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THE QUEENSLAND FRUIT TRADE
[By B. FLEWELL-SMITH, General Manager, Committee of Direction of Fruit Marketing.]

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The General Marketing, Canning and Export of Queensland Fruit

Development of the fruit industry in Queensland, from its inception, has been very largely dependent on transport. It was poor transport facilities in the early years, in particular, which limited the production of fruit in Central and North Queensland. In the very early days, large quantities of bananas produced in the Cairns area were shipped in the bunch to the Sydney and Melbourne markets, with varied and all too frequently disastrous results.

It has been difficult to obtain much information about the fruit industry in the early stages; but some very helpful information has been made available by Mr. Austin, Honorary Librarian of this Society, by the Brisbane City Council and by the Department of Agriculture.

The following extract from “Queensland Past and Present” (Weedon) published in 1897, is interesting to note:


“In 1891 there was a large trade to Melbourne; but this fell away. The crops were attacked by disease. The producers complained that they frequently did not obtain a fair return for fruit sent to the South in consequence of the middleman contriving to form a corner. When a consignment consisted of a commodity so perishable, an immediate sale at any price was imperative.”

My own experience of the industry forty years ago was one of upsets and frequently glutted markets, and a general feeling amongst fruit growers that the whole-
sale trade was not giving the grower a fair return for his produce. No doubt growers in the 1890's placed the blame on the wholesale trade for disappointing returns caused in the main by faulty transport.

The drop in pineapple plantings between 1891 and 1896 was an experience which has been common to the industry as far back as can be remembered. There have always been periods of prosperity and periods of depression in the pineapple industry.

On the other hand, citrus production over this period showed a progressive increase. From these figures it is obvious that bananas in the early days constituted easily the most important of our fruits. They retained the lead for many years and were finally displaced by pineapples.

The Brisbane markets form the main centre of distribution within the State and for the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales. It is quite interesting to follow through what information is available on the establishment of the Brisbane markets.

From a paper, "Genesis of the Brisbane City Council", by Mr. Arthur Laurie, the following is taken:

"The Brisbane City Council was elected in October 1859. At a meeting of the Council on October 31, 1859, it was decided to send a request to the Government for sufficient space on Gaol Hill with a frontage to Queen Street for a town hall and markets site.

"Site was granted for a Town Hall, but not for markets. Had this been granted it would probably have been where Allan & Stark now stands."

The City Council advises the site for the erection of a market was granted in 1860. Market By-Laws were suspended in 1874.

Tenders for the erection of markets submitted by J. W. Sutton & Co. were received on January 15, 1883, work to be completed in three months at a cost of £3,985. Tenders were accepted on July 2, 1883. Toward the end of July a motion that a cooling room be erected in the new markets was referred to the Works Committee. On October 18, the contractors—J. W. Sutton & Co.—were granted an extension of time for the completion of their contract. Contract appears to have been completed by March 1884.
Erection of the cooling room was approved by the Works Committee on April 7, 1884. Execution was conditional on the securing of a loan for that purpose, and there was some delay in securing the finance. The room was eventually constructed and leased in 1887. There is no record of what happened to the cooling room. Certainly there have been no cool storage facilities in the Brisbane markets for many years.

Records show that there were three market reserves in Brisbane in the early days. In 1885 assets of the market reserves were: South Brisbane, £15,000; Eagle Street, £30,000; Roma Street, £17,491/18/2.

First rent for the Roma Street market was for the six months ended December, 1885, and amounted to £158/15/-. It is interesting to note that the current rents from the Municipal Markets amount to £6,903.

The Eagle Street markets were on the river, between Mary and Charlotte Streets; but it is very doubtful whether they were ever more than a market reserve. The South Brisbane markets, however, were effective and probably reached their peak of activity sixty years ago.

South Brisbane was gazetted a municipality in January, 1888, and the South Brisbane markets were taken over by the South Brisbane Council on January 1, 1888, at a cost of £22,750.

