



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Women's Work and Chicano Families

Patricia Zavella

Published by Cornell University Press

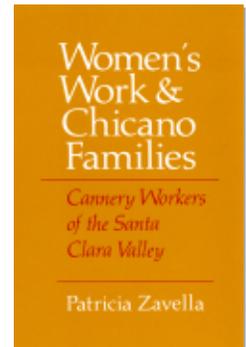
Zavella, Patricia.

Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley.

Cornell University Press, 1987.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57553>

---

Access provided at 29 Mar 2020 20:55 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Six Years Later

After the 1978 union elections, cannery labor organizers soon realized that they would have a short-lived victory. By the late seventies, the canning industry had begun relocating outside the Santa Clara Valley, a development that would ultimately undermine the organizing efforts of workers in the dissident caucuses. Cannery-worker activists faced a dilemma: on the one hand, they gained significant victories in turning back occupational segregation by race and sex in the industry and in making the union more democratic. On the other hand, the union was seemingly powerless in the face of plant closures. Furthermore, the employers claimed that worker agitation was itself a factor in the plant closures. With low profit margins, they said, production costs had to be cut in order for canners to remain competitive. Instead, canners faced increased production costs brought on in part by union wage less increases. By 1984 the lowest wage category had risen to \$7.92, and the highest wage category was \$12.97 (California Processors, Inc., et al. 1982:53).

The industry pointed to other problems, including increased truck-and rail-transportation rates and inflated energy costs (Goldberg and Wilson 1982).<sup>1</sup> Also, cannery waste disposal placed a

1. Upon analyzing national data for all food-processing industries, Roy Goldberg and Len Wilson claimed that labor costs had lower growth rates than any other production cost (1982: Exhibit 18).

burden on the local sewage-treatment facilities.<sup>2</sup> By relocating out of the Santa Clara Valley, canners could save on transportation and energy costs and avoid the sewage problems. As a consequence of competitive pressures and labor militancy, canners either packed up the factory machinery and moved out of the Santa Clara Valley or built new, large, technologically advanced canneries in rural areas of California.

Cannery-plant closures and relocations are part of a national trend toward “deindustrialization”—the decline of basic manufacturing in the United States (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Following growth in total manufacturing employment in California in the 1970s (especially in high-technology industries), basic industrial employment began to decline around 1979.<sup>3</sup> Between January 1980 and June 1984, 744 manufacturing plants closed in California, and nearly 118,000 workers lost their jobs. Several hundred thousand other workers also lost their jobs during the same period as a result of layoffs and reductions in operations.<sup>4</sup> Most of these closures and layoffs occurred during the 1981–82 recession. California’s unemployment rate reached 11.1 percent during the depth of the recession in 1982.

The food-processing industry in particular experienced a sharp decline, with the second highest number of recorded plant closures after “transportation equipment”—the auto and aerospace industries. Eighty food-processing plants closed in California between January 1980 and June 1984, putting 18,396 workers out of jobs.<sup>5</sup>

Santa Clara County recorded the fourth highest number of plant

2. The limitations of the municipal sewage systems had been a problem as early as 1968, with one canner calling it a “virtual invitation to vacate existing plants.” See *San Jose Sun*, 21 February 1968.

3. Data on plant closures is difficult to obtain since the California Economic Development Department began generating data only in 1980. The department calculates that usually two-thirds of the work force has been laid off before actual plant closures, and data is gathered only for plant closures of one hundred or more workers, which include only 40 percent of the affected workers.

4. Large establishments (with more than two hundred fifty employees) accounted for 52 percent of the jobs lost in California between January 1980 and June 1984. See Shapira 1984.

5. Employment Development Department, “Closed Business in California,” cited in Shapira 1984:14. Because of the difficulties of identifying and recording plant closures, these data significantly underestimate the number of closures and associated job loss.

## Six Years Later

Table 5. Estimated number of workers affected by eight cannery closures, Santa Clara County, 1980–84, by company

Company	Year closed	Workers affected
Glorietta, San Jose	1980	960
Stokeley Van Kamp	1981	285
Tri/Valley Growers	1981	1,500
California Cannery and Growers (three plants)	1982–83	5,000
Del Monte (two plants)	1982–83	900

Source: State of California, Department of Commerce, Economic Adjustment Unit, 1985.

closures among counties in the state.<sup>6</sup> There were 13,236 recorded jobs lost in Santa Clara County, with 118 plant closures (Shapira 1984:16).<sup>7</sup> Of them, just eight closed canneries accounted for 8,645 cannery workers who lost their jobs (see Table 5).

