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Hattie Bagley

Stephanie S. Gough
Campobello Island

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Cover Page Footnote

The following is based on the memories of 98-year-old Alice (née Boyden) Gough, an Eastport native and longtime resident of Campobello Island, who spent two seasons as a bookkeeper at R.J. Peacock Canning Company's #2 factory, 1937-1938.

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The following is based on the memories of 98-year-old Alice (née Boyden) Gough, an Eastport native and longtime resident of Campobello Island, who spent two seasons as a bookkeeper at R.J. Peacock Canning Company's #2 factory, 1937-1938.

The *Lubec* rounded the Friar,[1] white bow and wheelhouse becoming starboard and stern as the ferry chugged into full view. She let loose with a shrill whistle scream meant for Alice.

The young woman threw on a suede coat, one arm in, one arm out, one stockinged foot slipped into a saddle shoe, then another, and out the door, where she could see the boat now passing the Shag.[2] She broke into a run, dark curls bobbing. Her father-in-law watched her go, judged the distance from the *Lubec* to the Welshpool wharf and shook his head. She'd be late again.

Down in the 'pool, Alice slowed to a trot as she neared the wharf. The men on board the ferry beamed their good mornings. On most days, she was the only passenger picked up there and they would wait for her to arrive. She took a seat at the stern, next to Moses Pike, pausing a moment to catch her breath. The captain threw the boat into reverse before heading her towards their destination, Eastport, Maine.

R.J. Peacock Canning Co.'s #2 factory jutted out over the beach in Eastport's North End and into the cold waters of the Passamaquoddy Bay.[3] The office was not in fact adjoined to the factory but occupied one end of the building where the barrels of cotton seed oil were kept. It was April of 1937, and Alice had just begun her first season as bookkeeper for the cannery. She shared the office with the factory manager, Horace Bagley, a tall, thoughtful man, nearing sixty.

The room had a wooden floor, with a small sink in one corner and a wood stove in another. Horace's desk was on the back side. Alice's was on the waterside, next to a window that provided her with a view of Campobello Island across the bay. There was a small bathroom, where the 19-year-old would comb her hair and freshen up. "The soap they had there was gray looking and I used to brush my teeth with that," she said.

The office was a quiet oasis of civility, a stone's throw from the hustle and bustle, smells, shouts and sounds of the cannery, running at full tilt beside it. There, herring chokers, dozens of women who stood at the packing tables

snipping the heads off the fish, systematically packed cans with sometimes four herring, sometimes six. The noise of their chatter mixed with the industrial clangs of iron and hisses of steam as the fish were flaked, steamed, packed, stacked, filled with oil or mustard and sealed in tins.

On the south side of the office, there was a small window that looked upon the houses, clotheslines and canneries of the North End. Next to the window was the office door, and it wasn't too long before Horace's wife strode through it.

"I'm Hattie Bagley," she said smiling in Alice's direction.

Alice took in her attire, typical for a sardine packer—stained white apron, hair tied back by kerchief—and struggled to keep her mouth from dropping open. "She was packing sardines. I couldn't believe it. *The boss's wife!* In Eastport, the boss's wife would never, ever go in the factory and pack sardines. You could have knocked me over with a feather."

The Bagleys were from Whiting, but they owned a house in Lubec, up on the hill by the Catholic Church. Hattie wanted a new sink for it so she was packing fish that year to get the money to buy it. It wasn't just any sink—it was a Monel Metal sink, six feet long, double drain board, shiny bluish grey, and very expensive.[4] Alice didn't know anyone else who had one. Hattie spent so much time talking about it and treated the sales representative with such reverence that when he came by in early days of her new job, Alice mistook him for the factory owner.

Yet there was more. During the summer months in order to be closer to work, *Horace and Hattie lived in one of the factory camps!* Though the Bagley's camp was a little nicer than the infamous skid row that Eastport's cannery housing had become, with a little porch and a couple of rooms, and down closer to the water, it was still… *shocking*.

"People from Eastport who didn't have much money stayed in the camps. They stayed in them year round. When I was there, none of them worked in the factory and they were poor. There must have been six or seven camps at Number Two. They were in a row, made from wood and painted red," says Alice.

"I was never inside of one."

Alice was from Eastport, but the year before she had married a young fisherman from Campobello named Joe Gough. Boats had suddenly taken her interest. From her desk at #2, she had a clear view of the low, graceful sardine carriers coming and going at the factory wharf. She quickly learned all their names by heart. "Every time a boat was in sight on the water, the men would name it, but I always knew it before they said it," she said proudly.

On her lunch break, Alice would walk downtown to the *Sentinel* office where her friend Amy Pike worked. They would buy a tomato and some cheese at the A&P, before wandering across the street to look at the shops. Next to the grocer's was Carroll Hickey's shoe store. When Alice came through the door, Hickey greeted her by shouting out her shoe size: "Number Six!"

