



Ordeal by **FIRE**

Wattis's

FEBRUARY 1962

individuals known and unknown gave voluntary and valuable assistance from the beginning of the fire.

I cannot speak too highly of the Company's Staff, European and Maori, man and woman alike. Their work during the fire and since can be described in one word – magnificent. Their loyalty and co-operation explain how the factory was able to resume production in such an almost incredibly short time after the fire.

Innumerable messages have arrived from all parts of the Dominion, and from the United Kingdom, U.S.A., Sweden, Holland, and Australia, expressing sympathy and offering to assist the Company in every way possible. These are much appreciated and have given the Directors, Management and Staff, comfort and encouragement in this time of trial.

Now that the factory is back in full production, the destroyed buildings and plant will be restored as quickly as possible and all that has happened will belong to the past. And what of the future – well, I know all connected with the Company have proof that it possesses goodwill in full measure and that after successfully overcoming a severe challenge it has emerged stronger and greater than ever.

Supported by good reasons therefore, I am confident that the Company will continue to progress and develop, without cessation, probably more rapidly than before.



Chairman of Directors



A Message to Shareholders and Friends

This booklet has been produced to record by word and picture the terrible havoc caused by fire at our Hastings Factory on the 19th February, 1962. At this moment the assessment of the damage has not been finalised, but it is estimated to be in the vicinity of half a million pounds.

When the outbreak occurred, the factory was in full production, canning and quick-freezing fruits and vegetables. A stoppage of even one week in the height of the busy season could have meant serious losses of produce involving scores of thousands of pounds. It was therefore vital that everything humanly possible should be done to get the factory back into production with the minimum of delay. This was successfully achieved less than fifty hours after the outbreak; there being no monetary loss to our growers or our staff.

At one stage during the height of the fire, it seemed that the destruction of the entire factory was inevitable, and I am sure this would have happened but for the efficiency and courage of the fire brigades of the district. Everyone who saw the inferno expressed praise and gratitude of the highest order to the firemen and their leaders. Their performance was superb.

Our local Member of Parliament and the Mayors of Hastings and Napier were amongst the first to offer assistance, and I cannot speak highly enough of their co-operation.

The services rendered by the local organisations are deserving of my sincere thanks and commendation. The New Zealand Police Force, Traffic Officers, Post and Telegraph Department, Salvation Army, St. John Ambulance, Civil Defence Organisation, New Zealand Railways, the Press, Broadcasting Service, and

The logo for Wattie's, featuring the brand name in a white, stylized, cursive font set against a red, trapezoidal background.