At that time the value of the other markets was: Eagle Street, £98,475; Roma Street, £47,270.

It could well be that the value of the Eagle Street markets was accounted for by site and buildings other than for marketing purposes.

The South Brisbane markets were situated behind Birts Wharf,\(^1\) in Stanley Street. Doubtless, they will be remembered by many of the older generation. Farmers were allowed to bring their wagons in on payment of a toll as they passed through the gate. They sold from the wagons to the public such things as vegetables, eggs, poultry, pumpkin, potatoes, and even on occasions, calves.

These markets were closed some forty-eight years ago. It was a natural development, as in Australia as in many other countries great difficulty has been found in operating in more than one market area.

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1. Corner Glenelg and Stanley Streets.
Similar experience was suffered in later years when a wholesale fruit and vegetable market established in the Valley failed to meet competition from the Roma Street markets and the buildings were used for other purposes.

Retail markets are a feature of marketing in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide and thousands of members of the general public buy direct from growers in these markets. The general feeling in Queensland is that the grower has a full time job producing his fruit, and it pays him to give a wholesale agent ten per cent. commission for an expert sales service. In Queensland, therefore, we have the employment of a large number of agents to carry out this work on behalf of growers. They give the industry a good service and generally business ethics are high in the wholesale fruit agency business in Queensland.

A big impetus was given to the fruit industry in 1919, with the introduction of the first interstate fruit train. Before the introduction of this service, growers were entirely dependent upon shipping, which was unreliable. In 1919 a number of fruit growers on the North Coast under the leadership of the late Mr. J. T. Wilson, then Headteacher of the Woombye State School, combined to rail fruit via Wallangarra to the Sydney and Melbourne markets. These growers guaranteed the Railway Department against loss on two special trains. The service was a success from the very commencement. These fruit specials have played a very important part in the development of the fruit industry in our State. They are now completely organised and run regularly from even North Queensland fruit centres to service the Newcastle, Sydney, Albury, Melbourne and Adelaide Markets.

Loaders are stationed at each end of the main points of production. Growers bring their fruit in to the stations with each case marked with a particular agent's number and destination. The growers' own organisation, the C.O.D., freights it through to the various markets in the south, where its own branches or representatives distribute the fruit to the particular agents. The C.O.D. also supervises transhipping from Queensland to New South Wales' waggons at Clapham
and gives a liaison and marketing service between the Southern wholesale trade and the Queensland growers.

The quantities shipped interstate by this means and by passenger train and air during the financial year 1953-54 were: Fruit specials, 37,564 tons of all varieties or 1,619,106 packages; Passenger trains, beans, 83,015 packages; strawberries, 2,095 packages; Air freight, beans, 793,313 pound; strawberries, 202,141 pound. The fruit specials run to mail train schedules.

Whether there are floods or strike hold-ups, the growers continue to bring their consignments into loading stations confident that their own organisation will organise transport. Invariably transport has been arranged to the Southern markets for this fruit; road transport being called on when rail transport is not available. Due to improved air transport, beans are now sent to the South from as far North as Ayr and Bowen.

The next big step forward in the marketing of Queensland fruit was the passing by the Queensland State Government of “The Fruit Marketing Organisation Act” in 1923, and the commencement of the C.O.D. in 1924.

Functioning under powers given it in the Fruit Marketing Organisation Acts, the C.O.D. is a unique organisation. There is no knowledge of a similar organisation anywhere else in the world.

It is an Act generous to the fruit and vegetable growers. It gives them the right to organise voluntarily and the power to tackle industry problems on a district or State-wide basis and by voluntary or compulsory means. Under the Act, statutory control can be taken over the marketing of any particular variety of fruit in any or all parts of the State. However, there are protective provisions to prevent statutory powers being exercised unless these powers have the approval of the majority of growers concerned. Statutory control of fruit intended for canning has proved very effective.

