

ASTORIA



Ketch-Em Brand salmon eggs were packed in Astoria from 1920 to 1938, making use of some of the billions of salmon eggs that were a byproduct of industrial salmon-canning operations on the Lower Columbia River.

Matt Winters Collection

← The salmon egg capital of the Pacific Northwest →

Salmon eggs are astonishing pea-sized lifeboats, self-contained factories carrying a new generation of salmon into the future.

Depending on the size of an individual fish, biologists figure an adult female Chinook can average 5,000 eggs. This mid-July, the number of returning adult Chinook salmon counted at Bonneville Dam is approaching 235,000. If half are female, this means roughly 588 million Chinook eggs are bound for spawning grounds and hatcheries. Maybe 1 out of 2,500 will ultimately survive to adulthood and complete their life cycle.



Matt Winters

This compares to annual Chinook returns of around 7 million to the Columbia River in the 1800s, generating about 17.5 billion eggs a year. Early salmon processors usually disposed of eggs and everything else they couldn't sell by dumping it into the river. People regretted waste even in those lavishly abundant times, but there was little taste for salmon caviar in America then — or now — and it took decades to develop markets for fish byproducts to use for fertilizer, pet food and other purposes.

Just after 1900, a few entrepreneurs began processing a fraction of harvested Pacific Northwest salmon eggs as recreational trout fishing bait. This unsung chapter in local industrial heritage is well told by Philip Beguhl in his book "The Art & History of Salmon Egg Bait." (\$39.95, www.whitefishpress.com)

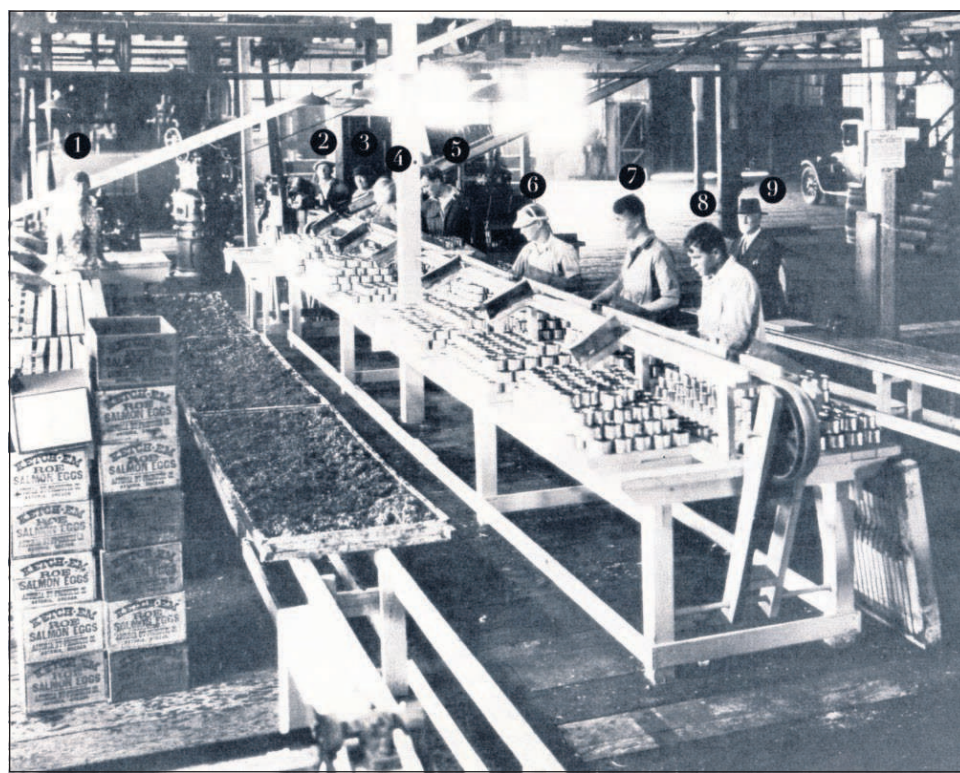
Beguhl's book is the result of more than 30 years of collecting research materials, labels, catalogs, photos and other artifacts. He told me he went so far as to hire a genealogist "to chase down living family members of the salmon egg packing company founders and operators so I could interview them over the phone or by letter."

