PEAR PACKING: A SEASON OF WOMEN'S WORK

by

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Introduction

The topic of this paper is women's work today in the pear packing industry in Jackson County, Oregon. Local women have been the mainstay of the packing houses since World War I. There are thirteen packing houses in Jackson County and more than five hundred local women pack each season.

My first interest in pear packing came fifteen years ago, shortly after I moved here. I had met several women who mentioned that they were or were not going to "pack" that year. Some said, "my sister" or "my mother" is going to "pack." I was curious about this work that seemed so much a part of their lives. My interest was rekindled during a class in sociology on women and work. I decided that this seasonal work in agriculture done by local women would be the topic for my Master's project.

My degree will be interdisciplinary: sociology and English (writing). This paper is the last part of my project. The other section, a "show," Pear Packing: A Season of Women's Work, blends poems and photographs. It was first displayed at the Women's Center on the Southern Oregon State College campus during Women in History Month (March 1988), then at On The Wall gallery in Medford during the Pear
Blossom Festival (April 1988). It has been at the Southern Oregon Historical Society's museum in Jacksonville from July 1988 through October 1988.

The show has two sections. The first is a series of poems inspired by the daily journal I kept while pear packing in 1984, and it is accompanied by contemporary photographs of packing. The second part is a series of historic photographs depicting pear packing from the turn of the century through the 1940s. I will include in this paper selections from the contemporary photographs and lines from several of the poems contained in the show.

Although this paper's scope is limited to women who pack, I want to point out that women traditionally make up a large reserve labor force used by the agriculture industry in our area. In other parts of Oregon, for example, women seasonally "can" fish, in coastal cities such as Astoria, or work to freeze and "can" vegetables in the Willamette Valley.

Andrew Hacker in "Women at Work" (1986, 26) states that "Fifty-two percent of women employed outside the home work part-time or for only part of the year." Pear packing is part of the seasonal work force here in Jackson County.

The majority of women who pack live in Jackson County and have packed year after year, many times packing with
their mothers, sisters and daughters. Since World War I, when the work was done under tents in the orchards, women have packed pears. Before World War I, pears were packed by migrant families—men, women and children. The large packing houses or "sheds"—Bear Creek, Naumes, Southern Oregon Sales—now have more than one hundred women on the "floor" packing. The small houses like Del Rio in Rogue River and Meyers in Talent have thirty.

The orchard industry has been very important to Jackson County since the turn of the century. Pears were planted in the Rogue Valley in the late nineteenth century, and for most of the twentieth century the pear industry vied with the wood products industry as the largest employer in Jackson County. The railroad, completed in Jackson County in 1885, made it possible to ship pears to markets nationwide. Now the market is international, and local firms compete with those in, e.g., Chile.

To research pear packing I visited four of the thirteen packing houses between 1984 and 1987. Most important, I went to pear packing "school" and worked the three-month packing season at one of the oldest and largest packing houses in Jackson County in the fall of 1984. I will refer to this house as Siskiyou. Physical, blue-collar work was not new to me. I had worked for several years as a waitress and ten years in construction.

The houses differ in size and age but the style of
packing is constant, considerably because the equipment is similar and functions in the same way. Two of the houses I visited had clear differences in length of season packed. The one I worked in was different in ownership. Most houses are owned by growers who package only their own fruit. Siskiyou is a co-operative, processing pears owned by many different orchards.

The pear packing referred to in this paper is also known as commercial packing. It occurs during harvest season and is the packing of 45-pound boxes of table pears for the wholesale market. Most commercial packing sheds work one shift a day, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Some houses also gift-wrap fruit for the holiday seasons.

The commercial season is approximately the same for all houses, but the season for the houses that gift-wrap is longer. Bear Creek packing house is now packing locally for eight to nine months a year, September to May, everything from commercial pears and gift-wrapped fruit in the fall to bare root roses in the spring. Bear Creek is also the only packing house which offers medical benefits to packers who work for eight months. The other twelve houses in Jackson County offer no medical benefits or sick leave.

Four basic varieties of pears are commercially packed: Bartlett, Bosc, Comice and D'anjou. Both green and red Bartletts are packed at the beginning of the season. Packers told me that "Bartletts have declined in popularity;
we'll have to pack more Bosc this year." Bosc rate the lowest with the packers because they tend to be oddly shaped, with longer, weaker necks. Bartlett and Comice have short, thick necks. But the neck of the Bosc is often crooked, making it harder to lay the pear flat in the packing row. (Often the neck would break on a smaller pear. The pear would then be picked out of the box and the packer--mumbling "shit"--would throw the pear, wrapper and all, to the floor.)

Pears that land on the floor either deliberately or by accident are not wrapped for cold storage and sale. They become the property of anyone who picks them up. Packers often take some home, and those left are usually picked up by the rousties--men who do other work in the shed--and sold to local markets.