Procedure is that if any section of the industry wishes to take advantage of the statutory powers, a Notice of Intention to issue a Direction has to be published, clearly setting out what is planned under the
Direction. Within thirty days of the publication of such Notice of Intention, any thirty growers can petition for a ballot and at least sixty per cent. of growers voting on the question must be in favour of the Direction before it can be put into effect.

The organisation starts with the grower through the Fruit Growers' Associations. There are 120 of these associations scattered throughout Queensland. Members of the associations can vote for one or more of the six Sectional Group Committees, each representing a particular variety of fruit or vegetables. A minimum number of seven fruit or vegetable growers may form an association and growers of any variety of fruit or vegetables are entitled to membership.

The six Sectional Groups are pineapple, banana, citrus, deciduous, vegetable excluding potatoes, pumpkins and onions, and other fruits, responsible for the policy of all fruits not covered by other groups, such as figs, papaws, passionfruit, tomatoes, avocados and strawberries, etc.

The Sectional Groups are virtually miniature parliaments. Any association can send resolutions through, to appear on the agendas of the Sectional Group Committees, which are policy forming, but not administrative, bodies.

Administration is carried out by a C.O.D. Executive, consisting of two representatives from each of the six S.G.C.'s and a Government representative, the Director of Marketing.

Each of the sections of the industry tackles its problems in its own particular way. The Banana Section for instance, has overcome some of its problems by tackling transport and ripening difficulties. In the early days bananas were ripened by the application of gas and heat. Their flavour and keeping quality were poor.

The Banana Sectional Group Committee sent the then manager of the C.O.D. to America to investigate ripening methods used there with the Gros Michel variety. On his return, experiments along similar lines were conducted with the Cavendish, a much more difficult variety to ripen. These experiments were not successful.
The B.S.G.C. then decided to meet the costs of having investigations into banana ripening carried out by the C.S.I.R.O. A technique completely satisfactory for the ripening of the Cavendish was evolved and made known to the trade throughout Australia. The trade was disinterested and failed to adopt the ripening methods recommended by C.S.I.R.O.

To improve distribution and to provide reliable quality bananas to the public, the B.S.G.C. decided to finance ripening activities. The C.O.D. then commenced banana ripening in earnest and established a chain of ripening rooms.

At present, the C.O.D. has fifty-five rooms in Brisbane, and its Branches at Albury, Sydney, Newcastle, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns are also equipped with banana ripening rooms. The system requires small refrigerated rooms where under humidity control bananas are ripened at a temperature in the low sixties. With this system of ripening the life of the banana is considerably lengthened, and bananas ripened in Brisbane are now marketed in centres as far distant as Mt. Isa.

The Cairns, Townsville and Mackay ripening rooms, in particular, have given a measure of stability to the Northern banana trade, and given the public bananas of a quality such as never experienced in the early days.

In Brisbane we have one market owned by the City Council and one owned by a private company, the shareholders in the Turbot Street markets being Section holders. The C.O.D. has sections in both these markets. Agency businesses are also conducted in premises in several streets in the recognised marketing area.

In other Queensland cities, the Local Authorities have made no provision for marketing facilities. Various agents have established their own wholesale floors, some with small cool rooms and banana ripening rooms. Wholesale floors have been established by C.O.D. in Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns.

As already indicated, growers are given an excellent transport service to the South. The C.O.D. Executive considers growers should be given an opportunity
to sell co-operatively their own produce wherever possible, and with this in view the organisation has established a chain of Southern branches in Newcastle, Sydney and Albury.

Consignments to Sydney are handled on an agency basis. The C.O.D. branch there handles from thirty-five per cent. to thirty-eight per cent. of all Queensland fruits and vegetables sent to this market. Big quantities of Southern fruit and vegetables are also handled by this and the other southern wholesale floors of the C.O.D.

The statutory powers of the organisation are not used at all in connection with wholesaling, the use of these powers being mainly confined to factory fruits.

