

Corning's Rich Olive History

by Paulyne White



They come in all different varieties to please the taste buds of every palate: Spanish, Green, Green Ripe, Greek and the ever popular Big Black Olive. They even come in several sizes: Small, Large, Jumbo, Colossal, Super Colossal and many more. You can buy them chopped, sliced, whole, pitted, non-pitted, packed in oil, water and even vermouth! They are olives and they are grown and packed in Corning.

Much like Castroville is the Artichoke Capital of the World and Gilroy is the Garlic Capital of the World, Corning, with its olive orchards and retailer confirms its status as the Olive Capital of the World. In the past, no less than nine olive processing companies were operating in Corning at the same time!

How It All Started...

With a railroad land grant of 50,000 acres, W.B. Woodson planted olive twigs in neat rows, along with palms, oranges and fig trees. Photos were taken and sent in brochures all over the nation. According to a newspaper article from 1971, "Daddy" Woodson, as he is fondly remembered, went back east several times to promote Corning as the "Eden of the West." The article stated the olives did grow, as did the palm trees and so a unique industry was started by accident, more or less.

It was about 1900 when it was proved that large-fruited olives, when properly processed, were palatable and nutritious and quite distinct from the European green and Spanish olive. In those days, the Corning Observer wrote an article touting that "...any Easterner who once got a bite of the ripe Corning olive will yell for more."

Of course olives were growing in Corning before 1900, but it was about that time when olive processing plants began to spring up. Plants like the Maywood Packing Company started with harvesting 16 tons of olives and soon grew that into 6,000 tons per year. Fred Beresford learned how to process Sevillanos from Spain and brought that knowledge to Corning.

It wasn't until 1913 when Corning hosted its second olive plant. H.J. Heinz Company built with H.A. Fosgate as the local manager. You could still see their large Heinz tower located on Solano Street until Bell-Carter had to remove it for their expansion.

Seven years later, B.E. Glick and his family bought Maywood's oil mill and in 1928 started canning ripe olives under the name B.E. Glick & Sons. During WWII they opened the plant to the local ladies who would bring in their fresh fruits and vegetables, sit at the sorter belts cleaning and removing stems and husks, and then later pack up their own jars of freshly processed and packed fruit and vegetables. This was their contribution to the war effort. In the late 1950s the Glick family closed their plant and leased it out to Early California Olives out of Visalia, who used the plant for their local receiving station. Charley Glick had stayed on with Early California Olives and when they stopped receiving olives in Corning, Charley moved to Visalia with his family and stayed with the company until his death from a car accident. Several years later Early California sold their interest to Musco Olive Products in Orland.

Now enter Stanley Roush, a transplant from Ohio in 1914. Roush worked for the Glicks and Maywood. In 1928 he and Ira O. Wells opened a plant called The Corning Olive Company located on Kirkwood and Fig Lanes. Roush sold out to Wells and opened Olives Incorporated in 1936.

Around 1939, in the 1400 block of Solano Street, where Les Schwab Tires is now located, the Pacific Coast Olive Products Company was opened by three Italian men from Gilroy with Robert Foord of Corning as their manager. They had the olives put in barrels and made Spanish and Sicilian olives. After WWII Pacific Coast Olive Products was sold to Sylmar Olive Packing Company. Earl Hazen was manager and Dorothy Houghton ran the office. In 1952 Sylmar closed.

Mr. Foord also had an olive shed behind his home in the 1400 block of Yolo Street. He processed olives there and had Olives Incorporated can them for him. He sold them to fruit stands and always had a display at Crooks Corner. This was the gas station that stood where the intersection of Solano and 99W is now located. Since it was right where the

travelers had to make a sweeping curve to continue either north or south on their trips, it was a popular place to stop, gas up, get a cold drink and buy some olives. Does this bring to mind our now renowned "The Olive Pit" which sits just a few feet to the north of Crooks Corner? During the depression Mr. Foord sold bulk home cured olives to grocery stores. He would bake the olives in his home oven, put them in cellophane bags and sell them for 5 cents a bag.

