

THE CORN CANNING FACTORY – A BETHEL FARM CO-OP

March 11, 2011

New York importers, Wolff & Reessing Co., were the first to invest in a Bethel sweet corn canning operation. Canning began in 1880. Wolff & Reessing was already well known along the coast of Maine for its sardine canning factories. The company's arrival in Maine was due to the Franco – Prussian War of 1870 which had curtailed French exports of sardines to America.

The story of how Wolff & Reessing discovered Bethel may never be known. Possibly a Bethel person found them. The Androscoggin's intervale land would seem reassuring to a company agent looking for a reasonably good place to open a corn canning enterprise.

For more information about the Wolff & Reessing Company see this Lubec, Maine, web site: <http://www.visitlubecmaine.com/about/abouteconomy.htm> and another website covering the herring situation in Maine: <http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/noreaster/noreasterFW97/Sardine.html>

In 1880, America's food canning industry was only about 75 years old. Food canning had started in France in 1795.

In 1868 Burnham and Morrill opened their South Paris sweet corn canning plant; this factory may have caught the attention of Julius Wolff

In 1875 Julius Wolff went to Eastport, Maine to scout out a new source of sardines. In 1876 Wolff & Reessing opened their first sardine canning factory. His company eventually operated 18 sardine canning plants. Up to this point, it seems that Wolff & Reessing were importers but had not yet opened canning factories in Maine.

The June 8, 1880 Oxford County Democrat reported in the Bethel news that farmers have contracted to plant one hundred acres of sweet corn for the canning factory of John Webb. He is putting the Clough mill in order and is already turning out a large quantity of cans. (The Clough mill site was on the west side of Mill Brook next to the upper, higher dam.) On August 24 the newspaper reported that the corn factory commences packing Monday. The improvements about the business and the improved machinery put in must be a grand success, under the management of their energetic agent, Hon. J. M. Webb and his corps of efficient assistants.

To end the 1880 season, on November 16 the Democrat reported the following: Webb's corn factory put up 100,000 cans of sweet corn which is being shipped to market by the Grand Trunk. The corn and grain crops were shortened by severe drought, yet some farmers who planted early and used Bradley's phosphate have made it a paying crop. Mr. W. Town raised \$60.00 worth on one acre. S.B. Twitchell raised \$90.00



of sugar beets on one acre. (The 1880 news did not connect Webb to Wolff and Reessing directly. Town records have not been examined as to the paying tenant in this case.)

The Wolff & Reessing corn canning

factory (left) was on land previously owned by Eber Clough. Due to old age and misfortune Clough had moved elsewhere and had lost his property to foreclosure for non payment of taxes. Clough's property, now occupied by the corn factory, was located less than one-quarter mile from the site where historians say in 1774 Bethel began. . The company's rental agreement included the buildings (mill) and two acres on the east side of the Albany road plus the house and 20 acres on the west side of the road opposite the mill. The company's lease ran until May of 1890. Annual rental was \$200.

September 6, 1881, the corn factory was reported to have commenced operations and the corn is very good. They employ about one hundred hands and expect it will take six weeks to can the corn, after which they propose to can beef and mutton until December.

From 1886 through 1889, the only local name connected to the corn factory was Augustus Mellen (A.M. "Gus") Carter who was 49 in 1889. According to William Lapham, writing in his 1891 History of Bethel, Maine, Carter was a farmer and civil engineer who lived in the Carter neighborhood of Middle Interval (Bethel). Lapham refers to Carter as the "superintendent of corn packing establishment in Bethel.

Carter had served one and one-half years in the Seventh Maine Battery during the War of Rebellion; in 1866 he was elected as a road surveyor and in 1868 was elected one of five road commissioners in Bethel. In 1890 when the Bethel Water Company began construction of a water line from Chapman Brook into Bethel Hill village, Carter worked as a civil engineer at least some of the time as pipe arrived by rail and hauled to previously selected drop-zones. After the water line was finished he was appointed to a state commission on evaluation and his corn factory superintending is not mentioned again in 1890 or 1891.