Comice pears are the packers' favorite because they are larger than other pears, so it takes fewer to fill the box and "weigh out" between 45 and 47 pounds. Still, the larger Comice are hard to pack because so few will fit in to "make weight" and they are so round it is hard to stack the layers of pears in the correct patterns. Whatever the variety, each size pear is packed in a certain pattern so that a buyer will know that so many pears of a certain size will be contained in a standard cardboard box. Pay for packers is by the box, so anything that delays the process, such as a "broken neck" or misshaped fruit, is upsetting.
Most of this paper will be presented from my viewpoint as a participant observer at Siskiyou in 1984. I worked a three-month packing season with one hundred women that fall. I will focus on women who had been packing at the same shed for many years. I acknowledge that it is a limited view and that some women were relatively new and had many different reasons for choosing packing as their paid work.

I believe that the women I will focus on at Siskiyou were typical of women working then at other packing houses. In November 1987, for example, I visited the Pinnacle packing house in Medford and met Helen McKay, who started packing in 1947. At that time she worked ten hours a day, six days a week and was paid ten cents a box.

Helen and I talked about changes that have taken place in pear packing during the last forty years. Pinnacle is a newer and smaller shed than Siskiyou. Pinnacle was built in the 1950s and has a concrete slab floor. There are thick green foam mats on which the packers stand while packing.

Helen told me how federal and state laws concerning the workplace have changed the number of hours packers work. Ten to twelve hours a day was not unusual in 1947. Today she rarely packs more than eight. When Helen started packing in 1947 she came "back after dinner and sometimes on Saturdays to 'pack out' the fruit." Helen told me how she spent her paychecks thirty years ago when her children were young and she worked in the sheds. "Starting in July, I'd
shop for the kids' clothes. I'd put them on layaway. Then in September when the packing started I'd take my first paycheck and pay for the clothes, and the kids would have new school clothes. My second paycheck went to pay insurance on the house. My third and fourth paychecks went to taxes. After that, the money was mine. One year I bought a new refrigerator."

Helen's story was typical of other pear packers I interviewed in that she referred to her wages as "my money." Often the money was used for special events, Christmas, or new furniture.

In this paper the work of Roslyn Feldberg and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1982) has been somewhat helpful in deciding what to study and present to the reader. They state that while work is of central importance in the lives of both men and women, sociologists have treated their work very differently. "While issues of work are framed as universal ones, the actual study of work has proceeded along sex-differentiated lines" (1982, 64, 66). Women's paid work has usually been studied from the perspective of family and home as first priorities; therefore, problems on the job are assumed to be related to stress at home. In contrast, men's work has been studied with the assumption that the workplace and their relationship to it are men's first priority, with home and family as subordinate.

Glenn and Feldberg would like to expand the study of
work for both men and women to include family life as well as the workplace. "Thus, the analysis of paid work for men and for women would take account of the context of their total life situation and would reflect the variations of life cycle, gender, and the regional economy that characterizes workers' lives" (1982, 79). I try informally to incorporate some of their ideas at times by considering, e.g., women's ages and marital statuses. But I have to leave many such sociological questions unanswered. Surveys of the women who work seasonally packing pears could certainly supplement this more participant-centered study.

I will use *Contested Terrain*, the work of Richard Edwards (1979), to study the technology and workplace of the pear packer. By applying three concepts discussed by Edwards: 1) machine control or pace, 2) type of pay, and 3) the decreased need for direct supervision, the world of the pear packer can be better understood.

I will also discuss the effects of standing all day and the medical needs created by the use of hands, wrists and arms in the continuous packing motion. The physical stress is related to the fact that pay is by the box; only increased production will provide an increase in pay. Pay is individual, by the box, and there is a special type of competitiveness that results.

To give you a preliminary idea of the competitive mood
on the packing floor, here is an incident during one of my early "pack outs" before a "fruit change," terms that will be more fully explained later. It was my most embarrassing moment as a packer at Siskiyou. We were "packing out" Bosc pears, before a "fruit change." The middle bins were running full, but there was no large or small fruit for either the "head" or the "foot" of the line to pack. Most packers were sitting on the steel roller belts between the lines. I was working "foot" and had come up to the middle to find fruit. Jenna, a packer with twenty years' experience, had never spoken to me before. She gave me a hard look and said, "Who are you?" She continued to pack and refused to move up in the bin to allow me a space to park my packing "horse" and pack. I answered, "Susan Reid." She asked again, "Who are you?" I realized everyone on the belt was watching and listening for my answer. Again I said, "Susan Reid." Jenna turned her back to me and continued packing.

I knew I had a right to the pears. Jenna was second to head; therefore I had a priority to pack before she packed. Time seemed to stand still before I realized that my answer to her question "Who are you?" should have been "I'm the foot." The women sitting on the belt were watching silently. The head of the line and Jenna had packed out all but a few pears before I walked around Jenna's packing "horse" and faced her, saying, "I'm the foot." She moved away.
Most of the rest of this paper is in four sections on the women packers and their workplace: first, the women who pack; second, the physical workplace; third, the process of packing; and fourth, the technology of the workplace and process. Then I present some brief final thoughts.