Located north of Solano Street between Lincoln and Fairview Avenues, behind what is now Dick King's Corning Auto Center once stood the California Olives Packers plant. The plant, owned and operated by Everett & Esther Murdick and their son-in-law, Clyde Allen, began operation in the mid 1940s. Like most plants in Corning, the plant received, graded, processed and canned the small fruit as part of an industry that helped put this small town on the map. Canned, cooked olives as well as the Spanish variety were produced and shipped out nationwide. The plant employed primarily women, giving jobs to 12 - 15 ladies and 5 to 6 gentlemen each season. Wages were approximately 25 cents an hour. The young ladies were required to wear attire fitting of a lady. But, Floorwoman, Bessy Wright, stated on many occasions, "You are ladies, and we expect you to dress like ladies." Blouses, dresses and nylons were required of all female employees. The exception was during shifts on the greenbelt, an often cold and messy job, when a pair of jeans was allowed. California Olive Packers continued in operation, playing an important role in Corning's growth, until it closed in the late 1950s.

Olive Processing Plants

Through the years many plants sold and their names were changed. Following is a list that will, though, not perfect, give you an idea of why Corning was known as The Olive Capital of the World.

Second Street

Maywood Packing Company later sells to Bell-Carter Foods, Incorporated. Bell-Carter would later on purchase the Olives Incorporated Plant on Second Street, which is now known as Bell-Carter Foods, Inc. #2. They also expanded their operations to take in a large area of Fig Lane where other earlier plants had been located. The olives are processed under the Bell-Carter label and the Lindsay label which they purchased from the now closed Consolidated Olives, Inc. out of Madera.

H.J. Heinz Company

Known for their slogan of Heinz '57 varieties.

Fig Lane

B.E. Glick & Sons, before settling on Fig Lane this plant started out in the County and was also located for a short time at another location within the City limits. As the years passed this location was used as a receiving and shipping location for Consolidated Olives growers and is now part of the Bell-Carter Foods operation.

Corner of Kirkwood and Fig Lane

Corning Olive Company, (started by Stanley Roush, Ira O. Wells and others). After Mr. Roush sold his part out, the plant then became La Mirada Olive Company, then Feather River, managed by George Powell and was then sold to Consolidated Olives, Inc. who eventually moved to Lindsay and took over the Lindsay label.

Corner of Fig Lane and Peach Street

Tehama Olive Plant, which only processed oil olives. Later it became Ira O. Wells Olive Plant and processed olives under the name of Orinda Olives. Foster Estrem worked the retort machine among the many other jobs he held and his wife, Mary Etta, worked for Mr. Wells in the office. This plant closed in 1963 and the facilities became Consolidated Olives, Inc. location #2.



Hwy 99W

After Stanley Roush sold out his portion of The Corning Olive Company, he opened up Olives Incorporated. After many, many years of olive processing, Mr. Roush sold the business to John Pysillos who ran the plant and purchased several olive orchards in the area. This plant is now owned and occupied by Bell-Carter Foods, Inc. carrying their name as the plant name.

Although no longer an olive plant, Olives Incorporated carried on their name under the leadership of Bob Singletary and Signe Lewis, they processed olive oil and balsamic vinegar under the name of Stonehouse California Olive Oil. Stonehouse was bought out by Ray and Kathy Rogers and operates as Corning Olive Oil Company, producing extra virgin olive oil, flavored olive oils and a variety of vinegars. The office and warehouse are now located on the corner of Fig Lane and Peach Street.



Solano Street

Pacific Coast Olive Product Company / Sylmar Olives Packing Company and just up the street was California Olive Packers Plant.



East of Town on Loleta Avenue

Oberti Olive Company used a portion of the Sunsweet Prune Plant to receive olives, which they then shipped to their plant in Madera. Oberti sold to Tri Valley Growers, who retained the Oberti label and continued receiving olives here in Corning under the management of Sam Vanilla. They discontinued their Corning operations in 1995. Lucero Olive Oil, a family owned company, now operates an olive oil mill and processes their own signature brand on Loleta Avenue, close to 99W.