In June 1884, the Oxford Democrat reported that 100 acres of corn had been planted for the Bethel Corn Factory. Its April 7, 1885 edition reported that Wolff and Reessing of New York have entered into a five year contract with (Bethel) farmers to continue

canning and packing sweet corn. The canning company will spend \$4,000 on improved machinery. Farmers will receive two and one-half cents per 26 oz. can of corn..

1886: Sweet corn consignments for canning expand – Gilead and Newry farmers participate.

May: Farmers have signed up to plant 225 acres of sweet corn for Wolff & Reessing. Gilead: quite an acreage of corn and some acres of lima beans will be planted for Bethel's corn shop. Bethel; The corn factory will take all the lima beans that farmers can raise this year. Seed in limited quantities can be found at the factory. Middle Interval: 17 acres of sweet corn has been planted for the corn shop.

July: E. Richardson & Son are manufacturing 10,000 packing boxes for the corn shop. When a seven ton boiler was loaded on to A.M. Carter's wagon at the rail station, the weight of the load squat the wagon wheels into the dust.

1887: A great year for sweet corn

January: There was a short news item in the Democrat related to Maine's sweet corn canning. The item was written by an occasional correspondent to the "Boston Cultivator" by W.D. Philbrick. "Sweet corn for canning is grown almost exclusively in the state of Maine."

August: The New York owners shipped in new machinery. Steam powered mechanized corn cob strippers cut the corn off the cob and filled cans in one operation. News items claimed that the new machines did the job of eight men. In the same article, probably after talking with the factory's manager, the reporter noted that Wolff & Reessing owned a total of 21 fish packing and other concerns, presumably Bethel's factory was one of the twenty-one.

At the end of the 1887 corn canning season in Bethel, the county newspaper correspondents reported impressive results that also gave a good picture of the extent of corn raising in the Androscoggin River area east and west of Bethel. The corn factory paid \$7,000 to 170 farmers. The average pay per acre was \$35. Farmers from Gilead, Mason, West Bethel, Mayville, South and East Bethel, Newry and Albany made up the pool of corn suppliers. If the figures were correctly reported, sweet corn acreage amounted to 200 acres. So, on the average, each farmer grew only a little more than one acre – mechanical corn planters were just coming on the scene.

The factory spent its last operating day canning lima beans. Farmers who had planted even less than an acre of lima beans thought that they were being very well paid, again, according to news correspondents. The volume of one season's canning also seems impressive: 340,000 cans were put up; best day's production was 28,000 26 oz. cans. In 1887, the canning factory was approximately one and one-half miles from the Grand Trunk Railway depot in Bethel. Charles L. Davis used two teams of horses to haul corn from the corn factory to the freight cars at the rail depot. His teams made eight trips

daily. There were 36 boxes (of canned corn) in each cart (hay rack) load. At 50 pounds per box it made a load of 1800 pounds. One carload held 500 boxes and 28 cars were loaded.

1888: A very poor year for sweet corn – the last year for Wolff & Reessing in Bethel.

Poor weather conditions throughout the summer of 1888, spelled disaster for sweet corn harvesting and the Bethel canning factory. No figures were reported but the word around town was that the factory suffered a seventy-five percent drop in canning compared to 1887. It was Wolff & Reessing's last year in Bethel.

1889: The Wyman Brothers of Millbridge, Maine buy Wolff & Reessing's canning factory.

In April 1889 two brothers, J and E. A. Wyman of Millbridge, Maine, purchased the corn packing business in Bethel from Wolff & Reessing of New York. The Wymans will continue to operate the canning factory. (Here the newspaper made a mistake. The Wymans were from Millbridge, Maine, not Woburn Mass., as the Democrat had reported.)

Jasper Wyman learned canning as an employee of the John W. Jones Company in Millbridge, where he acquired a thorough knowledge of the business. In 1874, in co partnership with his brother, Edgar Albert Wyman, he formed a co partnership as J. & E. A. Wyman, to carry on the canning business on a large scale at Millbridge, Bethel, Reedfield, Cherryfield, Columbia and East Corinth. The products canned include corn, sardines, lobsters, clams and blueberries. This firm continued a large and growing business for fifteen years, and in 1889, the brothers incorporated as the J. & E. A. Wyman Company. They carried on the business up to 1901, when Edgar Albert Wyman sold out his interests on account of ill health and removed to the State of Washington. At that point Jasper Wyman controlled the stock of the corporation and sold the corn canning factories, which included the one in Bethel. (Maine: A History, Volume 4 by Louis Clinton Hatch (1872-1931), Maine Historical Society, Google Books.)

