

## **Legends of Freeborn County Meatpacking Industry Meant Stable, Well-paying Jobs**

by Bev Jackson

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The meatpacking industry in Albert Lea had its origins more than 120 years ago. We hope the recent fire does not mean the end of an era.

In 1877, the Brundin Meat Market opened on the 200 block of Broadway. The Brundin brothers expanded their business by adding a meat packing site on the east end of Charles Street, near where the swimming pool is currently located. In 1898, a two story building was built on East Main between Broadway and Newton, and later a three-story addition was built. There is a great picture in the museum's archives that shows a herd of cows standing on Main Street in 1905. In 1907, Brundins moved into new quarters on West Clark. An article from the Freeborn County Standard, March 20, 1907, states, "Brundin Bros. take great pride in this new and enterprising move, and they assure one and all that more than ever they will carry an assortment of meats which will include everything in the line and which they guarantee will please the most fastidious."

In 1908, the company was incorporated employing about a dozen men. The salary of the president, Alex Brundin, was \$150 per month. In the next few years the company went through several organizational and name changes - Albert Lea Packing Company, and in 1912 another Albert Lea Packing Company which moved the slaughtering operations to the site of the present Farmland. In spite of building a new hog slaughtering plant, by 1914 they were again in trouble so the company was sold to Sulzberger Corporation - the book value being \$5,629.

In 1916, the corporation was sold to Wilson & Company. It became the largest employer in Albert Lea, and for more than 50 years it provided a stable, well-paying job to thousands of people, many of whom spent their entire working years at the plant. Concern for its future began in 1967. Since that time the company has had a variety of name changes and corporate owners - Wilson Sinclair, Wilson & Company (again), Wilson Foods, Inc., CornBelt Meats, Farmstead Foods, Seaboard Farms of Minnesota, Inc., and now Farmland.

The meatpacking industry was the subject for several of Irv Sorenson's history cartoons published in the Albert Lea Tribune for many years. One of them described the Brundin Packing Company in 1909. "They killed about 125 hogs daily and also cattle and calves. In their first year of operation, they killed 17,236 hogs, 553 cattle, and 1066 calves." Another described the hauling of meat to Mason City in 1918. "Wilson & Company working with International Harvester, made a trial haul of meat to Mason City, Iowa. The 86 mile round trip took eight hours and 50 minutes. Six stops on the road took one hour and 40 minutes. Running time was seven hours and 10 minutes. Total cost for the round trip was \$13.27. This included interest, depreciation, and the driver at \$3.50 per day. The manager of Wilson's was convinced that the idea was feasible."

Other cartoons dealt with odors and ice. "In 1923 the city council received a petition, with hundreds of names, asking that they do something about the packing house perfume. They urged the plant to erect a sewage disposal plant," and "In 1924, 15,000 tons of ice was cut from Fountain Lake for Wilson & Company to be used for icing refrigerated train cars leaving Albert Lea."

More recently, I received a letter from a friend who had worked at Wilson's during summers when he was in college. His memories were revealing. "When I think of Wilson's, or what

everyone in town called "the plant," I think of the whistle at high noon and the smell, both wafting across Fountain Lake to my boyhood home on Park Avenue. Hearing the whistle and smelling the smell often prompted the friends of my youth to say that their dads worked at the plant. And they said it with pride, even if the smell suggested the daily production of pickled pigs feet.

"During the late 1930s and 1940s, job security, not pay was everything. The Post Office and American Gas Machine Company offered good employment, but Wilson's was the big show and its lights were aglow well into the night. To my young mind, it was the factory around which Albert Lea revolved... The jammed parking lot today gives no feel for the number of workers who walked to Wilson's, lunch buckets in tow, a half century ago. The standard attire was bib overalls...Because so many walked to work, the North Side was a prized residential location...Quite a few occupied homes south of Highway 16, near the Old Austin road, and adjacent to the then heavily polluted Lower Lake. No one in those days called it Albert Lea Lake.

"During the eight years between the end of the Second World War and my graduation from Albert Lea High School, I associated Wilson's with the baseball Packers and their perennial state championships...Where the meat was shipped endlessly fascinated me. You could count on the veal, the lamb and the prime beef going to hotels and restaurants on the East Coast (especially New York and Boston). The chittering (hog intestines) were headed to African-American populations in Detroit and Cleveland. The sides and quarters of beef often ended up in upstate New York, in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, to be sliced at branches into the different cuts of meat.

"Wilson's was a microcosm. It employed its dandies and pluggers, its nice folks and its rascals. I found the opportunity to work there was a blessing. It taught me respect for the men and women who work with their hands and who work well."

A special thank you to everyone who worked at Farmland and to all of the employees who have never given up their belief in the future of the industry in Albert Lea.

**Bev Jackson is the executive director of the Freeborn County Historical Museum.**