Pear Packers and Their Pay

a labor force for the season
summer drags on
the days are hot and long
warm evenings provide space
between work and dinner
between paid and unpaid work

Pear packing is seasonal work. At Siskiyou, the focus in this paper, most of the women returned to packing season after season and did not have other paid jobs during the year. More than half the women were married and it appeared that the majority of income or support for their families came from their spouses. Often the husbands did other blue-collar work. Still, there were women working as packers who were single, some single parents, and women whose husbands were out of work.

There were over one hundred packers on the floor the first day of the season and ten of us were new. The new packers were graduates of a two-week pear packing school held in August; it cost ten dollars to attend. As I entered
the packing house on the first day, many women were hugging each other and asking what their summers were like. Trips to Alaska and Arizona were the topics of conversation. Maybe half the women stood to the side, as I did, and were left out of what seemed to be a yearly greeting.

Most of the women on the floor were very experienced packers. Packing twelve to fifteen years seemed to be the norm. I was forty, and most packers were about my age or older. There were a dozen or so younger packers. I was to learn that some women in their sixties were very good packers, very fast. Betty, the floor supervisor, was in her early seventies.

The first day everyone was asking, "How much per box?" The price paid to packers per box had not been set. It seemed strange to me that everyone was willing to work when no one knew how much they were getting paid. The rate of pay per box is set by the Fruit League, a growers' association, and all packing houses pay the same. Our rate of pay in 1984 turned out to be 37 cents a box. New packers were guaranteed minimum wage: $3.35 an hour. If, after several weeks, you didn't pack approximately 90 boxes a day, enough boxes to exceed minimum wage, you were asked to work another job in the shed.

I "broke-a-hundred," packed more than one hundred boxes, on Friday of my second week. It gave me a sense of pride and a feeling of acceptance. I was one of five new
packers who packed for the whole season. Three left the packing shed in the first week. Two were asked to work with the weighers, a job with less pay and prestige.

Most of the women were well-dressed, married, and were mothers or grandmothers—some very young grandmothers, it seemed to me. I packed with Arleen, who had become a grandmother at age thirty-eight.

At Siskiyou, although not all packing sheds as I learned later, the nomenclature of pear packing reflected woman's role as mother. The first day on the job I was introduced as Arleen's "new baby" (a first year packer), and Arleen was introduced to me as my packing "mother." Betty, the floor supervisor, was the packing boss, or "boss mama." She took each of the new packers to a place on the "line up" just in front of an experienced packer, and introduced us to our packing mothers, the women who would receive an extra five cents per box to supervise and help us. We were to pack the pears in neat diagonal rows in boxes that when fully packed would weigh 45 to 47 pounds.
Arleen had a Class B chauffeur's license and could drive an eighteen-wheeler truck. Two weeks ago, she had returned from New York on a run with her husband, Dave. "We make more money when I'm on the road with Dave." But, she went on to reveal, "I look forward to packing and seeing everyone." Arleen first packed sixteen years ago when her first marriage was breaking up. She packed for a few years and then worked full-time for an oral surgeon for nine years. She has three grown sons, and drives a truck across
country with Dave for six to eight months a year. When I met Arleen, she was forty-five years old.

Betty, the packing boss, was a small woman—maybe five feet two inches and one hundred pounds. She looked like she has worked very hard, but she always smiled and was helpful to the "new girls." She told me how she started packing in 1940 at 3 1/2 cents a box. There was no minimum wage. Her first paycheck was thirty dollars. "We were just married. It was starting to get cold. It was fall. We went to Montgomery Wards and bought a wood stove. It was so pretty, with chrome—I was so proud of it." Betty has packed more than two hundred boxes in a day. She became sick the year I packed, and Jean took over as packing boss two weeks into the season.

Jean is tall, dark and quiet. Betty taught her to pack in the 1950s. Jean's daughter, Vanessa, went to pear packing school with me and was one of the new young women who packed the entire season. Jean and Vanessa lived in Jacksonville and were fans of the Oakland Raiders football team. Vanessa was married to a man her father's age. He "made good money" driving a beer truck for a Central Point distributor. When he came to the shed one day with their son, Kyle, I thought he was her father—the boy's grandfather. She took the mistake with a laugh. There were several mothers and daughters working at Siskiyou and many aunts, nieces, and cousins. Jean told me that families tend to
"stay with one house."

Jean and Vanessa seemed close and got along well. Vanessa liked to party at lunch and usually left the shed to go for pizza and meet friends. Jean ate upstairs in the lunchroom, at the same table every day.

The lunchroom is a small room appearing to be suspended from the high ceiling of the warehouse. Broad wooden stairs lead up to the lunchroom and adjacent washroom from the packing floor. Some of the women sell doughnuts and coffee at the break times and at lunch. Breaks are 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., lunch is noon to one o'clock. The same women seemed to meet at the same tables for lunch, there was very little mixing. Year after year these friends shared their lives. Talk was usually of husbands, boyfriends, and children. The lunchroom fills with cigarette smoke.

