson, Patrick W. Connors, Lewis Connors, Bernard Connors and Robert Thompson. At that meeting six directors were elected: Patrick W. Connors, Burton M. Hill, J. M. Scovil, H. P. Robinson, J. M. Robinson and C. H. Easson.

At the director's meeting, the following officers of the company were elected: A. Neil McLean as president; Patrick W. Connors as vice-president; J. M. Scovil as secretary and Allan McLean as treasurer.

Mr. Patrick W. Connors agreed to act as general manager for the company under a contract for five years at an annual salary of \$10,000. He held this position until his death 4 years later in 1927.

Lewis Connors left Blacks Harbour and with his sons Bernard and Edwin opened up a new sardine factory in West Satin John under the name of Lewis Connors & Sons Limited. A price war ensued in 1924 between the two companies and in 1925 Connors Bros. Limited purchased the company, the first in an acquisition of all other competing companies over the next 20 years.

Today this company operates 8 plants for the packing of sardines in Charlotte County – 3 at Blacks Harbour and 1 at Seal Cove on Grand Manan, 1 at Back Bay, 1 at Fairhaven, 1 at Wilson's Beach, and 1 at Beaver Harbour. It is the only company in Canada producing sardines.

In 1923, the sardine industry in Canada was packing 60,000 to 1000,000 cases Connors Brothers paid out \$60,000 to fishermen and to plant labour about the same. Twenty-five years later, in 1948 the company paid out to fishermen one million dollars and for plant wages, one and a half million dollars. Fifty years later our annual payments to fishermen are in the 3½ to 4 million dollar range and payments to labour are 4½ million dollars. The volume of production ranges from 1 million to 1½ million cases each year.

In 1923, the approached of the new management group was to increase the volume of production and widen the export market for its products. In 1927, Mr. Burton M. Hill made a tour around the world in the interest of the company with the message that Connors Bros. Ltd. produces the lowest price quality fish food in the world.

Today, we export to 56 countries in the world with Jamaica, Guyana and Australia being our largest foreign markets. In the early years, goods were exported in wooden boxes. In 1928 the company erected its own shook mill with Mr. Sherwood of Second Falls in charge. Electric lights came to the village in 1928. During the 1930s the depression years did not materially affect the community with production of sardines continuing even though they were selling for 5 cents a can at the retail level. In 1935, a fire department was organized and a fire station built. In 1937, the movie theater was built with a seating capacity of 320. In 1939, the road was paved from Pennfield into Blacks Harbour.

During the war years, there was a scarcity of labour. Three buses and cares were used to transport workers from outside areas. In 1947 the company expanded its operations to Newfoundland to take advantage of the herring fishery in the Bay of Islands area. In order to maintain a large volume of

production, the company had had to look at all areas on the east coast where a supply of herring may occur. They appear in different areas at different times of the year. In recent years we have been trucking herring during the winter months from the Strait of Canso area – a difference of 350 miles.

The herring supply has been of topic for argument since the early 1900s. There have always been the skeptics who say the herring has gone for forever whenever a drop in the supply occurs. Fortunately there have always been the optimists. It would appear in recent years that to be on the safe side in assuring a continuing supply of herring that proper management of the herring fisheries must be followed. You may have read of the quota system being set up for the east coast herring fishery. This means that only a certain tonnage of herring can be caught in the year. Once reached, fishing has to cease for that year except for weir fishing which is not included in the quota. This is a conservation measure. Reduction plants could utilize tremendous tons of herring for processing into fishmeal. Scientist felt that the supply of herring fishery could become non-existent. This happened on the west coast.

To bring the history of the management of the company up to date for you, the original group of 1923 with a few additions and deletions guided the business up to 1967. Senator A. Neil McLean was president during 44 years when he died in 1967. His brother, Dr. A. M. A. McLean was treasure ad managing director. During his tenure as a Member of Parliament from 1962 to 1968 he relinquished his official office in the company but continued as a consultant. He died in May 1969.

In 1967 control of the company was acquired by George Weston Limited of Toronto. A member of that organization, Mr. W. S. Robertson acted as president until February, 1968, when Mr. Keith Dalglish of George Weston Limited was elected president and chairman of the board. At the annual meeting, in September 1968, Senator Donald McLean Sr. was elected president.

In June 1970, Senator Donald McLean Sr. was elected chairman of the Board of Directors, Donald McLean Jr. was elected president. Vice-presidents elected were Victor H. Bradford Jr., James A. Stewart, W. M. Quartermain and G. E. Moore. Mr. Murdo McLean was appointed treasurer. He had been secretary of the company since 1941 when the previous secretary, Mr. James John M. Scovil had died.