From Hickey's, Alice and Amy would pass by Nina Lovell's variety store, packed with oddities, and Aimondo Conti's, where Joe liked to buy his cigarettes and oranges and bananas. "They were Italian, the Contis. Joe liked Conti, and Conti liked Joe. Once Joe went in and Conti passed him a twenty dollar bill and told him he had dropped it there the week before. I thought that was nice of him," says Alice.

At J.J. Newberry's on the corner of Water and Boynton, the young women would browse the selection of rouges, lipsticks, bobby pins, ladies' underwear and hair lotions. Amy had a wealthy Aunt Lavinia from New York who often sent her clothing in the latest styles. She was petite, with shoulder length brown hair set in waves and had a nice figure. She was never long without a beau and lunchtime conversation revolved around the latest.

Across from Newberry's, the girls studied the posters at the Acme movie theatre, next to Wadsworth's wharf where the *Lubec* docked. Just past Berman's clothing store was Alice's favorite shop, Samuel Kramer's. "I always bought my clothes at Kramer's. He was Jewish. If he thought there was something I would like, he would save it until I got over there. I still have a green wool suit up in the attic, a jacket and skirt. It was really expensive, but he didn't sell it so he let me have it at a good price. He always gave me a good buy. I was very stylish, or thought I was."

Past the Waco Diner, where Izzy Levin[5] was often waiting by his taxi, the girls could make out the Hotel East on Sea Street, alongside the great brick building of the American Can Company. Further on, passengers would be embarking and disembarking at the Eastern Steamship Wharf, seasonal residents from "Portland, Boston, New York, Phil'a and all points South and West." Just south of there was the bridge to Sodom, Eastport's gritty South End.

After lunch, Alice would drop Amy at the *Sentinel* before beginning the walk back to work. She passed by Oscar Brown's bowling alley where Luella Bleumortier from Grand Manan worked. Next to Edward Whalen's Dry Goods, where her older sister Mary liked to buy cloth, was Lillian Henderson's variety. Most days, Lillian was waiting outside to walk with Alice up over the hill and back to the North End.

The North End was the gateway to Eastport's vast cannery world, which had grown and shrunk and grown again ever since Julius Wolff of Wolff & Reesing, New York importers, produced the first can of sardines there in 1876.[6] Lillian and Alice strolled past Booth Fisheries, Moses Pike's factory and the

cannery of Hiram Blanchard & Sons, all alive with the bustle of hundreds of workers, screeching gulls and silvery herring being hoisted by the bucket from the briny holds of the sardine carriers docked at their wharves. Lillian always turned back before the clam factory, leaving Alice to walk the last stretch to Peacock's #2 alone.

The summer of 1938, the herring didn't come. In early June, Alice's step-mother Jesse was hanging clothes off her back doorstep on Shackford Street when she fell and broke her leg. Ira Boyden moved his wife's bed down into the living room and there she spent the summer in traction. Alice moved back home to care for her.

Joe had started running herring scales for the Mearl Corporation, which had a new plant in the middle of town.[7] "I missed him. I'd be up home. I'd get mama and daddy's dinner ready and then I would run downtown because Joe would be coming in with his load of scales. Just to see him for a few minutes. Then he would go back up shore," she sighs.

In August, the herring finally began to appear. Alice went back to work at #2, but it was slow. She spent the days playing rummy in the office with Horace and Hattie, who had a new pastime: spying on the residents of the camps through the little window in the room that housed the barrels of oil.

The camps were a beehive of activity and not always of the desired sort. "Once she was looking out and somebody pushed somebody else out of the upstairs window of one of them! And then they pushed the bed out after them! Wild goings on," Alice recalled.

On Fridays, the factory owner, Carroll Peacock, would come over from Lubec in the *Casamaro* to bring the pay for #2's workers. If it was a cool morning, he would warm his hands by the woodstove and then Alice would help him count out the pay packets. "We would spread the money out on the table. We had to have it just so. If we put two nickels in instead of a dime, it spoiled the whole thing. We had to have it exact. Then, they came to the door and everybody got their little packet of money."

The slow days at #2 continued into the fall. From the window by the office door, Alice began watching a young woman who came out of a house down by the water each day to hang clothes. She daydreamed about the woman's life, thinking how lovely it must be to be her, living in that little house. Much to her dismay, Alice later learned she was the one they called Black Duck, a woman of reported ill repute, and it wasn't her house at all! She merely worked there. Black Duck lived in one of the camps.

One day when she was downtown, Alice ran into an old friend, Fanny, who was pushing a baby carriage. Fanny and her sister Lola, a famed beauty, were from Perry and had worked at Brooks Bluff the summer Alice worked there after high school. Fanny had since married a man from the South End and now she had a little boy. Alice stopped to admire the baby.