Some women chose to eat their lunch on the loading dock next to the railroad track on the east side of the building. A few of the younger women sat in the sun on the west side of the building, where most of the men who work in cold storage ate their lunch. Very few women left the work area. It seemed to me that the dock next to the tracks was a no smoking area, where women who liked to read or sit quietly would spend their lunch hour. Some of them would fall asleep. The women who joined the men for lunch were a mi-
nority, they would listen to music and talk.

Most of the packers would sit in the lunchroom. I felt accepted after being asked to join Arleen and Jean in the lunchroom. Sitting at the tables I was able to listen to conversations and viewpoints of the individual packers who sat there. The women knew I was writing a paper concerning women who packed.

Some of the women who sorted pears also ate in the lunchroom. There was a clear distinction between sorters, who are "paid by the hour" and packers, who were considered "their own boss" and an "elite," at least amongst themselves. Packers made more money than the sorters.

The conversations in the lunchroom varied from a local ballet, which I was surprised to hear mentioned, to the use of money, to men, and politics. That fall was one of a national election and Ronald Reagan was often a topic of conversation, as were "women's problems," menopause and children.

The lunchroom provided social rewards; a place to brag about accomplishments, new cars or kitchen appliances. It also was a place to gain sympathy for illness or the wrongful action of a husband or child.

In my brief experience, there was little said at lunch, or in other settings, about some of the harsher realities of pear packing; the hard work and resulting pain, or the pay. It seemed to me that because pear packing was a temporary
situation, seasonal work, many of the women felt that problems could simply be endured.

After two weeks of packing I was asked by Arleen to "go for pizza." Every Friday for lunch from thirty to fifty women would walk down the railroad tracks to the nearby pizza place and order pizza and beer. Tables would form with the same women who ate together in the lunch room, and one or two pitchers of beer would be consumed before the pizzas arrived.

This act of drinking was in defiance of the packing house policy. Several years before, the habit of drinking on Fridays had caused a change in the method of pay. The policy had been to pay the women at noon on Friday so they would not have to wait after work for their paychecks. But because of the drinking at noon, some women would not come back to the shed or could not function if they did. So the distribution of paychecks was changed to after work on Friday. The head packer would stand next to the time clock, holding the paychecks. Everyone would be anxious to leave; Jean would call the packer's last name and that packer would step up and get her pay.

Pear packing is hard physical work. I worked eight hours a day, five days a week at Siskiyou. Swollen feet and hands were common, expected. Cortisone injections were
needed by many experienced packers, and most packers wrapped their forearms with Ace bandages throughout the season. I took four to six aspirin a day for pain and swelling.

On the third day of work my left hand was swollen, the little finger rubbed raw and bleeding. Arleen and Jean helped me wrap my hand with tape. We used our fully-gloved right hands to pick the pears out of the bin. (It is gloved so that there will be no damage to the pear. Pears are sensitive, a cut in the skin by a fingernail would ruin the whole box of packed pears because such spoilage spreads.) The glove on the left hand has been customized, the middle and index fingers cut back an inch, so rubber finger stalls can be taped in place. Stalls are needed to pick up the wrapping paper. Almost as soon as you pick up the pear, you throw it into the palm of your left hand, which holds the tissue paper you picked up after placing the last piece of fruit in the box. With your right hand you reach for a new pear, after twisting the paper around the pear you are holding in your left hand. You repeat this motion more than one thousand times a day. This repeated turning of the wrist sometimes results in the need for "carpal tunnel surgery," a procedure performed by an orthopedic surgeon, requiring general anesthesia and hospitalization.
Sometimes when my hands seemed numb I would try to calculate how many pears I had thrown into my left hand: an average of 120 pears per box and I was packing more than 100 boxes a day. Pay was 37 cents a box. I was making 37 dollars a day.
Although the competition for the best pears was keen, some women would take the time to encourage new or slower packers. During a break one day Bea gave me some advice: "stay loose" and "keep your elbows in close to your body, you'll make a good packer."

Bea packed in front of me on the "line-up." She was a friend of Arleen's (who stood behind me). Sometimes I would look over my shoulder and see their eyes meet. They would communicate without speaking, with a roll of the head or a narrowing of the eyes. There was little talking on the packing house floor. The noise from the equipment, compressor engines and belts made hearing very difficult.

The Shed and the Division of Labor

women hurrying out of cars
quick pace up to the loading dock
inside a line to the time clock
punch in
pears are moving down the belts
filling the bins

Siskiyou's packers worked in a huge green stucco building about seventy years old. It is right alongside a railroad track, east of Medford. Basically a warehouse, it is divided into two parts. The north half (10,000 square feet including its basement) is for cold storage of huge wooden boxes of pears after the harvest. The fruit is then packed
cold and returned to cold storage in 45-pound boxes. There is a polyurethane bag inside the cardboard box in which the pears are packed. In the past, "poly-girls" or "poly-baggers" used vacuums hung from ceiling rafters to remove air from the bags before closing them and sending the boxed pears back to cold storage. This technology, I was told, was developed in the 1950s and discontinued shortly thereafter. Now the bags are folded closed.

