

## Together we can / Ken Ogasawara

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### **History of mobile cannery**

**Christy:** Welcome to Relief, Development and Podcast. I'm one of your hosts Christy Kauffman, but today we have a special guest produced episode for you.

You will be hearing Ken Ogasawara, the producer of our sister show, "Undercurrents," made by MCC Ontario. Ken takes us on a journey to the new MCC Meat cannery that, unlike the traditional mobile MCC meat canner, this one is stationary.

**Ken:** Welcome to "UNDERCURRENTS." My name is Ken Ogasawara. I'm part of the Communications team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This episode is about canning meat.

**Woman's voice during Meat Cannery Grand Opening:** You want to know what happens in this room? So yeah, the can is going from a tin clip from over there down the conveyor to this table...

**Ken:** On January 18, 2025, a brand new 10,000 square foot facility had its grand opening at the MCC Hub in New Hamburg, Ontario. Over 700 people of all ages including local dignitaries and politicians, came out to tour the place, eating bushels of popcorn, drinking gallons of coffee, and generally creating the most festive atmosphere you could imagine for the opening of an industrial canning facility.

**Man's voice from grand opening:** "It will be easy to clean and easy to work in. That's really important."

**Ken:** Why the excitement? Because this was MCC's first ever stationary meat cannery. To understand the passion behind meat canning at MCC, I'll give you a brief history of MCC's mobile meat cannery – a legendary piece of equipment that was first designed and built specifically for MCC in 1945 by the Shenandoah Equipment Company to safely ship emergency food to hungry people around the world. After many iterations and upgrades over the decades, MCC's mobile meat cannery is still unique in the world, engaging close to 30,000 volunteers across the U.S. and from the mid-90s until 2019 making stops in Canada as well. But getting a massive, custom-made tractor trailer rig across the border to process thousands of pounds of raw meat was not without its challenges, especially in the beginning.

Here's Jon Lebold, the Material Resources program coordinator for MCC in Canada, telling me about one particular person who had his doubts.

**Jon:** There's a story that you can still find even by Googling around Martin Rahn, who had worked for CFIA. [What is CFIA? Canadian Food Inspection Agency] who had heard that the Mennonites were looking at doing this, and actually Martin might even be on site right now, and so, he'd be a good one to chat with if we can catch him and if the timing lines up.

**Jon:** I mean So the mobile cannery started coming here in the 90s; however, just recently I was doing, Hey, Martin, [Is this the guy?] Yeah, come on in. [So now I've interrupted.] No, no, this is perfect....

**Ken:** We happily interrupt Jon's interview to bring you Martin Rahn, a retired inspector with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

### Martin introduction

**Martin:** So, I was having dinner Sunday afternoon at a fellow that I call Uncle Jack, who's a dear friend of mine. (He's passed away now, but...) We're having dinner he casually mentions that the meat canner is coming to Ontario. And I said, "What's the meat canner?"

He said, "Well, they make canned meat for people around the world, and it's coming to Ontario."

By then I had 20 years in with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I had been an inspector in charge at a meat plant. And I said, I said, "This will never fly in Canada. They will never do this. I have to stop them before they spend money, waste money coming to Canada because this will never fly."

**Martin:** I said, who do I have to call? So the first call was to Jon Barkofsky, and he's a very good guy, but he said, "You need to call these other people." So I got in touch with Dave Worth, who was in charge from Akron at the time and he started mentioning all the right people in the hierarchy in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

**Ken:** The further Martin investigated, the more intrigued he got.

**Martin:** I have to see how they're going to pull this off, but my initial response was, "Meat has way too many rules. This is never going to fly."

**Ken:** Eventually he became a champion of the meat canning operation, helping to iron out details that made it possible for the meat cannery to cross the border into Ontario, and later, to Winkler, Manitoba, where they canned from 2002 to 2013.

**Martin:** And it was an exercise possibly in minimal compliance, but it did comply. We met all the requirements along the way, and as requirements got stiffer, tighter, bigger mountains to climb, we climbed those mountains as well.