A further reorganization of the company's corporate structure occurred in 1971 when Connors Bros. Limited and all of its subsidiaries were amalgamated and a new company incorporated on December 30, 1971, retaining the name "Connors Bros. Limited".

The McLean name has been associated with the Connors Bros. Limited since 1923 and the relationship among them has often confused people. The father of Neil and Allan McLean was a brother of Donald McLean's father which made the four older McLean's cousins. Senator Donald McLean Sr. came to Blacks Harbour in 1923 and Murdo came later the same year from Whyhogamaugh, Cape Breton.

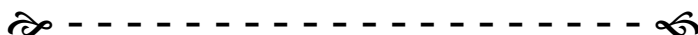
There are several of our senior citizens still living in Blacks Harbour who remember and were part of the early years of the industry in the 1800s. Mr. Victor Hugo Bradford Sr., Mr. Warren Justason and Mrs. Chipman Brewer, to name a few. Mr. Victor Bradford's mother, Mrs. Lola Bradford, was brought to Blacks Harbour from Beaver Harbour by Patrick and Lewis Connors to instruct the women in the art of packing sardines. An interview with this lady was written by Mrs. Rose Haughn and published in the Fundy Fisherman in 1946 (see below). The early methods of canning the sardines are described.

Based on today's standards they were archaic but also ingenious in many ways. A copy of this interview is attached.

The factory site has been utilized for 8 years but tonight I can inform you that a new canning plant adjacent to this site will be started immediately at the estimated cost of four million dollars.

The experience of the past and the outlook for the future of this industry has led us to view it with optimism – hopefully for another 80 years.

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## **Mrs. Lola Jane Bradford Celebrates 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

Originally published in the Fundy Fisherman Newspaper, Blacks Harbour (1946)

Written by Rose Haughn

Mrs. Lola Jane Bradford who resides with her daughter, Mrs. Chipman M. Brewer of Blacks Harbour, celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday on May 6<sup>th</sup>. One of the older residents of the village, she is perhaps the most noted having brought here in 1895 by Pat and Lewis Connors, founders of the firm of Connors Bros. Limited, to instruct the women of the village in the art of packing sardines and she packed the first sardines shown at the Saint John Exhibition in 1896.

A cheerful, interesting person, known as Grandma Bradford to the whole village, she is the mother of eighteen children, eleven of whom are living, and also has 83 grandchildren and 48 great-grandchildren, making a total of 141 living descendants of whom 95 are resident in Blacks Harbour. She also has 10 grandchildren deceased.

She was born at Saco, Maine, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1866, daughter of Ora Barney who came out from Ireland at the age of eight years and Florella Tucker, a native of Saco, Maine. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1882, just before her sixteenth birthday, she married Martin Byrne Bradford and went to reside in Eastport, Maine, where six children were born, Victor H. Sr. of Blacks Harbour, Harold of Oak Bay, NB, Bailey and Royce (both deceased in infancy), Kathleen (Mrs. Warren Justason) and Helen (Mrs. John Justason) both of Blacks Harbour. Mrs. Bradford was employed packing sardines at MacLean's factory while in Eastport and after living there for nearly ten years she moved to Beaver Harbour, NB, to pack sardines for Lewis Holmes who had a cannery there. Two children, Martin (killed in France in 1918) and Eric (who died of wounds after returning home in 1919) were born at Beaver Harbour.

In 1895 Pat and Lewis Connors started the Canadian company, Connors Bros. Limited, which was to become world famous for its sardines, and Mrs. Bradford was persuaded to move to Blacks Harbour and instruct the women how to pack sardines. The remainder of her family, ten children, were born here: Windfield W., Gladys (Mrs. Chipman Brewer), Mildred (Mrs. Wesley Leavitt), Lola and Avis (deceased in infancy), Myles, Donald, Ernest (deceased in 1943), Freda (Mrs. Wendell Estabrooks of Marysville, NB) and Theodore.

She had four brothers who served in the American Civil war of 1861-1865, three of whom were killed in action. Four sons served in World War One, two of whom were killed, and her youngest son,

Theodore, served overseas all during the Second World War She also had ten grandsons in the Army: Eric, Martin, Donald, Norman, and Theodore A. Bradford.; Reginald, Arnold, Robert and George Justason; and Wesley Leavitt; two grandsons with the R.C.A.F.: James Estabrooks and Hazen Bradford, and her granddaughter Gladys (Justason) Surrette had the distinction of being the only girl from this village to serve overseas.

