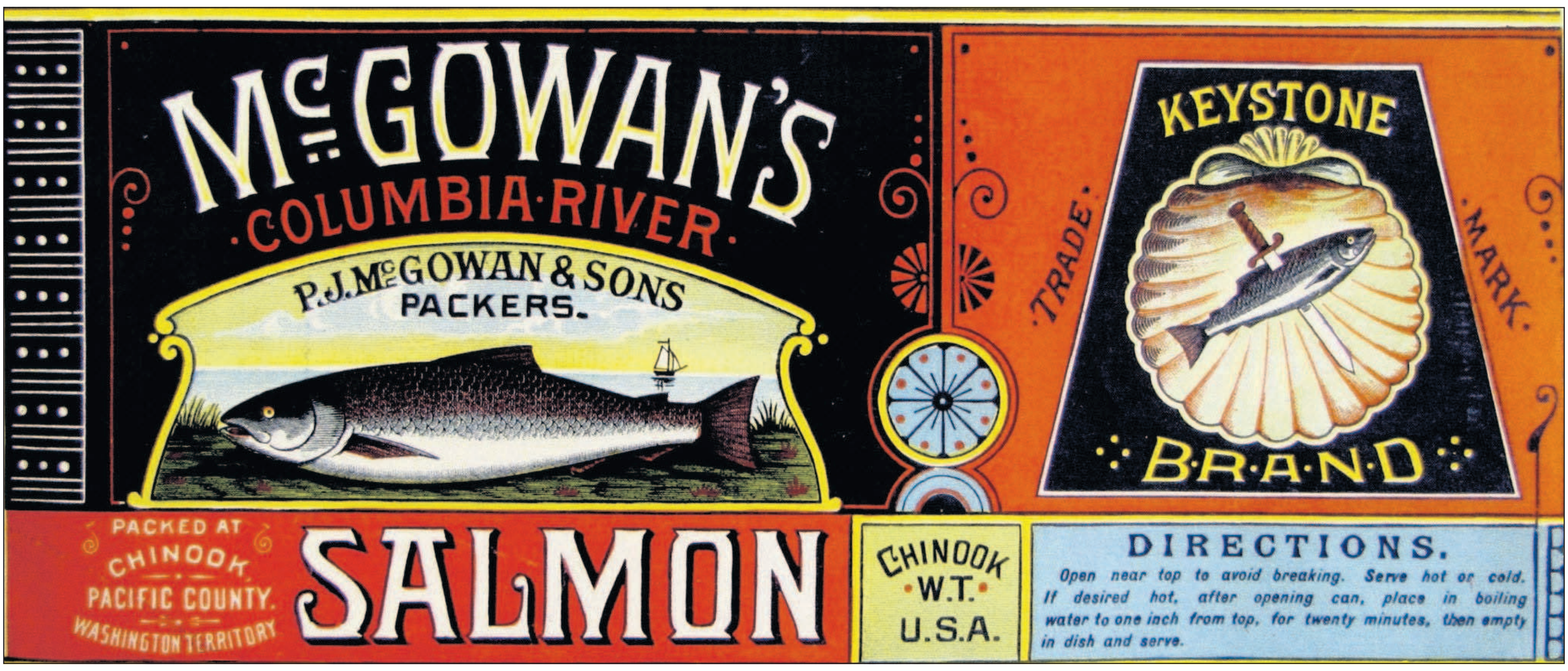


Submitted Photo

A1-pound can of McGowan's Keystone Brand salmon sold for 12 cents wholesale in 1905. This version of the label dates from 1889 or earlier, before Washington attained statehood.

Discarded ledger offers view of salmon workers' lives

Records provide rare insights about Chinese-Americans in an Ilwaco cannery

It's difficult to learn details about the lives of working people a century ago and nearly impossible to find out anything about the Chinese and Japanese immigrants whose labor did much to sustain the Columbia River's early economy.

So I was excited last week when my friend John Guimond brought me a discarded cannery invoice ledger he rescued from the dump several years ago.

Although it wouldn't have been obvious to whoever threw it away, the ugly, smelly ledger contains a wealth of rare details about the lives of ordinary workmen on the Columbia River estuary in the second half of 1905.

In some ways, 1905 is recent. Like many reading this, my grandparents were children and young adults then. We can go on the Internet and read 1905 newspapers: Theodore Roosevelt began his first full term as president, Japan and Russia were in a savage war that eventually led to the Bolshevik revolution, Einstein developed his theory of special relativity, and the legendary spy Mata Hari began her exotic dance act in Paris. Las Vegas was founded.