**Ken:** More on those mountains later, but first, why meat? Maybe, like me, you're eating less meat for environmental or health reasons and wondering why is MCC investing so much in a meat cannery? Why not send beans or lentils instead? To answer that question, Jon answers an even more fundamental question around how MCC decides what relief to send in the first place.

### **Supporting partnerships: why meat?**

**Jon:** There's a few things that I like to touch on and, really, things that we've wrestled with prior to building the cannery, knowing it's going to be labeled as a meat cannery. I mean, one main one is MCC prioritizes in-country purchasing. In almost any of the areas that we're shipping to, no matter what is happening there, when it comes to purchasing beans and some of the other proteins that are consumed in those areas, we have not had partners reaching out to us to say, "Hey, we can't source beans. Can you can them and send them to us?"

I mean, we operate off of request. And if that request came, we'd shift because we do send exactly what our partners are asking for. However, meat, which is a staple food in all of the areas that we're shipping meat to, is something that becomes extremely hard to source in times of conflict or disaster or other things.

And so, in these areas that we're shipping to, meat is a staple food. Prior to disaster war displacement, they're making it, they have their recipes, their family knows it. It brings them comfort. So in a time when they're displaced, and they're having to move out of their homes or they're in a refugee settlement or something, if we're able to offer them that meat and that comfort in that moment, it's much like us giving our comforters, like our blankets, or some of those other staple items that bring you comfort in your day to day without even knowing about it. Meat does that for a lot of our partners.

### **Tatiana: impact story**

**Ken:** Martin has a story that illustrates this point. Back in 2005, he was inspecting a plant at the Heinz company in Leamington, Ontario.

**Martin:** And I checked my incubation room, made my records, came out, and in the hallway was one of the quality control people there, and her name was Tatiana Linjaki. And Tatiana said to me, "I know of these yellow cans that you make." So Tatiana was an immigrant from Sarajevo. "I know of these yellow cans you make."

I said, "What are you talking about – these yellow cans I make?"

“You're over there at Heinz in the parking lot, and you make those cans of beef.”

I said, “Yep, I know of these cans.” I said, “Well, tell me your story. How do you know of these cans?”

Tatiana was in Sarajevo in an apartment building under siege, and one of the people in the building got a can of MCC meat, which was beef at the time. The yellow label is a beef label. And it was a Muslim girl, and she was afraid to eat the meat, so she put it up to anyone in the apartment building.

Tatiana said, “My friend heard about it, got the can. We had a party. We fed about 20 people with that meat that day. We made a stew and shared it with everyone. And she said, “The value of being able to have meat when you haven't had it for months at a time, is immense.”

**Ken:** Tatiana's story doesn't end there. Martin explains that the mobile meat canner was switching from beef to chicken and turkey, as it was more widely requested by MCC partners around the world.

**Martin:** She says, you're moving to chicken and to Turkey. Do you have a process? Tatiana was a process specialist at the Heinz Company. Process is how long time and temperature that you cook the product.

I said, “Not yet. We have to find someone to do the process.”

She says, “I will do that work for you.” And she spent countless hours after work with samples and our can size, doing tests for us to verify that our process would be adequate and proper. I said, “For this one can, you're giving these hundreds of hours?” She was the right type of person as well. She got tapped on the shoulder and did the right thing.

### **Journey to stationary cannery.**

**Ken:** Tatiana and Martin were not the only ones putting in a lot of work into the mobile cannery. There were two communities who did meat canning in Ontario: Leamington and Elmira, separated by about three hours on the highway. Each of those communities had a meat canning committee.

**Jon:** The amount of work that those committees, I mean 20 or so individuals would put into making the event happen. It was a year of planning. They were meeting at least once a month, and then as it got closer to the date, they'd meet more often and, yeah, working out all of those details of like, okay, so we've got 25,000 pounds of meat that we're canning that week, so we're going to need this many refrigerated trailers. We're going to need diesel fuel to come this day and this day for the boiler we're going to need... There were so many details and so much stuff that they were having to work out that it took literally thousands and thousands of hours of planning and just to make it happen for the one week that it would come. Yeah, well, I mean that would be, so Elmira lined up around 700; Lemington lined up another 400 for the next week.