The retail trade has never been tackled in Brisbane; but the organisation has engaged in this type of trade in a number of country towns.

C.O.D. wholesale floors in Rockhampton, Mackay and Cairns operate retail units in conjunction with wholesaling and there are retail units in Innisfail, Charters Towers, Bowen, Longreach, Charleville, Roma, Stanthorpe, Gympie and Nambour.

The chief aim of the organisation in establishing this chain of retail branches has been to take city amenities to folk in country centres. The retail unit in Cairns gives a country order service by air, particularly in the Gulf Country.

Both Charleville and Longreach branches do a big country order trade, the former servicing clients as far away as across the South Australian border. Longreach branch is serviced from Brisbane with refrigerated waggons. C.O.D. also services the Mount Isa Community Stores from Brisbane by refrigerated transport.

The pineapple industry is one which has bounded ahead in recent years.

Bananas for many years constituted the main fruit industry in Queensland; but with the incidence of bunchy top, leaf spot, etc., the banana industry moved across the New South Wales’ border, while the development of canning and the opening of an export trade enabled the pineapple industry to expand.
With the establishment by the C.O.D. of its own cannery in 1947, the industry expanded rapidly and the problem that has now been given to the C.O.D. is the provision of adequate canning facilities to take care of a rapidly increasing production.

This factory was determined upon by the pineapple industry after many years dissatisfaction with the old system under which the C.O.D. had statutory control of factory pineapples, but under which no canning activities were conducted by the C.O.D. Progress was far more spectacular than was ever anticipated, and the organisation now has two canneries, one at Northgate and the other at Koongal, near Rockhampton. These canneries are operated by C.O.D. through a cannery Board of Management on behalf of the P.S.G.C. Fruit growers have invested over £600,000 in the canning activities of C.O.D.

Northgate is one of the most modern fruit factories in Australia, and holds the Australasian record for a single day’s output of cans by a fruit cannery. This record output of 780,000 cans and bottles was established during the last summer crop.

In 1951 the maximum quantity of fruit handled at the Northgate Cannery in a week was 50,000 cases; but this summer crop, working Saturday and Sunday, the factory processed 130,000 cases in a week.

Brisbane is one of the few areas in the world where fruit for canning is available practically all the year round. Pineapples come in during most of the year, and canners also receive a wide range of other fruits for canning.

There are papaws available over many months which combine well with pineapples for a tropical fruit salad. There are strawberries, citrus, deciduous fruits and figs.

Tropical fruit salad has become so popular in Australia and New Zealand that factories have not succeeded in getting sufficient papaws to meet the demand.

Queensland has a relatively big strawberry industry. Our State is now easily the largest strawberry producing State in Australia; but by world standards our production is small.
In 1951 the Northgate Cannery experimented with a canned strawberry pack, which met a popular demand. Since then the C.O.D. has been able to secure its full requirements of berries, with the result that late last year the Cannery Board was able to give the strawberry industry an assurance that it would take all available berries from the coming 1955 crop at a guaranteed price of one shilling and ninepence per pound.

This guarantee has enabled growers to go ahead with their plantings, knowing that they would have the whole of the Australian fresh fruit market open to them and a guaranteed factory outlet at a reasonable price for their surplus.

Orange juice is canned and a complete range of fruit juice cordials and jams is put out by the C.O.D. Cannery. Stone fruits for canning are brought from the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area in Griffiths. Figs are handled in large quantities from the Sunnybank area; pie-melons are also used.

This big variety of fruit, coming in throughout the year, gives factories in Brisbane a very big advantage over southern competitors.

Australia was one of the first countries to get back into its stride with pineapple canning after the war. The industry decided to concentrate upon the export market.