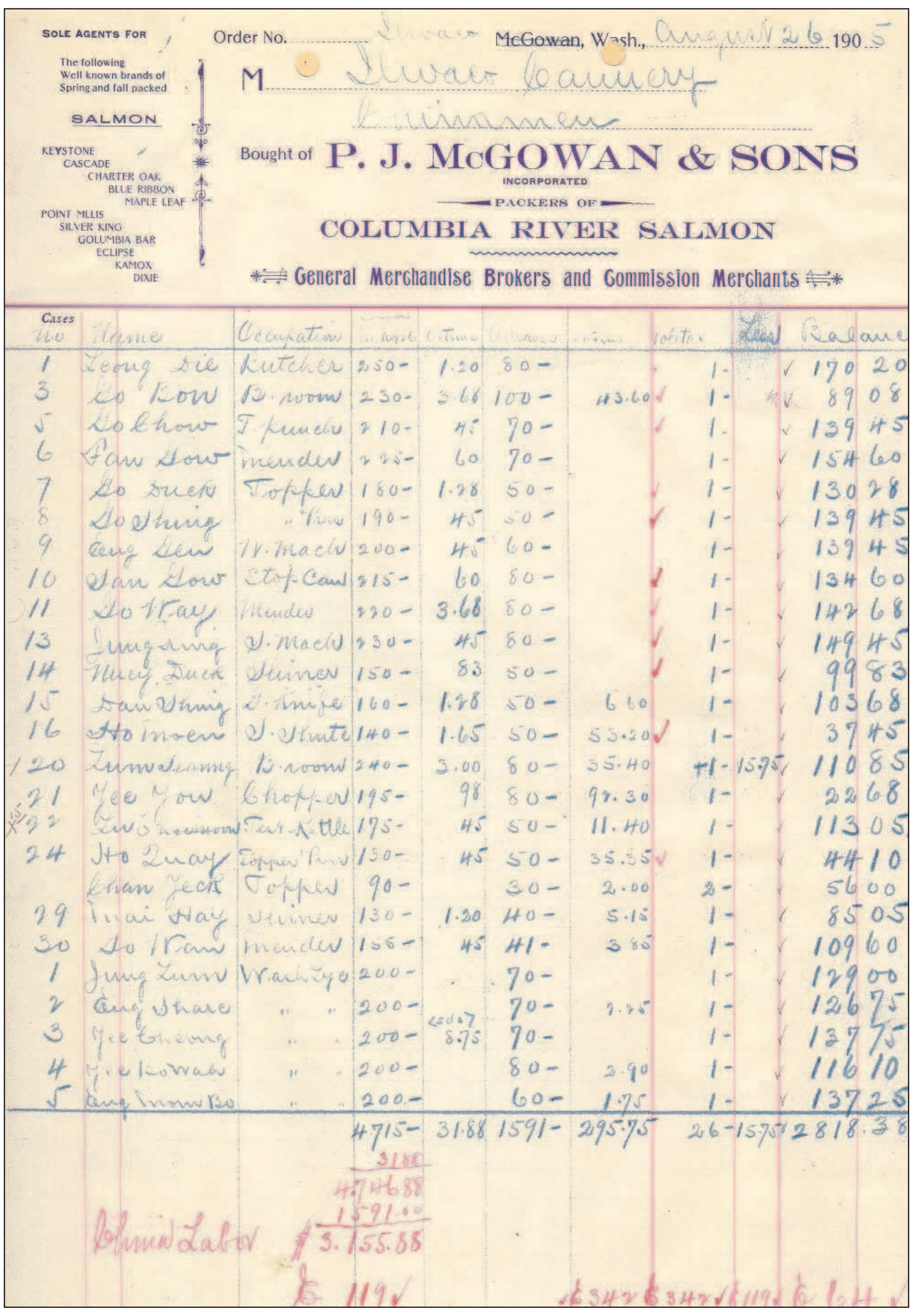
Matt Winters

In other respects, the realities of 1905 are shocking. The U.S. Supreme Court threw out as unconstitutional a New York law limiting workweeks to no more than six 10-hour days. The court's reactionary wing went on to invalidate minimum wages and other pro-employee laws. Child labor was common: It wasn't until 1907 that a statute was passed barring boys under 14 from working in coal mines. Although wage stagnation and loss of economic momentum have soured political discourse in 2016, in 1905 unscrupulous employers had free rein to treat working-class Americans like draft animals.