The south half of the warehouse is called the packing shed. It faces the small tudor style building that houses
the office and paymaster. Men were paid there.

The shed has two large double doors that face south and open to big vats of soda ash and water, plus a mystery chemical that none of my co-workers could name. The use of chemicals in the pear industry is a problem for the workers. I had a rash which covered my right forearm and stomach for most of the packing season. It was not uncommon and was referred to as "pear poison" by the packers. I never knew the cause of my rash and cannot attribute it to any specific chemical.

This huge shed is filled with the sounds of belts rolling over steel pins, boxes being sent from the loft to floor, fork-lifts dumping fruit, compressors keeping the fruit cold, and the hard cold fruit being slapped into the paper that is held in the left hand of the packers. There is not much talking except at the sorting tables and weighing stations. When a train passes, the shed shakes; the sound is deafening.

Fork-lifts move in and out of the south-facing double doors all day, dropping wooden crates of pears into the water/chemical solution. The number of pears to be packed, the number of pears dumped into the water, is determined by men working in the office. These managers are rarely seen by the women working on the packing floor. No women were
employed as managers when I packed.

The packing shed is like a cavern inside, with catwalks suspended from a ceiling fifty feet high. The catwalks were formerly used for supervising the women and for orchardists to watch as their fruit was packed. When I packed I saw only one or two people venture up to the high walks. Siskiyou was one of the oldest packing houses. Other newer houses do differ; they are usually smaller, less barn-like and have better lighting.

The Siskiyou shed is dimly lit by fluorescent tubes. The sliding doors on the east side facing the railroad tracks are usually closed, as is the sliding door on the west side where workers enter and punch in on the time clock.

The time clock is separated from the packing area by the large belt that carries fruit to cold storage. This separation of work areas also separates the sexes into their own workplaces. A section of the belt is hinged, forming a gate that must be raised to get into the packing floor. Men work handling the boxes of pears for cold storage and shipment. Women work on the packing floor.

Joseph H. Pleck in *Women and Work* discusses occupational segregation by sex (1982, 105). The older pattern of blue-collar segregation was women in one place, men in
another—a separate setting. This is still evident in pear packing. Women typically work in the packing shed half of the huge warehouse; men, with the exception of rousties, work in the other half, which is for cold storage. Pleck also points out that in this older system of segregation male authority or control is administered by female supervisors, minimizing male-female contact. This too is still very true in the packing shed. There is only one supervisor on the packing floor, a woman who is called the "head packer." She reports to male management. This meant one direct supervisor for one hundred packers.

The only exceptions to the division of sexes are three men, teenagers, called rousties. The rousties work among the women on the floor. Two were sons of women working in the shed. They carry the full boxes back to packers who have miscalculated the weight of the pears. The size of pears varies, so different packing patterns are used. With small pears it takes up to 180 to fill a box and weigh out properly. With some of the larger pears it takes only 60 to fill the box, and weigh that necessary 45 pounds.
Rousties also cut open the bindings that hold the flattened cardboard boxes in packs of twenty. The razors they use to cut the bands often fly inches from the packers' heads as the rousties move between the women to reach boxes on the belt above the fruit bins. There is physical contact between the packers and young men as they move in between the tightly packed women, but the rousties seem to be ignored.

The equipment used at Siskiyou is old. The last phys-
ical change made in its packing house was after World War II, when cardboard boxes replaced wooden ones. Most of the equipment dates from the 1930s. Some of the newer packing houses have smaller bins and conveyor belts, but the houses that I visited all had the same basic design and equipment. In short, to the packers, packing has not changed significantly since the 1930s. You still stand all day to do the packing, and fatigue from that and from the routine nature of the work is a real problem.

The Packing Process

women helping women
tape their fingers
wrap Ace bandages around their wrists
preparing for a fight like boxers
positioning themselves in lines
lines that snake across the room
positions they left last night

Once the pears are dropped into the soda ash solution, they float up and are caught on conveyor belts that move to two separate sorting tables (six feet wide and fifteen feet long) in the packing shed. Eight to twelve women sit on high stools and sort the pears. The women sort the pears as to quality and send on to the packers only perfectly shaped pears with no bruises, mold or fungus. Pears not good enough to pack because of size, shape, insect damage, or color are sent directly outside on a small conveyor belt and
trucked to the juicing house.

Most pears are placed onto one of four large conveyor belts and sorted by size, then dropped into slowly turning bins. The large conveyor belt is made up of two individual belts that gradually separate from each other, allowing the smallest fruit to drop into the first bin, called the "foot of the line." This is where the smallest fruit is packed. The largest fruit is dropped at the "head of the line."

The head of the line is the most desirable place to pack, because pay is by the box. The larger the pear, the fewer needed to fill a box to 45 pounds. There are four complete lines, belts running in the center with eight bins turning underneath, creating two foot positions and two head positions on opposite sides of the belt. Each double line forms a peninsula that points north to cold storage. Running between and at the head of each line is a large belt that takes the packed boxes to the weigher and then back to cold storage.

