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Plant Shutdown Shifts Workers

By Marylyn Donahue

Amid the stench of slightly spoiled frozen fish, four elderly workers sat on a hard wooden bench inside the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Provincetown plant this week, sharing one of their last 10-minute coffee breaks. They had worked together for 24 years; in less than four days they would be out of a job.

On the Saturday before Christmas the plant's management announced they were closing down the fish packing and freezing operation and selling the 62-year-old Commercial Street property. The decision came as a complete surprise to the estimated 44 employees—some of who have worked there for 40 years.

General manager Joseph Bakoff said the plant would officially close on Friday, January 11.

The Atlantic Coast Fisheries fish-packing plant is owned by the Live Fish Company in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Bakoff said the reasons for closing were lack of fish and the dilapidated condition of the building. He said some of the equipment was being transferred to one of the company's plants in Portland, Maine.

The employees' reaction to the closing was anger, mixed with sadness. Despite abysmal working conditions, the plant offered one of the few year-round jobs in Provincetown.

As the cold winter sun filtered through the plant's dusty windows, the four elderly workers sipped coffee and talked about their years at the factory. Some remembered putting in 15-hour days to make enough money to pay doctor bills.

Job Insecurity

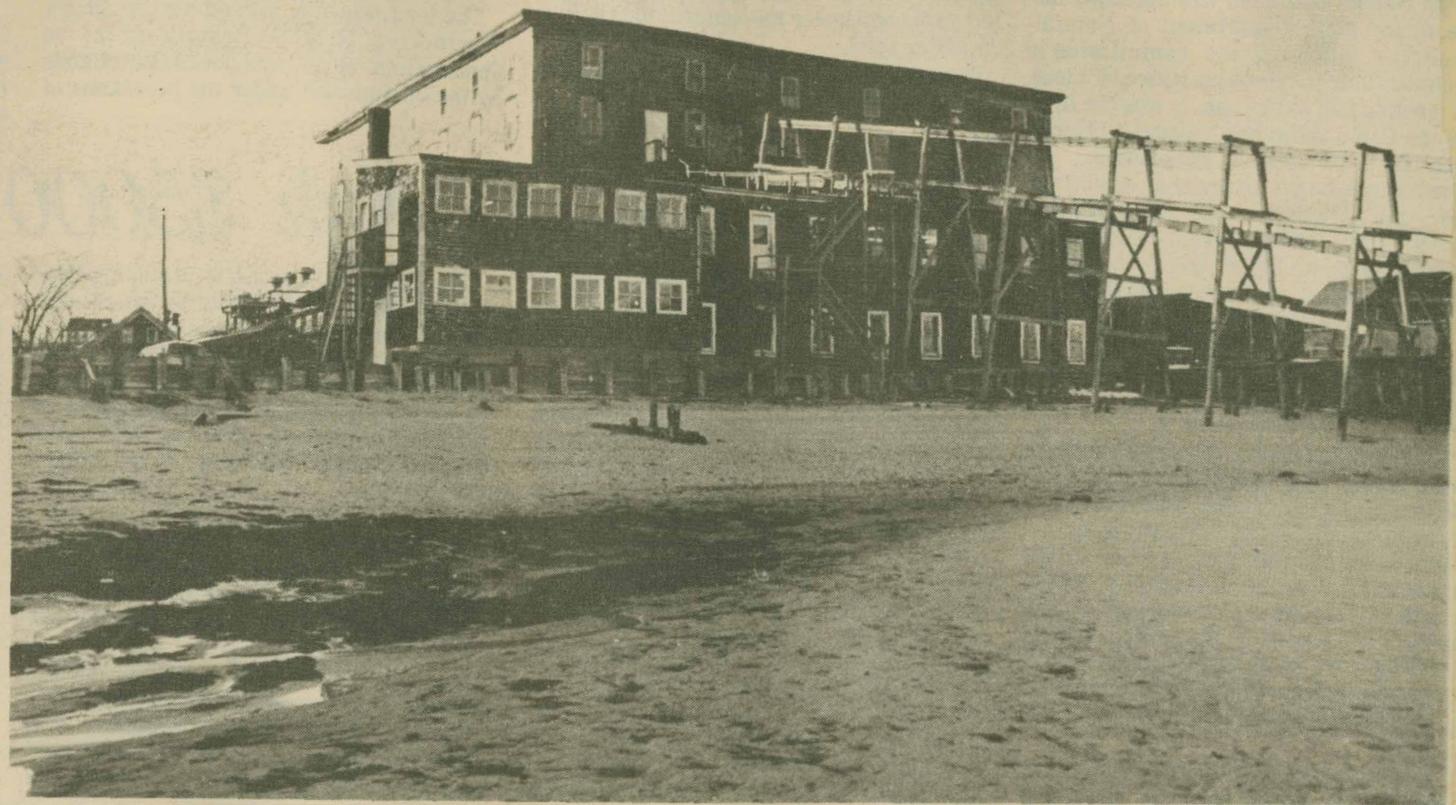
"They never gave us any benefits or security. We're paid by the hour and if you miss a day or if you fell sick and take the afternoon off, that's that. We make \$2.25 an hour—the same as the youngsters," one woman said.