Progressive employer

Thankfully, then as now, most employers adhered to a higher standard. One of them in 1905 was P.J. McGowan. He was an independent-minded Irish-American. By the turn of the 20th century, he was one of the Columbia's top-10 salmon packers. Though he flirted with joining an early iteration of the quasi-monopolistic Columbia River Packers Association, he opted out when it got started for real in 1899. (P.J.'s grandson John was later president of CRPA and led its transition into Bumble Bee Seafoods. Some of P.J.'s other public-spirited descendants helped create the Middle Village-Station Camp Unit of Lewis and Clark National Park at the old McGowan townsite across from Astoria.)

In 1905, McGowan operated two canneries — the original and another in Ilwaco, where foreman/partner R.H. Herrold was boss. (Herrold's dynamic family — prominent in the Chinook Indian Nation — also still lives here, growing oysters on Willapa Bay.) The ledger is from the Ilwaco cannery. Careful study is rewarded by hundreds of details of interest to fans of local industrial history.



SOLE AGENTS FOR
The following Well known brands of Spring and fall packed
SALMON
KEYSTONE, CASCADE, CHARTER OAK, BLUE RIBBON, MAPLE LEAF, POINT MLLIS, SILVER KING, COLUMBIA BAR, ECLIPSE, KAMOX, DIXIE

Order No. Ilwaco McGowan, Wash., August 26 1905

M Ilwaco Cannery
Chinamen

Bought of **P. J. McGOWAN & SONS**
INCORPORATED
PACKERS OF
COLUMBIA RIVER SALMON
General Merchandise Brokers and Commission Merchants

Cases No	Name	Occupation	[illegible]	O. Time	[illegible]	[illegible]	Poll tax	[illegible]	Balance
1	Leong Die	Butcher	250-	1.20	80-		1-		170 20
3	Go Low	B. room	230-	3.66	100-	43.60	1-		89 08
5	Go Chow	T. punch	210-	45	70-		1-		139 45
6	Faw Sow	mender	225-	60	70-		1-		154 60
7	Go Duck	Topper	180-	1.28	50-		1-		130 28
8	Go Shing	" Two	190-	45	50-		1-		139 45
9	Eng Sew	W. Mach	200-	45	60-		1-		139 45
10	San Sow	Stop Can	215-	60	80-		1-		134 60
11	Go Way	Mender	220-	3.68	80-		1-		142 68
13	[illegible]	S. Mach	230-	45	80-		1-		149 45
14	[illegible] Duck	Sliner	150-	83	50-		1-		99 83
15	Dan Shing	S. Knife	160-	1.28	50-	6.60	1-		103 68
16	Ho Moen	[illegible]	140-	1.65	50-	53.20	1-		37 45
20	[illegible]	B. room	240-	3.00	80-	35.40	1-	15.75	110 85
21	Yee You	Chopper	195-	98	80-	92.30	1-		22 68
22	[illegible]	Tea Kettle	175-	45	50-	11.40	1-		113 05
24	Ho Quay	Topper Two	130-	45	50-	35.55	1-		44 10
	Chan Jeck	Topper	90-		30-	2.00	2-		56 00
29	[illegible] Hay	Sliner	130-	1.20	40-	5.15	1-		85 05
30	Go Wan	mender	155-	45	41-	3.85	1-		109 60
1	Jung Lum	Wash Fish	200-		70-		1-		129 00
2	Eng Share	" "	200-		70-	2.25	1-		126 75
3	Yee Cheong	" "	200-	8.75	70-		1-		137 75
4	Yee Kowah	" "	200-		80-	2.90	1-		116 10
5	Eng [illegible]	" "	200-		60-	1.75	1-		137 25
			4715-	31.88	1591-	295.75	26-	15.75	2818.38

4715- 31.88 = 4746.88; 1591.00; China Labor $3.155.88; 119

Submitted Photo

A ledger sheet shows the names, occupations and pay for the China crew at P.J. McGowan & Son's Ilwaco cannery in August 1905. It's somewhat unusual to learn so much about ordinary salmon industry workers. These records show they were well paid by the standards of the time, even making overtime.

In my experience it's unusual to find the names of individual Chinese and Japanese workers. Often, they were hired by a middleman — Chan Ah Dogg was probably the most famous of these on the Lower Columbia. This middleman/contractor was paid a lump sum and doled out the proceeds.