The women stand next to the bins, forming a line. This packing line is formed from the foot of the line to the head, small fruit to large fruit.
When the packing house is running at full capacity, there are two to three different sizes of pears in each bin/tub, and two or three women pack on each side of a bin. Each place on the line has a name, a position in the priority of packing: head, second to head, third to head, foot, second to foot, etc. Each woman packs for half an hour in one position before moving to the next position in the line-up. This allows all packers to share equally in the larger fruit. The fewer pears needed to fill a box and weigh out,
the more boxes packed, the more money made; so with the larger fruit is where everyone wants to be.

The packer who is working the head of the line has first priority on the fruit and can move down the line from bin to bin packing fruit wherever it is available. The foot of the line is second in priority and can move up in the line looking for fruit. When fruit supply is limited, the packers in the middle of the line step out until more pears are released.

suddenly a slow down
a "fruit change"
they stop and sit on the big belt
waiting, waiting, listening
listening to women talk

These waiting women often sit on the large steel roller belts that move the full boxes to the weigh stations. The belt provides a place to rest when "standing out" of the line. Women sometimes take a quick drink from thermoses, go up to the washroom, or talk with other packers who are also waiting to get back into the line-up.

The "slow down," or lack of fruit which causes women to "stand out," usually occurs when there is a "fruit change," meaning either a change in orchard, ownership of the pears, or a change in the variety--Bosc to Comice, for example. When there is a "fruit change," one variety of pears must be completely "packed out" of the bins before a new variety can be released by the sorters. At this time packing can be
slow on one line and a bin might have too much fruit on another line. Then there is a system of assistance that takes place. Packers who do not have priority in one line can be called to "boost" (help) in another line where pears are coming down the belt so fast that the machinery can be clogged.

There is a "pack out" at the end of every day, when all fruit must be returned to cold storage for fear of spoilage. Pears are a valuable fruit; packers said that some boxes of Comice sell for twenty-five dollars on the wholesale market.
Cold storage and gloved hands are precautions used to insure the pears' quality.

Although some fruit is lost—the fruit that lands on the floor—the situation that is most damaging to fruit is called a "pear jam." This usually occurs when fruit new in variety or owner is released by the sorters and too much of one size arrives, over-filling one or two tubs on the line. There is limited space around each tub or bin, a maximum of eight packers (four on each side) can pack out of a single tub. If pears drop into the bin faster than the packers can or will pack and the level of fruit reaches the steel bracing that supports the delivery belt, then pears are mashed. They are caught between the bin of cold hard pears and the steel; a thick pear paste forms. The packers' gloves become wet and slippery, and packing stops until the bins are cleaned out by the packers and rousties. Many pears and much time are lost when this occurs.

At Siskiyou when one belt is turned off, all packing stops; either all belts are running and tubs turning or all are stopped. There is a single main switch.

A pear jam sometimes happens at the end of the day. As sorters are anxious to leave, they pass fruit down the belts faster than the packers can wrap and box the fruit. Packers call out to the head packer to slow the sorters down. Some women blame the situation on the sorters. Others think it is the fault of management and step back away from the over-
flowing bin, allowing more fruit to be lost. Normally it is
the availability of fast packers to work as "boosters" that
determines how much fruit is lost.

The south end of the building above the sorting tables
has a loft where wooden packing boxes were made until World
War II. The cardboard boxes are stored there. Placed on
steel roller belts, the boxes drop so quickly to the level
of the top of the conveyor belt above the fruit, that the
momentum carries them to the head of the line. Each packer
pulls a box down, opening the box in the same motion as she
places it on her "horse." The horse holds the box at an
angle which allows the packer to see the entire bottom of
the box from her standing position.

The horse is a steel table on wheels, approximately 14
inches wide, 18 inches deep, adjustable to between 3 1/2 and
4 feet tall, depending on the height of the packer. Each
packer has a horse set up for her, and she keeps that horse
for the entire season.

The horse also holds the paper with which each pear is
to be wrapped. The paper protects the thin skin of the
pear. A sharp needle on a spring holds the paper in place
above the box. A stamp with the packer's number hangs on a
string from the horse. Each box is stamped for identifica-
tion. On a lower rack the horse holds all personal belong-
ings: purse, jacket, change of shoes (for swollen feet), tape for fingers and wrist, and a lunch.

The packer reaches into the bin, selects a pear, wraps it and places it in the box, placing the pear in a pattern reserved for that particular size and shaped pear. The head packer can walk by, glance at the pattern of pears and know exactly how many pears will be in the box. The head packer also judges neatness of pack and settles any disagreements as to position in the line. If the boxes do not weigh out correctly, they are returned to the packer by the rousties--
to be repacked before leaving for the day.

At Siskiyou the floors are old wooden planks, making it hard to roll the horse over to the next position in the line. But many of the women would say, "I'd rather fight my horse than stand on concrete all day." Packers move up to the head from the foot of the line and down to the foot after "rounding the horn," at the top of the line. When packing, the women snake across the room from south to north, with the pear bin rotating on their right and the steel horse on their left. Each morning you start packing in the position you left the night before. When there is a "full house"—plenty of fruit and a full work force—it takes a day to move halfway across the packing house floor.