It's a wonderful look at a bygone era. The details he was able to capture from participants who may now be deceased are a cool addition to the history of the Pacific Northwest.

There's lots of content interesting to those like me with roots in old Seattle, where several egg packers were located. But local readers will be most fascinated by his stories about the families who packed Ketch-Em, Star and Spex brand salmon eggs in Astoria in the first half of the 20th century.

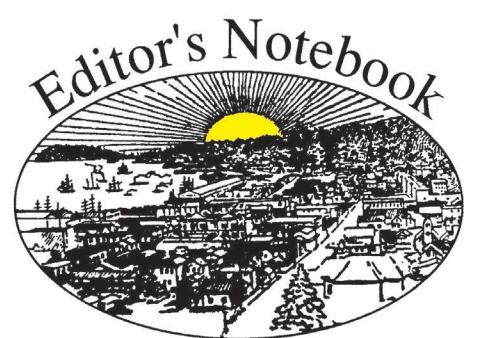
After moving here in 1991, Ketch-Em Brand labels were some of the first fishing industry items I collected — outstanding examples of stone lithography printing. Ketch-Em eggs were put up by brothers Dick and Eben Carruthers to raise college money, an enterprise that became Astoria By-Products Co., which switched to processing fish-liver oil in the World War II era under Dick's son Richard. The whole family is descended from Eben Weld Tallant, one of the Columbia's pioneer salmon packers.

Star Brand Salmon Egg Co. was started by J.W. Peck in Astoria in 1914 and August Spexarth canned Spex Brand eggs in the 1920s and early-1930s. Across the river, the Wiegard brothers in Ocean Park, Washington, put up an extensive line of different sizes and qualities of eggs. A few artifacts of the Columbia-Willapa salmon egg industry can



Columbia River Maritime Museum

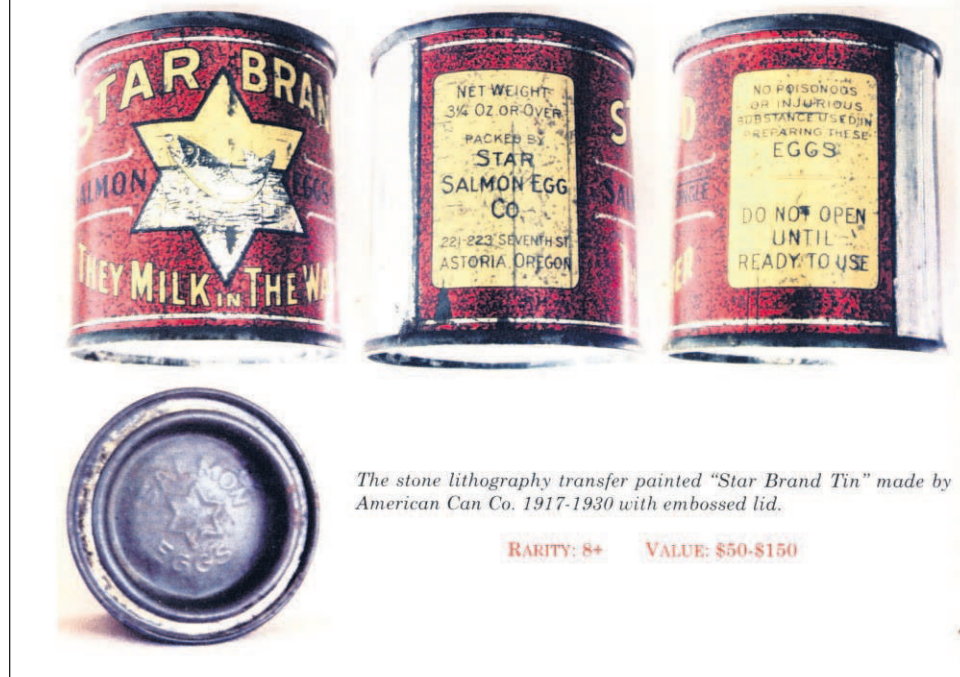
This photo in "The Art & History of Salmon Egg Bait" shows the Ketch-Em Brand salmon egg roe packing line in the 1920s, operated by the Carruthers family. The packing plant was located on the river front, just east of where the Astoria Bridge now spans the Columbia River.