The early 20th century was rife with racial prejudice against the Chinese, who were seen as competing for blue-collar jobs. But the McGowan records show individual workmen by name and occupation, and indicate they were well paid by the standards of the time, when the average American man made about $400 a year. For instance, Go Way, a mender, appears to have earned $482.60 plus $8.71 overtime between August and December 1905. Leog Die, a butcher, made nearly $575 in half a year. Lee Lum, the top can filler, did 90,459 cans in August, for which he was paid $175. Covered by a different (and some might say crappy) contract, the top Japanese filler was G. Fugimoto with 61,357 cans, for $80.

All these workers would also have been paid for the spring salmon run, but those records are not included in the ledger that survives.

Salmon industry secrets

Other insights offered by the McGowan ledger:

• Between July 15 and July 24, 1905, the two McGowan-owned canneries together bought 67,069 pounds of Chinook salmon at 7 cents a pound and 12,787 pounds of steelheads at 5 cents a pound from the Lindenberger Company.

• After processing, canning and labeling, Chinook salmon sold under the company's Keystone Brand went for $1.45 per dozen one-pound tall cans, or a little over 12 cents a pound wholesale. Maple Leaf Brand salmon packed in key-opening cans brought 18.75 cents a pound.

• There is little indication of fish purchases from individual fishermen for the fall run until Aug. 17, when Kline Church was paid 6 cents a pound for 307 pounds of "Big Salmon" and 5 cents for 123 pounds of small salmon — a total of $24.57. Individual fish tickets show he caught seven Chinooks on July 24 and three on Aug. 3 with an average weight of about 31 pounds. The small salmon — perhaps what we call cohos — averaged 20.5 pounds each.

• By late August, salmon were swarming into the river. For example, on Aug. 29 gillnetter William Suomola was paid $651.55 for 7,000 pounds of big salmon, 3,848 pounds of small salmon and 761 pounds of steelheads. He was paid a dime apiece for 11 tules.

• Some fishermen and trap operators made amazing sums for the time. German-born fish trapper Louis Hauffe of Chinook was paid $3,449 by McGowan for salmon provided in August 1905. That's more than $90,000 today on an inflation-adjusted basis. (Hauffe had the rotten timing to move back to Germany soon after 1905, losing everything in the war.) It is worth noting that racially biased laws barred non-whites from fishing.

• Bills from Pacific States Telephone & Telegraph Co., were handwritten. A call from McGowan to Ilwaco counted as long distance and cost 25 cents. In some cases when the operator didn't recognize the caller's voice, he is identified only as "Chinaman."

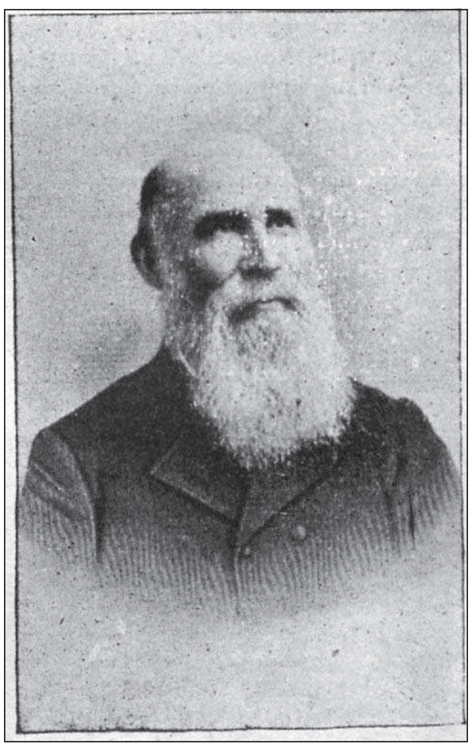
• Standard Oil Company's bill for 1,100 gallons of "Motor Gasoline" at 17 cents a gallon was "Payable in U.S. gold coin."

• What impresses me most is the sheer diversity of the cannery workforce and fishermen. To be sure, there are archetypal Anglo names like Hancock, King, Graham, Rogers, Beasley, Smith and Wright. But there also are Lu Shong, Wan Guan, Go Duck, Low Ling, Ho Quay, Jung Lum, T. Gaxamaka, M. Fuokiki, G. Saski, Nels Saari, John Cola, John Aho, Aug Anderson, Herman Koski, George Jorgenson, and a couple hundred more. (I make no warranties about the McGowan bookkeeper's spelling.)

All these immigrants from around the world helped make the America we all ought to be gloriously proud of today.

—M.S.W.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal.



Submitted Photo

P.J. McGowan was one of the most successful salmon packers on the Columbia River.

Editor's Notebook

Thankfully, then as now, most employers adhered to a higher standard.

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

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