The Wymans' agent, Augustus M. "Gus" Carter, Esq., was signing 1889 contracts with farmers for planting. Two weeks later Gilead's correspondent reported that Carter had been in town signing up farmers to raise corn and beans for canning. By August, farming news indicated a good corn crop despite some cold weather and heavy rain. Word on the street was that by the end of August the corn factory would start up.

As canning operations got under way, the factory employed 60 men and women; this number increased to about 100 as the month wore on. Near the end of September, the corn factory ran out of cans and telegraphed for an emergency shipment of 68,000 cans from Massachusetts. "Charles Davis had three full days of hauling (to get) them (from the railroad depot) to the factory-16 loads with horses-filled a large hay rack with each load." When the factory closed in late September, 335,000 cans of

corn and lima beans had been filled. From Gilead came the report that “the most paying crop this year is the lima beans which were planted for the canning factory: Eben Chapman raised \$54 worth from one-eighth of an acre and Dana Wight \$170 worth from three-quarters of an acre.” As if to confirm earlier estimates of how many acres of corn were raised by individual farmers, St. John Hastings, a North Bethel farmer whose fields included the area where Sunday River flows into the Androscoggin, said that he cut 110 loads, 55 bushels to the load of corn on less than two acres.”

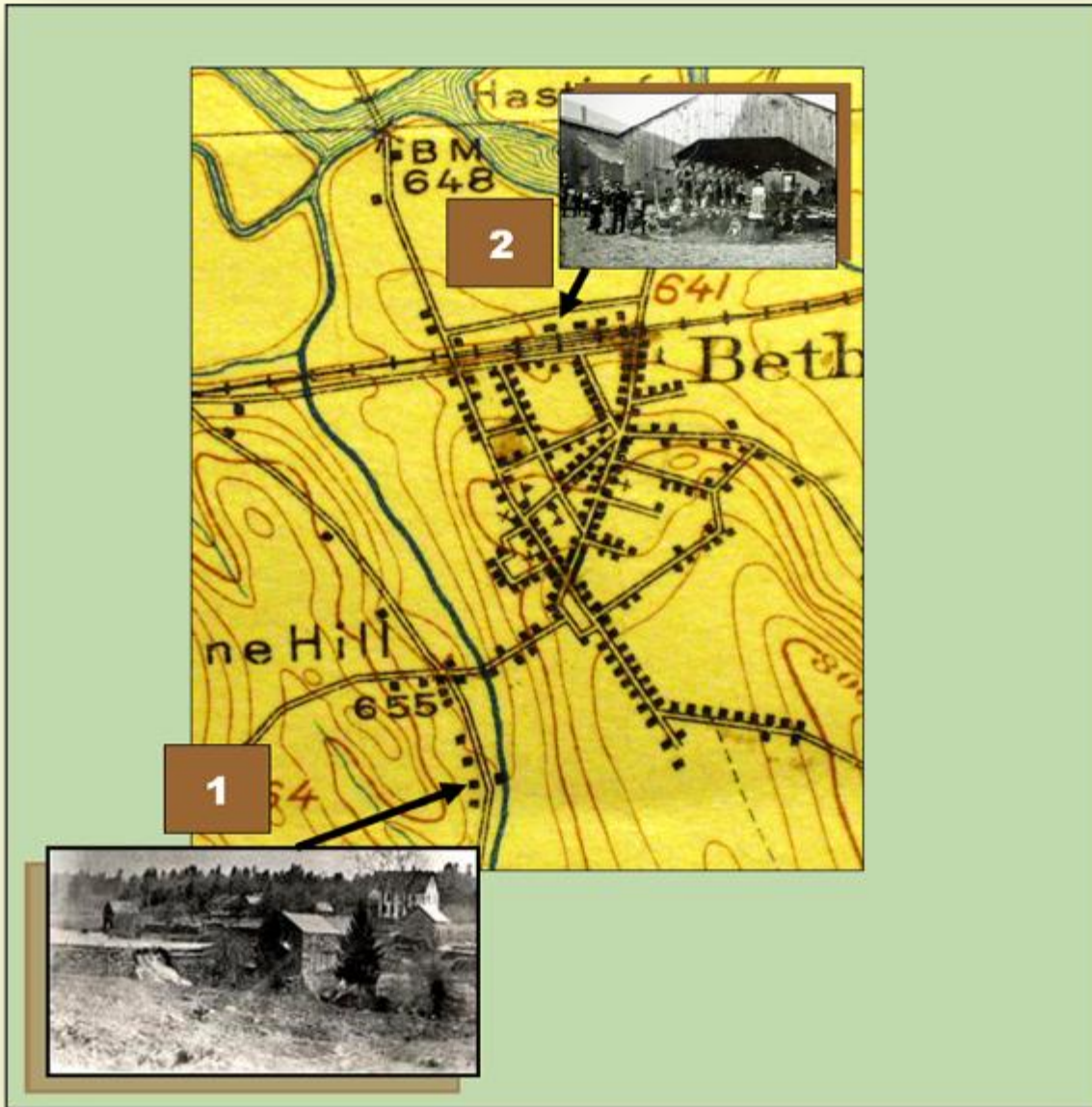
In mid October 1889, the papers printed - the Wyman’s “are now sending their pack of corn and beans to Wolff & Reesing, New York. It will take 30 (rail) cars to carry the season’s pack. They had seven and one-half acres of Lima beans planted and raised eight hundred and eighty-seven bushels for which they paid \$2,217.20, being \$295.66 an acre. Who says farming doesn’t pay?”

