

Blue Lakes green beans



Contributed photo

By Tony Pierucci

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The Historic Courthouse Museum has a large collection of Native American baskets, particularly those created and used by the Eastern Pomo of Lake County. These works of art and utility rightfully garner a large amount of attention and are given a place of honor on the first floor of the museum. The basket you see in the photo here was not made or necessarily used exclusively by the Pomo. Despite its somewhat drab appearance, this basket does, however, share a common history with some very important people — royalty and presidents no less. That's quite prestigious company for a plain, wooden basket.

Let me explain.

The story starts in Lake County in 1891 on the shores of Blue Lakes. Henry Wambold and his wife Elizabeth had just opened a summer resort on the banks of the lower of the three lakes. Laurel Dell was the idyllic name chosen. As was common in 19th century Lake County (and indeed much of rural America at the time), the Wambolds maintained their own garden, which

supplied them with fresh produce for their own consumption. Some years were bountiful enough that they could barter their surplus produce with nearby neighbors who raised chickens or hogs. Among the usual fare of root vegetables and the like, Mrs. Wambold also grew green beans. After one particularly fruitful year, Mrs. Wambold canned the excess beans and shared them with friends.

They were a huge hit.

This gave Mr. Wambold the idea of setting up a small canning operation near the Laurel Dell resort. So was born Blue Lakes canned beans. The small cannery, measuring just 16 by 24 feet, had only been operating a few years when Mr. Wambold decided to take his industry to the next level. Going into business with a nearby farmer by the name of Adolphus Mendenhall, the two men quickly developed what would become arguably the largest industry to come out of Lake County. Mr. Wambold grew his beans near Laurel Dell and, around the turn of the century, drained Tule Lake and reclaimed the land for further bean fields. Mr. Mendenhall's acreage was located in the Upper Lake valley.

If Mr. Wambold laid the foundation for the green bean industry by starting the first cannery, Mr. Mendenhall set the walls and laid the roof by developing the variety of bean that made them famous. These new beans Mendenhall stumbled on had the mild, slightly grassy but oh so sweet flavor that has today become so well-loved. Adopting the name of the region in which they were first grown, they became known as Blue Lakes Green Beans (or Blue Lake Green Beans).

The two farmers maintained business relations for a few years, but sometime in the first few years of the new century, they split ways to operate their own canneries. In August 1909, the Clear Lake Press published a story about the new cannery that Mr. Wambold had built. According to the reporter, the entire production — from picking in the fields to processing and canning in the cannery — employed upwards of 300 people each season. Some reports indicate that Mr. Mendenhall's operation employed even more.

The need for so much labor each picking season (starting around September) resulted in an influx of migrant laborers. These workers were a mix of local and out of county Pomo and white men, women and children. Each season hundreds of people would converge on Upper Lake to take part in the bean industry. These migrant workers pitched tents and lean-tos, built fires and otherwise settled in to what became a veritable canvass city. Locals, somewhat tongue in cheek, called this temporary town that sprouted up every year "the Beanville Hotel."

The quality of the Blue Lakes green beans from Lake County became so internationally recognized, so the story goes, that the royal family of England took notice. Supposedly occurring sometime during the turn of the century, King Edward VII commissioned one of the canneries (it's not certain which), to supply his household with packages of canned beans. Each package was wrapped with a specially-designed label — elaborately colored in royal purple and heavily embossed in gold and silver — and shipped to the royal personages.

Misters Wambold and Mendenhall died within a year of each other — 1926 and 1927 respectively. The Blue Lakes green beans had staying power, though, and the industry of

growing and canning them did not end with the two pioneers. In fact — much to the later chagrin of Lake County — someone had given a sample of the Blue Lakes variety to a farmer in Oregon in the 1920s. Soon, “Blue Lakes” was used to describe the actual variety of the bean more than the location of where it was grown and processed.

At the death of Mr. Mendenhall, two gentlemen bought his cannery (Mr. Wambold had already sold his years before he died). These men, Mr. Lambert and Mr. Simi, continued the brisk production of canned green beans, needing a constant supply of the vegetable to feed into their cans. It is to this period that the basket in the museum’s collection probably dates.

The basket itself was used by a bean picker sometime in the 1930s or 1940s to collect beans from the field. During the economic downturn of the Great Depression, even if the output occasionally stalled or was decreased, the presence of the canneries in northern Lake County helped keep the area’s economy afloat. The basket in the museum now stands as testament to this important industry and the hard work of the men, women and children who helped make it a reality.

The last of the green bean canneries closed after the 1967 season, but not before having one last hurrah. In January 1965 the White House published the menu for the inaugural luncheon of recently elected President Lyndon B. Johnson. Among the delicious entrees and side dishes, people of Lake County recognized one item: Blue Lakes green beans. Although we don’t know for certain where the beans were grown (by that time Oregon had become a large producer of that variety), it is nice to think those little green pods were Lake County originals.

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