The Technology of Pear Packing

In studying the technology of pear packing I found it helpful to look at the work of Richard Edwards (1979, 1984). His work concerning continuous flow production clearly applies to the packing house and the women who work there, especially his concepts of: 1) machine control or pace, 2) type of pay, and 3) the decreased need for direct supervision in the workplace.

Edwards states, "Machine pacing occurs whenever a worker must respond to, rather than set the pace at which the
machinery is operated" (1984, 122). This "machine pacing" occurs in industries like pear packing which use continuous flow production, e.g., with conveyor belts to carry the materials, in this case fruit, to the workers.

Edwards defines continuous flow production as a technical control developed in America in the early nineteenth century (1979). "Technical control involves designing machinery and planning the flow of work to minimize the problem of transforming labor power into labor as well as to maximize the purely physically based possibilities for achieving efficiencies." He goes on to show early development of continuous flow production in the textile industry in Boston which "introduced superior (even if still rudimentary) continuous flow production. And here, from the moment the spindles and looms were attached to the water-driven central power shaft, machinery harnessed the workers" (1979, 112-113).

In *Contested Terrain*, Edwards describes the developments of continuous flow production in the nineteenth century meat packing industry. His account also fits women who pack pears in the twentieth century. "From the perspective of control, the benefits of such production were immediate and obvious. By establishing the pace at which hogs were driven up the passages and onto the slaughter platforms managers could set the pace of work for the entire work force" (1979, 116). In pear packing the owners or managers
determine the work pace by deciding how many pears will be taken from cold storage and sent to the packing floor. The women packers have no control over the number of pears that are sent on to the floor, and are in a position of responding to the pace set by management. With the exception of pear jams, which packers can choose to respond to in different ways, and drinking on Fridays which affects their work on "Friday Afternoons," the workers are responding to the flow of production. On some days the work pace is frantic; other days, when fruit is scarce, women stand out of line and wait their turn to pack.

Edwards also talks about the link between the desired pace of production and the type of pay for workers. "For example, such machinery typically can in fact be operated at various speeds, and in this sense it requires bonus schemes, piece-rate, incentive pay, etc., to set the pace" (1984, 122).

In pear packing it has been decided that the way to reward workers for fast production is by individual "piece-rate." Women I interviewed who had been packing since the late 1940s had, for example, seen the rate of pay per box increase from 10 cents a box in 1948 to 37 cents a box in 1984. What such money buys, of course, varies with the cost of living.

Slower women are penalized by not making as much money as faster packers. At Siskiyou in 1984 if new packers did
not exceed minimum wage (which was guaranteed) in two weeks, they were asked to leave the packing floor. To break through the guaranteed minimum the packer has to pack approximately 90 boxes a day. There is a push for new packers to pack 100 boxes a day. A good packer can pack 200 boxes a day.

There is a comment that I often heard concerning packers: "Packers make good money." I feel this might apply more to women who packed in the 1950s than to women who packed in the 1980s. For example, I made a very simple comparison between a typical packer's pay and the median per person income for Oregonians. And I found that the pay in 1949, although based on only 10 cents a box, was higher in relationship to the median per person income than it was with the 35 cents a box piece-rate in 1980. My figures are from the U. S. Census (1950 and 1980), and I use a reasonable figure of 150 boxes a day as the average for a packer over a 75-day season.

1949:
10¢ a box x 150 boxes per day = $15 per day
$15 per day x 75 days = $1,125 per season
Median per person income: $1,967 per year
Ratio: $1,125
$1,967 = packers made 57% of the median income per person per year

Source: U. S. Census 1950: 37-166
1979:

35¢ a box x 150 boxes per day = $52.50 per day

$52.50 per day x 75 days = $3,937.50 per season

Median per person income: $9,925 per year

Ratio:  $3,938
divided by $9,925 = packers made 40% of the median income per person per year

Source: U.S. Census 1988: 431

It seems clear that packers made less in relationship to the median per person income in 1979 than in 1949. This is a complex issue requiring economic analysis controlling for cost of living, the market forces in the two periods and the availability of packers--a matter I will return to briefly at the end of the paper.

Edwards also notes that only a limited number of supervisors are needed to maintain the work schedule. He says, "In effect, the line eliminated 'obtrusive foremanship' that is, close supervision in which the foreman simultaneously directed production, inspected and approved work, and disciplined workers. The significance of this change is indicated by the small number of straw bosses and foremen needed to supervise" (1979, 119). Edwards reiterates his point concerning meat packing: "There were limits, of course, both physical and worker-imposed ones, but supervisors no
longer had primary responsibility for directing the worker. Instead, the line now determined the pace, and the foreman had merely to get workers to follow the pace" (1979, 117).