A special town meeting was held Saturday, December 9, 1889. At the meeting it was voted to appropriate \$2500 to be used for buying a lot and building a new corn shop thereon. A lot of land has been bargained for of Eli Barker, northerly of the railroad but westerly of and near to the chair factory. (See map below) “The shop is to be leased to the Wyman Bros. for a term of years and will be operated by them. The buildings will probably cost more than the amount appropriated, the deficiency being supplied by the Wyman’s. Wyman Bros. have operated in the old shop this season and have given universal satisfaction.”

1890: Bethel builds a new corn factory building near the rail depot. Actually Maine’s Constitution’s Home Rule section encouraged towns to appropriate money for industrial buildings to foster economic growth.

During 1890, work on the new building for the Wyman’s corn factory started as soon as weather permitted. Papers reported: “Mr. Wyman, our sweet corn man, is taking down the old corn factory (located on the former Eber Clough property west of Mill Brook) and is having it moved together with the machinery to its new location near the depot, where the town owns about two acres of land and is to build on it a corn factory building with the \$2,500 raised for that purpose. Mr. Wyman will occupy it; the old factory building will become an annex to the new one.

By mid March, several carloads of lumber from the Berlin Mills Company (Berlin, New Hampshire) had been landed on the site of the new corn factory; the Town of Bethel had a strong crew at work putting in the foundations which were nearly ready; framing had begun. There was real sense of urgency by all concerned. Besides the new building, the Wyman’s work crew was putting up sections of the old building and getting the machinery ready. Also, they were building an ice house and stocking it with ice. At the same time as this was going on, the Bethel Water Company had over 100 men at work building a pipeline from Chapman Brook to the village for public water supply. One of the first large customers for pure water was the corn factory.



Above: a quick map tour of the corn factory's move from Mill Brook [1] to the Grand Trunk Railway [2]. The map shows Bethel's buildings and streets as of 1914. If you look closely at an expanded image of the map there is a rail siding close to the corn factory and neighboring chair factory.

On September 3, 1890 the new corn factory opened; it was hooked up to the Bethel Water Company's new main. On September 26, 1890 corn canning was finished. However, the factory was busy throughout October. The employees were reported very busy - sorting and labeling, packing boxes and getting shipments ready to leave by rail for New York, Chicago and the Pacific states.

