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Bethinking of Old Orleans

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A COLLAPSE

Leave it to the late William Monacelli to have candidly caught with camera this load of tomatoes which collapsed near a "Help Keep Albion Clean" sign. The farmer was no doubt enroute to the Hunt-Wesson Food Canning Factory in Albion during the early 1960's when his load shifted at the corner of Routes 98 and 31.

Looking back over several years, this photo perhaps expresses in a way the almost total collapse of the food processing industry, especially tomatoes, once so prominate in Orleans County. Remember the fragrant smell of Catsup in the air as 4,000 acres of locally-grown tomatoes were turned into that "elixir". It's now been over ten years since that bountiful aroma permeated the air.

The Hunt-Wesson plant in Albion, formerly Birds Eye Division of General Foods and still earlier T.S. Snider Corp., closed in the Spring of 1970. The plant actually dated back to the early nineteen hundreds when it was the Bert Olney Canning Company which also operated a facility on Olney Street in Medina. During eighteen months of World War II German prisoners of war were held in Albion at barracks in back of the canning factory. Prisoners were used for manual labor not only in Albion but other food processing plants such as Duffy-Mott in Holley which closed in 1971 and the H.V. Heinz Co. in Medina which closed in 1963. Along with those plant closings there was also the Morton Canning Co., the Wallace Dale Canning Factory in Barre Center, the Birds Eye Plant in Medina and others.

With tomato processors closing or leaving Orleans County, the raising of fifteen million tomato plants by Piazza, Albanese and other greenhouses in the area was halted. Ten million other plants were shipped in annually from the south. Likewise, migrant or seasonal labor has declined. When the Medina Heinz factory closed, 350 year round workers and 150 seasonal workers were left unemployed. With the Duffy-Mott Co. closing in Holley 150 employees lost jobs. In Albion, 400 to 450 seasonal workers and 50 permanent employees sought other employment with the closing of the Hunt-Wesson factory. Canning not only tomatoes but many other fruits and vegetables, these several factories were the mainstays for county farmers over several decades. Although Orleans County is still not devoid of food processors, we see this week a final chapter of local major food processing with the closing of the T.J. Lipton plant in Albion.