**Ken:** And here's the thing – every year, after all that work – it was a gamble if the mobile meat cannery could even make it across the border!

### **Making the Process more Sustainable**

**Jon:** It was always just this fear, because although we would get approval from CFIA, and I looked that way because I have, I think, the last letter from 2019 hanging up from CFIA saying that we are pre-approving this, but just so you know, it's up to the border agent that they get to, to make that final decision. And the final decision can be no. So when you've got that much meat purchased, you've got that many volunteers lined up and you've got committees made up of that many people and everybody that they've been talking to over the last year, kind of all on edge waiting to see if this thing is going to cross. I know it created a ton of anxiety. Conversations with, I mean Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Canadian Border Services, were like: This is not a sustainable model. We may have said yes in the past, but we're not saying we're going to say yes in the future. Has MCC considered other options?

**Ken:** Then, the pandemic hit and the ensuing clampdown on cross-border travel made it impossible for the mobile cannery to come to Canada. MCC has not canned any meat in Canada since 2019.

**Jon:** We need to come up with a way that we can do this long term. And so obviously the first job was to make sure that this was truly needed. And so talking with our partners, talking with Tom Wenger, the head of the MR Network, we very quickly came to the conclusion that we do need to come up with a solution and a long-term solution to canning.

**Ken:** One of the main points in favor of continuing canning in Canada was that requests from partners around the world were more than what the mobile cannery in the U.S. could keep up with.

**Jon:** And so we looked into, okay, what if we built a mobile canner that stayed on this side of the border? What would that look like, staffing, all of that, and at the same time did up a concept paper around a stationary cannery. Like what would we have to produce to make it worthwhile at a certain budget level? And so we wanted something that, I mean, we are donor driven. We need to make sure that this is worthwhile when we're spending money.

And so we wanted to be able to say with confidence, when we handed in those concept papers, that if we spend this money that we're budgeting on the stationary cannery, that it is worthwhile and that we've done our homework. And through that, we were able to determine that that 90,000 pounds would make it worthwhile having a full-time cannery here in Ontario because of the cost savings around meat, the logistics, all of those pieces that we used to have to do for the mobile cannery, all of a sudden pulling it in house saves a lot of time. It saves a lot of money, it saves a lot. In order to do the 90,000 pounds, it would mean that we'd have to have the retorts turned on three days a month.

**Ken:** A retort is basically a gigantic steel pressure cooker in which the canned meat is cooked. It's a cylindrical tank that's 4-feet wide by 6 ½-feet tall, weighs a solid 500 pounds when empty.

**Jon:** There's a lot of work that goes into turning those retorts on, so like sourcing the meat and all of those pieces. And then there's also a lot of work that takes place after the meat comes out of the retorts, like labelling and other things that go into more days. So it's not that our cannery would be sitting inactive for the rest of the month, but that the retorts would have to be running at three days a month and at three days a month at 90,000 pounds, this all makes sense.

And so that was what went to our board, our senior leadership team, that was what was approved and that is kind of our baseline. However, as this project ramped up, as our donor relations team brought it out and shared that this is something we were thinking about doing, very quickly, we realized that there is a lot of interest in this project. There is a passion to do more. And so as it evolved, as it changed, as we designed, even as we know how much space we had available to us, we very quickly designed it in a way that 90,000 pounds is kind of the minimum amount of meat that we want to do in this cannery.

**Ken:** The momentum, the excitement and the vision of the mission was growing ... and then ... disaster struck.

**Jon:** Yeah. So we had secured, or we had thought we had secured retorts for this project. The price that was quoted to us was kind of \$10,000 a piece. We were looking at doing six to eight of them. And so for under a \$100,000, we would've had the retorts that we needed. And then kind of found out at, what we felt was the final hour, that they were no longer available to us. So, I reached out to the company in the U.S. that has built them for MCC in the past, got a quote on them and found out that they were something like \$150,000 a piece for the retorts.

