

From the book:
Flathead Lake, "From Glaciers to Cherries"
by R.C. "Chuck" Robbin
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Chapter 16 **Flathead Lake Cherry Growers, Inc.**

In 1935, a cherry grower's cooperative was organized to facilitate the packing, hauling and marketing of the increasing sweet cherry production. Corporation papers were drafted by Hans Walchi, a Kalispell attorney and orchardist. Capitalized for \$150,000, provision was made for 500 voting shares of Class A stock with a par value of \$10, and up to 14,500 non-voting class B stock shares.

Qualifications for membership were one share of Class A voting stock for each acre of cherry trees (90 trees) or major fraction thereof of a bearing orchard.

The purpose of the new corporation read in part:

"...to engage in the cooperative packing, warehousing and marketing of agricultural and horticultural products, and particularly the marketing of the stockholders of this Corporation, provided that such outside precuts are not to exceed 30 percent of the total amount of the market operations of the Corporation...to engage in the business machinery, equipment, fruit trees, grains and all manner of agricultural and horticultural products and reselling the same to the members of this corporation upon a cooperative basis...to assist growers in raising and growing of fruits and grains..."

The first growers to draft, ratify and adopt the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws of the new Flathead Lake Cherry Growers were Frank A. Nolan, Oscar A. Moen, Hector E. Robbin and C.J. Mulcahy. The first board of directors, appointed on March 26, 1935, was Nolan, president; Moen, vice president; F.S. Mulcahy, secretary and treasurer and directors Dr. J.L. Richards and F.S. Mulcahy.

Joint meetings were held with the Great Northern Railway Traffic Department relative to building a packing warehouse and leasing land on Great Northern property in Kalispell. Mr. Fred Vertner of the Northwest Fruit Exchange submitted that initial requirements would be a 1 ½ story warehouse, 125 feet by 60 feet, large enough to house 125 packers with receiving ports and a loading platform at an estimated cost of \$20,000.

The Great Northern Railway had the warehouse built to specifications in 1935, in time for the crop harvest and entered into contract with the cherry growers, who were obligated to pay GN \$200 per month and one/eight cent per pound for all warehouse

processed fruit. In celebration of the opening of the new warehouse, a dance was held and Lee Bohannon led the grand march.

Vertner of Wenatchee, Wash., managed the packing of the first crop in 1935. George Gilpin established the warehouse bookkeeping system. Homer Morris, who built a box factory one-half mile north of Yellow Bay, furnished the first 4000 wood cherry boxes.

The power supply for his factory was unique in that the saw and planer were run from a hand-built water wheel that was turned by opening the gate valve to a pressurized two-inch head of water piped down the mountain 2,000 feet from a water canal originating in Yellow Bay Creek.

Evert Pierce, school bus driver on the Bigfork-East Lake Shore route for many years, contracted to haul the first cherries from the orchards to the Kalispell packing plant. One cent per pound was paid to the plant packers and one and one quarter cent was the going price paid to cherry pickers. Cherry prices that first year were set at 15 cents per pound in 15-pound Camel boxes and 20-cents per pound for five-pound fancy packed boxes.

In 1936, W.M. Wayman, a cherry grower on the Tom B. Moore property, was elected to the board of directors replacing Dr. J.L. Richards. Other early-day members of the cherry board were Dr. L.S. Bugbee, Ben J. Krogstad, C.C. Fransler, George Gilpin, Harry H. Wilder and Beecher B. Beal.

Vertner continued to manage the plant for many years and later George Slade became the manager. The Nash-Finch Co. was the marketing agent in the 1940's. Claude Walter, owner of City Transfer and Storage Co. in Kalispell, contracted in 1947 to haul cherries from the growers' orchards to the Kalispell plant at 35 cents per 100 pounds and return the empty boxes to the growers free of charge.

Walter held the hauling contract for many years. In April 1945, Nat M. Boyd was hired as sales manager, a job which he held until 1971. During part of this time he was also plant manager. Cecil Miller, also an orchardist, became the next packing plant manager, and held that position for many years. Miller had a cherry orchard in the Yellow Bay area.

Cherry production continued to increase causing the warehouse facilities to experience growing pains. Starting in 1944, one-half cent per pound was withheld from cherry grower profits to be used as working capital. In 1946, Charlie C. Harper drew up a sketch for a plant addition. In 1948, growers agreed to loan the association money at \$1 per tree for expansion and construction.

The Great Northern Railway Co. was paid the balance in full for the current building and a loan for \$4,000 was obtained from Wilder and Ruth Wilder McDonald to build an addition to the plant.

The issuance of class B stock provided additional money for mechanized equipment needed to process the cherries. In the same year, 1948, 1,248,818 pounds of cherries were processed and sold through the plant. The loan was eventually repaid from the profits of the cherry growers association.

The current packing plant continued in operation through the 1984 cherry season. In 1983, the Burlington Northern Railway formulated plans for the completion of a shopping mall in downtown Kalispell. Part of the property involved housed the Flathead Lake Cherry Growers packing plant, and when the plan was finalized in late 1984, the growers were faced with the decision of where to move.

The Skidoo and Big Sky properties and packing plants on Flathead Lake's Finley Point were purchased in late 1984. Equipment was moved from Kalispell and consolidated with existing Skidoo facilities. A 50 foot-by-150 foot addition was built to house the additional equipment, and the plant processed the 1985 cherry crop.