None of the employees were told they would receive severance pay.

"Yes, we got good severance pay—a crack in the face at Christmas," a worker at the plant for 24 years said.

Bakoff said he did not know what arrangements had been made concerning severance pay. He also claimed he did not know the exact number of people on the payroll.

An employee estimated 10 long-term workers and 34 new employees would be affected by the closing.



The Atlantic Coast Fisheries plant on Commercial Street which closed this week. The building and land will be sold.

"It's like a family for some of us. My regret is having to break ties," a 15-year worker said.

"A few of us got together last week and told them how we felt. We told them they could have waited until after the holidays," he said.

One of the women remarked they had not even received the traditional frozen Christmas chicken—a gift from management and the only benefits granted by the company.

Welfare Bound

Few of the employees knew what they would do after Friday. Some said they would look for other work and others said they would be forced to go on welfare.

"I'm 64 years old and my friend here is 65—what do we do now? I'm a widow of 15 years and I have to work," said a woman.

Among the younger employees, most said

they had not worked long enough at the plant to be eligible for unemployment.

Chris Burlingeri, who has been working since November, said if she could not find another job she would have to apply for welfare.

"We've been screwed but it's the older people here that have it tough. They can't take unemployment in their heads and they can't get another job," said another young woman employee.

Ms. Burlingeri said she was not surprised by the way the owners handled the unexpected closure. She explained the treatment and working conditions at the plant were terrible.

"They allow us two 10-minute breaks with a one-hour lunch period—that's after standing on your feet packing boxes eight hours a day," Ms. Burlingeri said.

Union Busted

She said recently there was an effort

among the younger employees to form a union. Three years ago workers at the plant had tried to organize but management squelched the movement by threatening to fire the workers involved.

"If it wasn't for Ralph Fields, who is the foreman, a lot of us would have quit long ago. He was a good dude," Ms. Burlingeri said.

Fields is the only worker at the plant to relocate to Maine.

Ms. Burlingeri said the five-story building was on the verge of collapsing.

"Once the ice melts—which is holding this thing together—the place will cave in," she said.

Inside the plant, dirt and smells are intermingled with a general feeling of neglect. Ms. Burlingeri said the fish, which often had been frozen, thawed, and re-frozen, was contaminated with maggots.

She said most of the fish which is processed at the plant was imported from Japan, some of which was caught in waters off Provincetown. The fish include cod, flounder, whiting, and lobster tails. The fish is stored on the third floor of the building in cold storage rooms. From there it goes to the second floor where it is processed. Processing includes breaching, fileting, and packaging. The lobster tails come pre-packaged in twenty pound bulk packages. Workers then cut the packages into one-pound or eight ounce retail packages.

"Last week a rat was found in the men's room down stairs," Burlingeri said.

Provincetown Health inspector Fernando Gonsalves said this week that it was not his job to inspect the plant, since any property dealing in fish handling came under the jurisdiction of the state Food and Drug Office.

The plant was built in 1912 and was known as the Cape Cod Storage Company. In 1923 it changed hands and became the Atlantic Coast Fisheries. The Live Fish Company bought the building in the 1960's.

Bakoff said he did not know the asking price of the property. "All I know is there's an acre and a half of beautiful waterfront property here," he said.