**Ken:** Like more than 10 times the price

**Jon:** Yeah, I mean, it was essentially going to take up our entire budget for the whole build just to buy the pressure cookers or the retorts.

**Ken:** Jon and Peter Fiss, the primary build consultant, were very stressed about this, to put it mildly.

**Jon:** Peter and I had both been up at nights praying about it, thinking about it, not really knowing what we're going to do. To be honest, lost a lot of sleep about it. We weren't coming up with anything. And so, him and I met and came to the conclusion that we were going to have to notify our senior leadership team that this is a pretty big hurdle, and at the same time we'll bring it to the production, or to the build committee, the right people that would know how to build something like this, because I mean this is obviously not my expertise by any means.

**Ken:** Jon sat them down and shared his fears, that unless they could find this very specific, very expensive piece of gear for very cheap, this whole project – years of planning, fundraising, and marketing – was in danger of being shut down.

**Jon:** And Martin kind of sat back and smiled and said, “Well, I don't know if it's exactly what you're after because they're quite a bit bigger, but I have four retorts sitting at home behind my barn. Do you want 'em?”

**Martin:** So about 20 years ago, I had picked up four retorts from the scrap man, and they were bigger than what we were used to, but I had picked them up at that time just in case, somewhere down the road we could maybe use the lids or cut them down or use the controls. And they were sitting behind the shed for almost 20 years. So I hauled them out from the snowbank, and we put a little heat to 'em and a pipe wrench to 'em, and everything came apart that was supposed to come apart, like we never thought it would. And yeah, so they are repurposed here at the meat cannery. That is just a great thing to have happened.

**Jon:** It was a miracle. It honestly was. I laughed about it in the moment, just like that weight, because honestly, we really did not know how the project could continue at that point.

### **Dylan introduction**

**Dylan:** So our build portion is nearly completed.

**Ken:** This is Dylan Yantzi, MCC's cannery manager. He was hired even before MCC even broke ground on the cannery so that he could be involved from the very beginning. His job will be to oversee the operations of the cannery.

**Dylan:** Kind of one thing after another that's slowed us down but just with any build, things get delayed and with such a unique facility like this, and it's a learning curve for myself and Jon.

**Man's voice from grand opening:** This is actually super exciting how well this is fitting. We don't have to adjust the gate height at all.

**Dylan:** I mean it's just exciting to finally almost be at the end. We're just waiting on a few final details before we can start operation. [background conversation from grand opening: short length of chain] I think our limiting factor certainly will be what's the price of meat. There's been a lot of farmers that have reached out and want to be involved in donating animals. The reality is we need to get the meat from a federally licensed meat facility. Thankfully there, there's a large number of federal plants here locally that we can supply meat from.

So in a year, I hope we're over that hundred thousand pound mark, I want to set goals high, but I also want to be realistic because in that first year there'll be a lot of learning...but I hope in a couple years we're getting up over that a few hundred thousand pounds and working towards what the max this facility could do. I figure running you know four or five days a week for six to eight hours a day, we could

do about three quarter million pounds. So it's not too farfetched to think that this facility could do a million pounds one day.

### Meat costs

**Ken:** With lofty goals set for the future, Dylan and Jon first needed the last few key pieces of equipment – including the huge metal baskets that the cans of meat would stack into.

**Martin:** So now we had to have baskets specific to this retort, right cause the cans go in the basket, the basket goes in the vessel and we didn't have the baskets. So I went to a local fabricator in Lemington, said, what do you think? And he built eight of 'em for us. [ Eight??] And that's why, oh, that's, I'm here today as I dropped one off so that they can try them. We need four absolutely. And he said, "Well, since we're making them, let's make enough right away."