It would astound early egg packers to learn the jars and cans they retailed for 35 cents each can now cost an avid collector 200 or 300 times that sum.



The first Star Brand tin with paper label and "Fisherman in Star" graphics. Non-embossed lid. See catalog cut form 1929 Honeyman Hardware Co., Portland, Oregon. This is a 1915 era cut being used long after the painted tin with "Fish in Star" graphics were in use. By the early 1930s tins were no longer offered. RARITY: 10 VALUE: \$50-\$150



Philip Beguhl/The Art & History of Salmon Egg Bait

Star Brand salmon eggs were processed in Astoria from 1914 until the Great Depression.

still be found with a bit of effort, while most others are rare as unicorns. Beguhl has collected them all, or at least has managed to find images of them.

If there's anything to discover about salmon eggs as bait, Beguhl has recorded it. For example, an article in the August 1925

Popular Mechanics provides a detailed contemporary look at the business:

"In the Pacific Northwest alone, where the salmon-egg bait industry is centered, more than \$1,000,000 worth of this kind of lures are used each season by sportsmen. ... In four years its manufacture has grown from a few

tons, consumed locally, to more than 500 tons, supplying a large demand in all parts of the world. ... In the hands of the anglers, this amount represents approximately 1,000,000 bottles of bait, costing the fishermen about \$350,000."

It would astound early egg packers to learn the jars and cans they retailed for 35 cents each can now cost an avid collector 200 or 300 times that sum.

There's always been class warfare when it comes to sport fishing in the West, with the most stark division between fly and bait fishermen. My Uncle William Giles Winters, a prominent west Seattle dentist, was a master tier and fisher of artificial flies, many of which I still have. On the other hand, mom's side of the family believes in bait — and usually nothing so fancy as store-bought salmon eggs. My grandmothers disliked one another. Flies vs. bait just might be one reason why.

I'm agnostic on the issue, having caught fish on pretty much everything, depending on who I'm with and whether I'm fishing for the art of it, or for dinner.

There's a funny advertising display pictured in Beguhl's book of a kid selling a string of bait-caught trout to a shame-faced fly fisherman who's gotten skunked and doesn't want to go home empty-handed. The fact is that oftentimes bait is the most effective, and certainly the least fussy, way of catching a fish with a hook and line.

One of many modern controversies surrounding salmon propagation is the extent to which fish and their eggs are wasted, or nearly wasted — sold at state hatcheries for garbage-like prices to the highest bidder. There are many complexities to this issue that are far beyond space limitations — or reader patience — in this column.

Much of the appeal of The Art & History of Salmon Egg Bait is its portrayal of a more innocent and simple time, when miraculous salmon eggs created vast amounts of fun and delicious catches for generations of fishermen. It would be nice to get past all the politics and back to something resembling those glory days.

— M.S.W.

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



THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

STEPHEN A. FORRESTER, Editor & Publisher • LAURA SELLERS, Managing Editor
BETTY SMITH, Advertising Manager • CARL EARL, Systems Manager
JOHN D. BRUIJN, Production Manager • DEBRA BLOOM, Business Manager
HEATHER RAMSDELL, Circulation Manager