Mrs. Bradford has grown up in the sardine industry and remembers vividly the gay nineties when the company first started here. The women received 12¢ per case for packing the fish and the average wage for a man was \$1.25 to \$1.50 per day. Four hundred cases was a large shipment and all the work was done by hand. First, the cans were hand-made. The tinfoil was brought in by boat and the material for the rims was then taken to Eastport to be decorated and the lettering was all on the side of the can instead of the top as today. The bottoms and covers were identical rectangular pieces and so a ring was placed on the cover to distinguish it. When the tin arrived back from Eastport, it was cut into strips 7/8" wide and the proper length by a pair of shears operated by foot-power. The rims were bent into a rectangular shape, the ends soldered together, and the bottom piece was then pushed down inside and soldered in by a can-maker. The soldering was done on a device called a "whirl-a-gig". This was a round piece of iron shaped like a stove cover, an iron rod 3' long went down through the middle and the sharp end of the rod was set into a block on the floor. A top iron piece came to table height and has a Hinchley clasp which held the can in place. The device could be rotated by moving the feet on the lower piece of the iron enabling the can-maker to solder the whole can without turning it by hand. Cook stoves were used first for heating the soldering irons and later kerosene stoves. A good can-maker could solder 300 and sometimes 400 cans per hour.

The tiny fish arrived by boat as today but were hoisted out by hand and wheeled into the factory where they were pickled in tanks made of hogshead. When taken from the brine they were placed crosswise on wooden racks made of slats and set in the sun an hour to dry or if the weather was unfavorable the flakes were placed in a dry house on the second floor and stoves downstairs provided the necessary heat for drying.

After flaking, the fish were placed in a wire basket which was passed by hand through a 15' tank filled with boiling oil and with steam pipes in the bottom. After being fried in oil they were lifted out to cool and drain before being packed.

The packers standing at a table placed the fish in cans and they also had to oil and head their cans. One ladle of oil from a bucket in the middle of the table was placed in each can of fish. Each packer had what was known as a "Header" which was a piece of iron four or five inches long, 1/2" wide and 1 1/2" thick with a thin lip in the end of it. The top of the can was laid on and the header used to fit the cover down into the can.

The can then went to the sealer who soldered the covers on the same as the bottoms. Each sealer had his own mark which he placed in the ring on the cover and he was fined one cent for each leaky can, but got only 25¢ per 100 good tins.

After sealing, the cans were dumped into a large tank of water at the boiling point and left for an hour and a half. They were then dumped out on the wooden floor of the building, covered with sawdust and left for twenty minutes, turned over and over and raked through a trap door in the floor, dropping they rolled along slats which removed the sawdust and cleaned the cans which were then picked off by hand and packed in wooden boxes for shipment to various parts of the province.

Comparison between the methods of the nineties (1890s) and those of the 1940's shows the progress of the machine age, the saving in time and labour, and the increase in productive capacity. Today the can proper is pressed out of a sheet of tin in one piece by a can-press and the covers are also machine made. The fish still arrive by boat but are dipped out by automatic hoists and passed down a sluice onto a wire screen which removes the water and fish scales and the scaled fish pass on to a carrier that delivers them to the flaking machine which lays the fish separately on the flakes. These flakes are lifted off by hand and placed in the steam racks which hold twenty-five flakes and they are placed in the steam box and cooked according to the size of the fish. The racks are wheeled from the steam boxes and put in the drier and from here are put on conveyors and passed into the packing room where the women remove the heads and tails with scissors and placed the fish in the cans as of old. The cans are placed on trays of twenty-five each and when four trays are ready they are lifted off by hand, wheeled to an automatic oiler which does the 25 tines at one time and they are then taken to the sealing or closing machine where the covers are laid on by hand and the operation completed. From here the tins pass by conveyor belt to the retorts where they are processed and they are raked out of the retorts through a door in the bottom onto a wire conveyor belt which carries them through the washer and rinse water dumping them onto another belt which takes them into the shipping room where they are cooled and then packed in wooden boxes for shipment, being now well-known in practically every county of the world.

Mrs. Bradford has the distinction of being the only woman to hold the position of foreman in the packing room here. Always ready and willing to help, during World War One when men were scarce she acted as foreman for two years and every season since and during World War Two she has worked in some capacity in the plant.

Her husband, Martin B. Bradford Sr., died February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917. She is a staunch member of the United Baptist Church, has a deep interest in the welfare of the village in which she has spent much of her life, and attributes her long life to Christian living and plenty of exercise, especially walking.

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Note: Lola Jane Bradford died on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1949. She and her husband, Martin Byrne Bradford, are buried in the Blacks Harbour Baptist Cemetery.

Transcription by Jason N. Gaudet, Heritage Charlotte (2008)  
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