**Jon:** That's amazing.

**Martin:** Yeah, they're here. Complete free gratis.

**Ken:** Did you catch that? These custom-made baskets were free.

**Jon:** Oh man. Oh, oh man.

**Martin:** Yeah.

**Ken:** More miracles coming in the door as we speak.

**Martin:** Well, this is the kind of project that draws the miracles in, I think.

### God's cannery

**Ken:** What makes a miracle? Martin recalls years ago, when the meat canner was just starting in Ontario, a pastor preached an Easter sermon about the feeding of the five thousand and the loaves and fishes. And the pastor asked rhetorically, what was the name of that boy who brought the loaves and fishes? And someone in the congregation called out:

**Martin:** "Maybe his name was Martin?" I had never thought of it that way, that you could multiply the efforts of good people and make such a great thing happen.

**Ken:** Martin and Jon and the thousands of volunteers who have helped to feed countless hungry families over the years were answering the call to bring their loaves and fishes. They also recognize that their offering is only a small part of the miracle.

**Jon:** We tend to try to take on as much weight on our own, try to do as much work, and we feel like it's our accomplishments, and there is nothing more humbling. I've probably grown more in my faith through this project than any other moment that I can actually just pull out in my life just realizing that this project has only been made possible by the grace of God.

### **Prayer and God's cannery**

**Jon:** There has been so many of the, I shared the story of the retorts. There has been so many mountains that have come up, where at first I would lay in bed wondering how I am going to solve it, and it's not possible for me to do it. And so instead of laying in bed all night stressing about it, I turned to praying about it. And I know there's a lot of staff here that started doing the same thing, realizing this is only going to be possible if this is something that we are supposed to be doing. And then just seeing God work in such amazing ways to make things happen and to make me realize this is not MCC's cannery. This is not my cannery. This is God's cannery. We are doing this in the name of Christ. This is that we can be just another way that we can be the hands and feet of Jesus and help feed all of his children. Prayer isn't always answered how we feel it should be or needs to be, but it's always answered one way or another.

**Ken:** I want to give a big thanks to Martin Rahn, Dylan Yantzi and Jon Lebold for sharing just a part of this epic journey with us. And a huge shout out to the dozens, the hundreds, the thousands of volunteers who have contributed their loaves and fishes over the years – from the build committee, to generous donors, to the kids and teenagers and grandparents who have lived out the truth of this motto: Together, We Can!

**Christy:** Christy jumping in here at the end. I am here in the U.S where the mobile meat canning season is well underway. Last week I got the opportunity to see some of the action with the mobile meat canner while it was stopped in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, from cutting up of meat to the weighing and canning, all the way to packaging and labeling the cans. While volunteers do a lot of the work, there are four guys that travel with the mobile meat canner around the country. MCC is currently recruiting for this unique opportunity so I asked these guys what they may say to someone who might be interested in the position. We will start with Lars, then go to Kenan and Andrew.

**Lars Braun:** We are feeding people. When I wake up in the morning, it's a good motivation that there's hungry people and I'm going out to feed them.

**Kenan Broersma:** I love the work because it's pretty much all just machines. When you hear meat canning, you think you'll be packing around meat all day, and you don't do that. You work with, you run the big stuff, the machines.

**Andrew Widrick:** You should sign up and do this. I know two years sounds like a lot of time, but the time really does fly by. It's hard to believe I'm almost done with my second year. I've made so many

friendships and met so many great people. And being on the canner is a really neat experience. It is kind of a once in a lifetime thing.

**Christy:** If you are inclined to listen to Andrew's suggestion of signing up to travel around the U.S. with the mobile meat canner, creating relationships, taking leadership in running the machines and canning a whole lot of meat for important nutrients and relief to people around the world, the link to apply for that opportunity is in the show notes.

**Last year, MCC shipped 658,790 pounds of canned meat to countries like Chad, Ethiopia, Malawi, South Sudan and Zambia. So many people play important roles in making that happen.**

This episode was produced on the traditional Lands of the Attawandaron, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples, today the Six Nations and Mississauga of the Credit.

This is Christy Kauffman, producer of "Relief, development and podcast." This special episode was produced by Ken Ogasawara and edited by Christen Kong. Head producer is Emily Lowen. Thanks, and take good care.