He was a handsome child, named John after his father, but he was seriously ill. Fanny hovered over him, explaining that the doctor had said the baby must be kept very still at all times. It was difficult to do, and she was clearly taxed, constantly coddling the child in an attempt to mollify him.

That year, the #2 team worked until the first of December, but there weren't many fish even then. It was Alice's last year at the cannery.[8] The following summer, she gave birth to her own baby boy, Joseph, and began life as a young mother on Campobello Island.

Eventually, Hattie and Horace sold their Lubec home and moved back to Whiting. They bought a big white house on Whiting Corner, across from the pond. They were happy there. But sometimes Hattie would say wistfully, "Oh, if only I had my kitchen in Lubec."

There wasn't much in that old kitchen, recalled Alice, just a rocking chair, a stove. "But it had a great long pantry where the sink was, when she finally got it. It must have taken her a year to save up for it."

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[1] Friar's Head is a rocky outcrop on one end of Friar's Bay Beach in Welshpool, Campobello Island. In August of 1864, it was the target of practice shots by American troops from a battery on neighboring Treat's Island. At the time, Campobello Island was under British possession and it caused an international incident. Islanders say the shots knocked the head off the Friar. The bluff was also the subject of the eponymous poem by Clara M. Arthur in *The Cherry-blooms Of Yeddo, And Other Poems,* 1881.

[2] In 1937, there were five weirs along Friar's Bay: the Shag, closest to Friar's Head, then Gough's Beach weir, Allingham's Upper, Allingham's Lower and finally, closest to Welshpool Wharf, the Harbor Master. "As a rule, the small sea herring, used in the preparation of the Maine sardines, is caught in weirs, placed in comparatively shallow water along the shore. Most of the weirs are located in Canadian waters. In 1901, Bensley estimated that each season between 700 and 800 weirs operated for catching these fish under licenses issued by the Dominion Government. Prince, in an earlier report, stated that 95 percent of the American sardines are caught by Canadian fishermen. A weir is a large circular or heart shaped inclosure, made by driving stakes into the bottom of the sea, and intertwining brush between the stakes (F.C. Weber, *The Maine Sardine Industry,* 1921) .

[3] R.J. Peacock Canning Company opened its first factory in Lubec on May 5, 1928. At its heyday, the company was once of the largest employers in the State of Maine.

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[4] Monel is a corrosion-resistant alloy of two-thirds nickel and one-third copper. It was an expensive alloy, with costs ranging from five to ten times that of copper and nickel. It was patented in 1906 by the International Nickel Co. During the world wars, it was used for U.S. military dog tags. It was supplanted by stainless steel after WWII.

[5] Isadore Feltenstein was a Polish immigrant, who drove a taxi in Eastport for 55 years. Alice Gough knew him as Izzy Levin, supposedly for his step-father Max Levin, an Eastport merchant.

[6] The first cannery for sardines was built at Eastport in 1875. During each of the succeeding years, one new cannery was added to the number so that in 1879, there were five in operation. In the spring of 1880, eight more were built at Eastport, and one each at Robbinston, Lubec, Jonesport, Lamoine, and Camden, making eighteen in operation in the State. By 1886 there were thirty-two canneries in operation at Eastport and the neighboring places. Along the coast, scattered from Cutler westward, there were thirteen others in operation, making forty-five canneries in Maine in 1886…In 1899, two companies were formed, known as the Seacoast Packing Company and the Standard Sardine Company, which included most of the canneries in Washington and Hancock Counties. The Seacoast Packing Company eventually absorbed its younger rival, and a number of the more antiquated plants were discontinued. Some of the canneries were fitted with new and improved machinery and were thus rendered more effective than formerly. Eleven plants at Eastport, owned by the Seacoast Packing Company, were not operated in 1902. This company was reorganized in 1903, and a greater number of its canneries were sold (Raymond McFarland, *A History of the New England Fisheries*, 1911). Seacoast Canning Co was the site of over 50 child labor photos taken by Lewis Hine in August of 1911.

[7] The Mearl Corporation was formed in 1933 by Harry E. Mattin and Francis Earl of New York and Burton G. Turner of Eastport. It was located until fire destroyed the plant in 1947 at the current site of the Eastport breakwater on Water Street. The Eastport plant was the last remaining commercial pearl essence plant in the world when it finally closed its doors in 2007 (Edward French, *The Quoddy Tides*, January 12, 2007).

[8] At the outbreak of WWII, the U.S. government contracted the Peacock Canning Company to provide sardines for the war effort. Until the end of the war, 88% of their total production went overseas. These government contracts led to a boom in the industry. At the end of the war, there were 52 sardine canning companies statewide, many of which closed their doors shortly after. "As the story goes, the British developed a 'canny liken' to a species of red fish, so the plant gave them that 'red look' by packing sardines in tomato sauce." Hank Stence, *Lubec Light*, April 18, 1996).