And, the factory was still busy canning apples. As it turned out, this was the latest date in the fall season that the corn factory had continued canning operations since 1886. Sensing from all of the fall reports, those involved with the new corn factory, farmers, employees, town officials and the public were enthusiastically pleased with the outcome of the town's investment. Getting packed cartons loaded onto rail cars was now much simpler than before; only a few hundred yards separated the factory from rail sidings. For farmers hauling corn to the factory from almost any direction, the new location was more central for all than the old site near Mill Brook.

1891: Good corn crop – successful canning season.

January: Eber Clough, Jr., is canvassing the town for the sweet corn plant for the coming season in the interest of the Wyman Bros. (Clough has apparently taken over the superintendent job previously held by A.M. "Gus" Carter.)

September: Grover Hill, Middle Interval and Newry report that a number of men from each location have employment at the Bethel corn canning factory. Overall, the factory reports about 150 hands employed. Officials of the Grand Trunk Railway stopped for an hour in Bethel and visited the corn factory and the chair factory. On the 22nd, the paper reported that the Wymans are putting up about 33,000 cans a day. (In October, it was reported that the best day's output was 32,000 cans.) The Bethel corn factory closed its season on September 29th. The factory filled 300,000 cans; it was claimed to be the best year since the company had started operations in Bethel.

October: The Wyman Bros. are shipping their sweet corn as fast as they can label and pack it into boxes. The October 9, 1891 Democrat reported that the Wymans had finished and paid the town \$150 in rent.

1892: The Wymans and Bethel corn canning factory enjoy another successful year.

At the beginning of September when the corn canning season was about to start a good corn crop signaled a successful canning season was expected. On September 27th the paper reported that the corn factory had finished packing. The factory had put up 300,000 cans of which 95% were deemed as **No 1 Corn**. The Wymans told the paper that they considered it the best season they had had here.

October 1894 - Lightning struck the iron stack on Wyman's corn factory. Part of the lightning bolt ran down a guy wire and tore up several lengths of the Grand Trunk fence. Another branch of the same lightning strike ran down the stack into the engine room, thence through the whole set of buildings following the water and steam pipes.

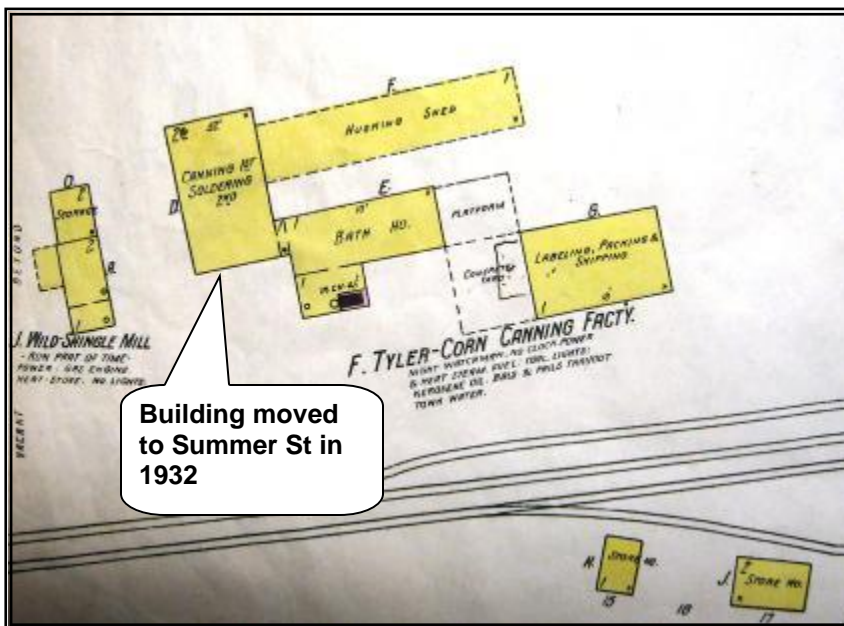
Curtis Abbott, bookkeeper, Mr. Wyman and C.L. McGoon were in the office and not more than ten feet from the place where the current left a pipe and leaped through the floor. Mr. Wyman was paralyzed for a few seconds but soon recovered. The event occurred on a day when the full crew was not working.