In the immediate post-war period, pineapple canners would certainly have gone bankrupt if they had marketed their packs in Australia, as all Australian prices were then under strict control. Excellent prices were obtained in Canada where through non-convertability of the Canadian dollar, the market was almost closed to Hawaii and Mexico. For the three year period ended 1950, Queensland canners concentrated upon the Canadian market with the full approval of the British Ministry of Food, then the sole buyer of canned fruits in the United Kingdom. During this period Queensland shipped into Canada just over one million cases of pineapple products.

The industry received a serious set-back with floods and drought in 1951, and the quantity for export decreased.
During this period the Canadian dollar became convertible, with the result that Queensland now has to face intense competition on this market from Hawaii and Mexico.

Hawaii has a huge production of canned pineapples. American interests in the Philippines are also rapidly developing the pineapple industry.

Australia has a preference of two cents per pound for pineapples in Canada, a very valuable asset.

Pre-war the United Kingdom annually imported approximately eight and one-half million cases of canned fruits. The largest supplier of canned pineapple was Malaya, which exported ninety per cent. of her output to the United Kingdom. Immediately pre-war, Malayan canned pineapple could be purchased in England for as low as five and one-half pence and even four and one-half pence per can.

Australia in those days had to compete with Malaya, and consequently Queensland frequently received disastrously low prices for its canned pineapple on the British market.

Before the war, there was no canning in the United Kingdom of peaches, pears, apricots or pineapples. With the freeing from price control of canned fruits processed in the United Kingdom and with the old country still almost entirely dependent for canned fruits on the British Commonwealth of Nations and a few smaller countries prepared to accept payment in sterling, British manufacturers decided to enter this canning field. Last year their production was about two and one half million cases.

The old country last year received approximately eleven million cases of canned fruits from Empire countries and home manufacture.

The future of the pineapple industry will obviously depend upon our ability to meet competition on the overseas markets. British imports are increasing rapidly. In 1952 her imports of canned pineapples were 166,000 hundredweight, in 1953, 537,000 hundredweight and last year, 917,000 hundredweight. Whilst there is non-convertibility of sterling, our most serious competition will come from South Africa and Malaya.

South Africa has numerous advantages over Australia. In the country between East London and Port
Elizabeth there are many thousands of acres of highly suitable pineapple land, which can be put under the plough for approximately six pounds per acre. She has unlimited cheap labour available and the taxation laws allow a farmer up to thirty per cent. of his gross income free of taxation, provided this amount is ploughed back into his farm. Another big advantage is a regular shipping service to London.

South Africa has certain disadvantages, such as severe drought and very strong winds. That country has recently suffered some heavy losses from sunburn. In Malaya floods have caused extensive damage to the pineapple crop and bandits have restricted production by small land holders.

The Malayan industry has been completely reorganised since the war and is now under Government control. It is expanding fast.

In the very near future Queensland will also have to face competition from two other Commonwealth countries, Swaziland and Kenya, which are getting well into production.

The marketing of pineapple juice is one of our greatest problems. Up until last year, Queensland canners had no difficulty in securing attractive prices in the old country for bulk juice, which was put up in four ounce bottles by British manufacturers. In London last year this bottled juice was being sold through the pub trade from one shilling to one shilling and three pence per bottle—generally one shilling and three pence.

In an effort to find new outlets for juice, the C.O.D. Cannery last August, put a line of juice in seven ounce bottles on the Brisbane market. This bottled juice was well received by the public and distribution has now been extended to Sydney and Newcastle, in addition to country towns in Queensland and New South Wales.

Distribution has reached eight and one-half million bottles; but this only looks after a small proportion of the recoverable juice and hundreds of thousands of gallons have had to be allowed to go to waste this summer crop.
In conclusion, I would emphasise that the pineapple industry in Queensland, in contrast to the deciduous section in the Stanthorpe district—which has a wonderful market here during the summer for its vegetables and stone fruits and throughout the year for its apples—is entirely dependent for security and stability on its ability to meet competition. Every possible step is being taken on the canning and production sides to meet this competition.