At Siskiyou in the fall of 1984 there were one hundred women working as packers, there was only one floor supervisor. The supervisor (the head packer) took responsibility for inspecting and approving the packaging of the pears. She was paid according to the total boxes packed on the floor in a day. Her pay was based on the production of the workers she supervised. The limited number of supervisors needed clearly cut the costs of production.

Equitably or not, many of the women I packed with in 1984 worked for social rewards as well as the money. These included status as a competitive (fast) packer and the friendship of other women; their daily contacts gave them, for example, a chance to share, brag or complain.

the days grow shorter quickly
the work wears the body down
it's darker now, leaving for work or home
no space, no time
less fruit, fewer packers
shorter, colder days
the season will be celebrated

The end of the packing season was commonly celebrated. Most packing houses have either a pot-luck initiated by the packers or a company-sponsored dinner. At Siskiyou we had both. For weeks women planned the pot-luck, to be held in
the lunchroom on Wednesday of the last full packing week. They looked forward to bringing their favorite dishes; lima beans and ham, Jell-O molds, macaroni salads, and dishes filled with marshmallows and chocolate. In 1984 during the last weeks of work the weather got colder. We would wear sweaters and long heavy pants. Some of the women drank more hot coffee from their thermoses, sometimes laced with brandy. Finally the second big day came and Siskiyou provided a sit-down dinner for the entire warehouse work force, men and women. It was held at a large Chinese restaurant. Everyone dressed up: for several days what to wear to dinner had been the biggest topic of conversation on the packing floor.

Some Final Thoughts

In this paper I have tried to give the reader a close-up view of pear packing in Jackson County, a look at who works inside the large packing sheds during the harvest season. I found that the women at Siskiyou probably represented the typical packer for the last two or three decades, what economists call "secondary workers," supplementing the income of a male spouse. But all over the country more women are working full-time (Sidel, 1986). I now think this will affect pear packers and the pear industry in important
ways that I did not realize when packing in the fall of 1984.

In 1987 I talked with Jud Parsons, owner of Hillcrest Orchards, whose fruit is processed by Siskiyou. His concern was the lack of women available to pack. He said, "More women are working full-time, fewer are available to pack." He could see that the labor force for pear packing was clearly changing.

So in the fall of 1987 I also interviewed Sue Naumes, an owner and manager of Naumes, Inc., a large orchardist and fruit processor, owning three of the thirteen sheds in Jackson County. She pointed out an interesting difference between Naumes and Siskiyou: Siskiyou's lack of a direct social link between employees in the orchards and those in the packing house.

For example, there has been a steady growth in the number of Mexican women working in most of the packing houses in the last five years (1982 to 1987) according to Ms. Naumes, who is responsible for having a full work force in their packing sheds. Two of their three houses now hire predominately women with Latin surnames. When she informed the Mexican men who worked in their orchards year-round—not the seasonal pickers who are often in the valley temporarily and without families—that she needed packers, many of their wives and sisters came to work. The Mexican women were replacing Anglo women who had done the seasonal work before
them. It is likely that the Anglo women were working elsewhere part-time or full-time for better pay.

This "labor force composition" change issue is just one of the many I have become more aware of since my experience actually packing pears. How typical was my experience then? Now? What other kinds of work are former pear packers doing, part-time or full-time?

There is new technology, which reduces the changes of fruit loss due to spoilage while in storage. This technology is available and in limited use in Jackson County and could affect the work of the packers. It could extend the packing season.

I am left really with many such unanswered questions. I believe a sample survey of women who pack might help answer some of them. It might also serve as a resource for the packing houses in recruiting new packers. The survey, at the minimum, should try to identify common characteristics of current packers: How do they learn of the employment opportunity? What is their route of entry into packing? Would the packer work full-time if work were available? Or part-time for a longer season?

Other questions might deal more directly with packers' personal situations; e.g., age and family. Would providing child care make packing more desirable? What about group rates rather than individual pay rates? Sick leave? Some "say" in the chemicals they work with?
I feel that more needs to be known about the current and likely future validity of the idea that "pear packers make good money." Compared to whom? The women I worked with were often glad to work, even though they knew it was very hard work. It wasn't that all of them had to work. There were social rewards as well as economic rewards, psychological satisfaction as well as physical pain and injuries. They created their own "women's world" at work, and valued it. But such rewards are not enough to support a family or pay bills, and more women today--single and married--find they cannot depend on someone else's salary. What all this means for the future of pear packers, their employers and the orchard industry in this region is not clear.

During the 1988 harvest season I visited the Reter packing house, a very clean, older house which employs approximately thirty packers. The work force at Reter had somewhat younger women than the other houses I had visited. About fifty percent of the women were Mexican and, according to the management, almost all were related to men who worked for Reter.

I realized when I visited Reter how drawn I am to the women and their workplace. I enjoyed packing and would like to write more concerning this seasonal work. It would be interesting to compare the packing houses here in Jackson County to those in other areas, such as Washington State. I
understand that there are larger packing houses in Washington that pack longer seasons, combining apples and pears. I wonder if these are an equally inviting environment, or if the rural location of Jackson County and the smaller size packing houses create a unique situation.
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Interviews


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