Clearly, in Santa Clara County the majority of jobs lost because of plant closures were in the canning industry. The number of canneries in the Santa Clara Valley dropped from the high of fifty-eight in 1930 to eleven in 1982.<sup>8</sup>

The Valley of the Heart's Delight has been transformed into the Silicon Valley, as electronics production has become the new major industrial base. Closed canneries are being converted into "high-tech" production facilities or office complexes, and the expanding real estate market makes these conversions lucrative for developers. A recent conversion of the Glorietta cannery into an industrial park for electronics production has been one of the most profitable redevelopment ventures in recent history.<sup>9</sup>

Plant closures have had a negative impact on union membership. Between 1973 and 1983 the proportion of union members in California, where union activities are traditionally well organized, dropped

6. Large urban counties containing much of California's industrial base have lost the greatest number of jobs through shutdowns. Los Angeles, Alameda, and Orange counties suffered the heaviest losses.

7. These figures include all workers, not just those in manufacturing, although manufacturing accounts for most of recorded plant closures in most counties.

8. *San Jose Mercury News*, 22 August 1982.

9. *San Jose Mercury News*, 25 October 1984.

from 36.1 percent of the manufacturing work force to 23.4 percent.<sup>10</sup> During these years, the number of union members in the food and kindred-products industry declined 14.6 percent (Shapira 1984:19).<sup>11</sup>

Plant closures in the valley also provided an opportunity for canners to impose wage cuts. In the 1983 collective-bargaining agreement in the Modesto local, a new category called "beginners" was instituted. Beginners are those workers who have less than ninety days seniority in one season and who perform Bracket IV or V jobs. Beginners, however, receive two dollars less than Bracket IV and V wages (California Processors, Inc., et al. 1982:54).<sup>12</sup> The ninety day cut-off point is significant, since it raises the length of time before a cannery worker can be considered a seasonal worker. Thus beginning seasonal cannery workers receive significantly lower wages, and by working for only ninety days, beginners do not receive the same benefits as other seasonal cannery workers. By introducing the category of beginner, the cannery labor force has once again become internally bifurcated.

What happens to cannery workers who are laid off? A study of the Hunt-Wesson B Street plant, which closed in 1978 and left 1,580 workers out of jobs, is illustrative.<sup>13</sup> Two hundred of the unemployed had been full-time workers and were transferred to other Hunt-Wesson operations. Sixty percent of the rest of the laid-off workers, of which the majority were Hispanic females, were enrolled in a publicly funded Comprehensive Training and Employment Act (CETA) program designed to provide retraining. Eighty percent of the participants in this program eventually obtained permanent employment in other industries, but their hourly wages were generally significantly lower than those provided by cannery jobs.

Plant closures have had a devastating effect on my cannery informants. Only five of the twenty-four (three women and two men) are still employed in canneries, and four of them transferred to the

10. Not all of the decline in union membership can be blamed on plant closures. Some of this is accounted for by the growth of high-technology and other industries, which do not have unionized labor forces.

11. The principal unions were the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and Bakers and Confectionary Workers.

12. There have also been problems of cannery workers retaining their seniority but losing their wage brackets when they transfer to another cannery. California Rural Legal Assistance, personal communication, 23 July 1985.

13. This discussion is from a report by the Associated Community Action Program (1980).

*Six Years Later*

Central Valley when their factory closed. Given the relatively advanced age of the women, I would predict that most of them were forced into "early retirement," that is, full-time homemaking. At the times of our interviews, many women had indicated that they felt too old to enter fast-paced electronics production.

The decline of canning in the Santa Clara Valley, however, did not end the organizing efforts of northern California cannery workers. In 1982 the California Senate Industrial Relations Committee held hearings on a proposed bill requiring employers to give one-year notice before plant closures. Although the bill did not pass, the hearings and subsequent media coverage provided increased public awareness of the problems of plant closures. Furthermore, San Jose cannery activists received renewed funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to continue the activities of the Cannery Workers Service Center.<sup>14</sup> The struggle between cannery workers and management undoubtedly will continue for some time to come.<sup>15</sup>

14. *San Jose Mercury News*, 5 November 1985.

15. In the fall of 1985 the mainly Chicano food-processing workers in Watsonville, California (in nearby Santa Cruz County), led by Teamsters for a Democratic Union, staged a strike in protest of wage cuts.