Corn Canning Factory reports during **1893** and **1897** did not show any major changes, other than the incident above. In May 1893 news reported that Herbert Lord of Waterford had assumed the manager's job. When the canning season began in September the factory expected a heavy yield and in September they reported hiring 150 hands. In the last week of September, the can count had reached 250,000 with record 32,000 cans put up in one day. But at the end of the season, owner Wyman had noted that statewide corn harvest for canning was only half the usual yield; however, in Bethel he judged the season as producing about three fourths of an average good year's crop.

F.J. Tyler Leases Corn Shop, May 13, 1917 Citizen: A special town meeting was held last Saturday (April 28, 1917) with but a few present. Mr. Paul C. Thurston was chosen moderator and then Mr. Tyler stated his proposition. It was voted to lease the corn factory property to F. J. Tyler for a term of three years at \$50 per year, with the right of renewal at the end of three years at a rental to be then agreed upon.

Mr. Tyler will begin repairs at once and also the installation of machinery. About sixty acres of corn have been pledged and it is expected that enough more will come in to make it seventy-five. A good early seed has been secured and all may be assured of a square deal.

The farmers should give Mr. Tyler hearty support and plant some sweet corn, if only half an acre, for it may mean the running of the corn factory more that in the corn season. Why would not the canning of peas, string beans, beets, apples, etc., be possible here?



1924 Notes: Night watchman, no clock, power and heat steam, fuel: coal, lights kerosene oil, barrels and pails throughout town water



Connect the map with the photo.

Photo shows the “husking shed” and crew, to the left is the “bath house” and in the rear of the husking shed is seen the “canning and soldering” building. Both the photo and map are Bethel Historical Society property.

The White Mountain Brand label, below, was the last corn canning identity used by the Bethel business of Fritz Tyler. Tyler (1873-1964) had the reputation of a go-getter and an innovative, industrious person. Tyler Street in Bethel, which connects Chapman and Vernon Streets, is named for him.



Tyler operated the canning plant from 1917 until 1926 when the business closed. In 1929 Mr. Tyler transferred title of the canning factory property to his name from company ownership.

EPILOGUE

In 1932, Mr. Tyler moved the main canning building to Summer Street where it became the Harrington's Feed and Grain Store. In 1964 the building housed the startup of Western Maine Supply Company. Later it became "The Backstage", a pub, eatery and entertainment place; currently (2010) the building houses "The Funky Red Barn" (2010 photo right) also a pub and eatery.



In 1944 a surging fire on the Middle Interval Road destroyed the Leslie Davis planer mill. Davis was able to lease the corning factory property from Tyler where Davis then set up a new planer mill. The Leslie Davis Company continued to occupy the same site into the 1990's.

Going back to the Wyman era of the corn factory. After Edgar A. Wyman left the company, it was incorporated as Jasper Wyman & Sons; the corn canning plants were sold in 1901. Today **Jasper Wyman & Son**, the leading US grower, packer, and marketer of wild blueberries and flash-frozen berry fruits, is still in Bethel but in the frozen food section of Bethel's Shop 'n Save (called the IGA by many).

—A prominent "Son of Bethel", Frederick "Bud" Kneeland (1928-2001), became the CEO and president of Jasper Wyman and Son from 1969 to 1984. His career achievements also included being the first legislative finance officer for the state; he was a trustee emeritus of Gould Academy where he had graduated in 1945. He was made an honorary colonel in the Maine State Police. In a more modest way he began his accounting career at Hanover Dower Mill in Bethel. Born in West Bethel, Mr. Kneeland was the oldest son of Roland and "Libbie" Kneeland. On his death in 2001, he was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery in West Bethel.

Sources for this article about Bethel's sweet corn canning came from the Internet, Bethel Historical Society collections and the Bethel Citizen. The majority of the information about the early years of corn canning was reported in the Oxford County newspapers Democrat and Advertiser. Microfilm files of these newspapers are owned by the Bethel Historical Society.

The Bethel Journals

Donald G. Bennett

PO Box 763

Bethel, Maine 04217