The Fire at Wattie's

FEBRUARY 19th, 1962

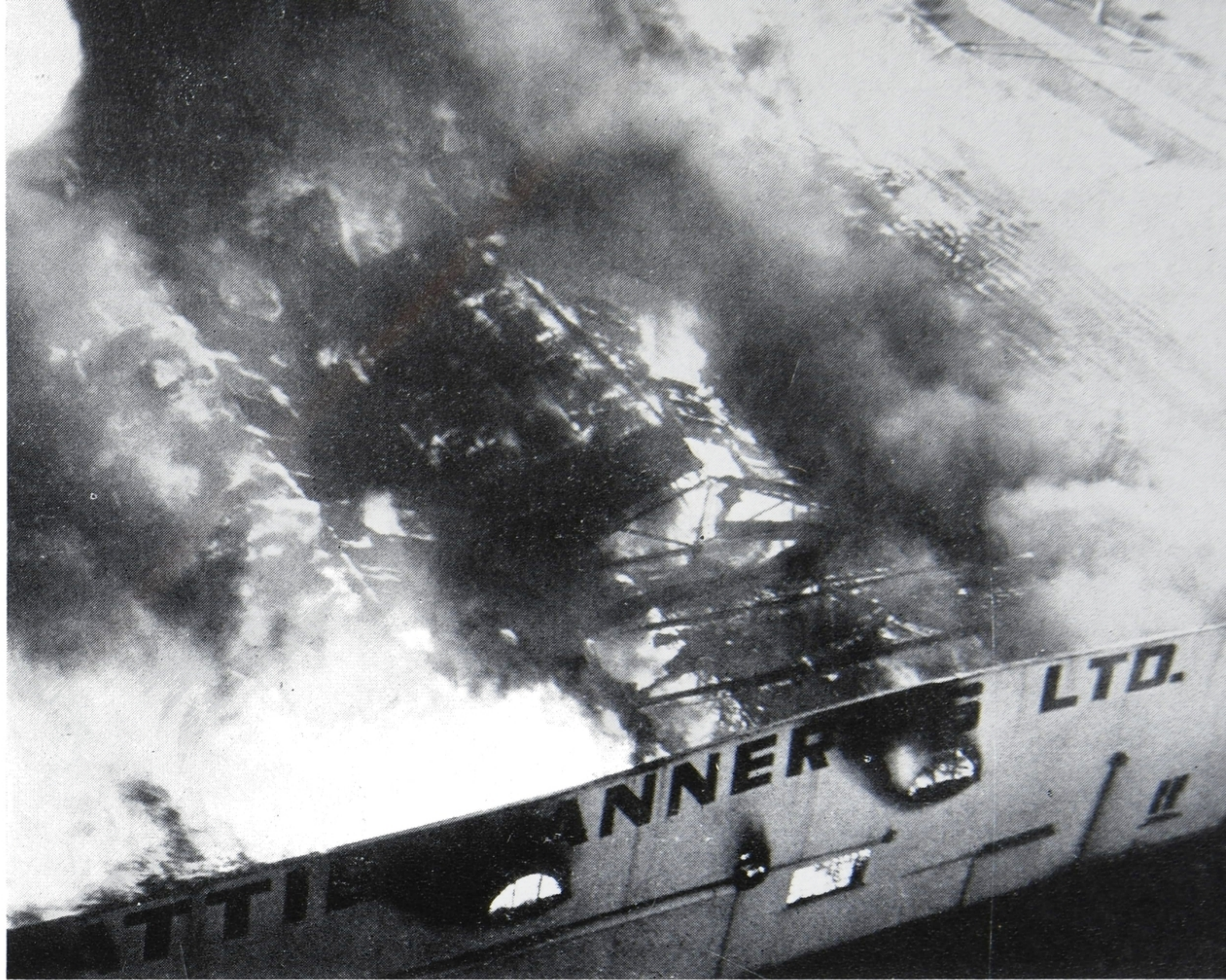
The fire at Wattie Canneries struck when the factory was at peak production. It struck at the height of the most prolific pear harvest in the history of the Company, at the peak flow of green beans and tomatoes and with barely a week before the commencement of the peach harvest. It could not have chosen a more critical moment to disrupt the great volume of fruit and vegetables through the factory into cans or quick frozen packages.

That the factory was able to recommence its interrupted programme within 50 hours of the outbreak of the fire was a triumph over what could have been a major disaster to the factory and to suppliers of produce of all kinds for processing. It was due in no small measure to the unselfish co-operation of all concerned both during the fire and during the subsequent rehabilitation.

Here is a brief summary of events from Monday, 19th, to Wednesday, 21st February:

The factory had just resumed work following the afternoon tea break when heavy smoke was seen on the first floor level. The Fire Brigade was immediately summoned and shortly afterwards factory and office staff were evacuated without panic and in good order.

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Approximately one hour after the outbreak, the top picture shows the blaze at its height. Shortly afterwards, the roof collapsed and part of the east wall fell outwards, completely destroying one of the life-lines of the factory – the six-inch main steam pipe which can be seen in the lower picture.





Beer Cannister Lacquering Plant

The only one in New Zealand and one of the very few in the Southern Hemisphere. It had been in operation barely six months before it was totally destroyed. It was valued at £40,000.

Laboratory

Nothing was salvaged from the entire stock of equipment, valuable instruments and materials. Urgency was accorded and within days, certain vital requirements reached Wattie's from England, France, and Australia.

Automatic Labellers

An installation of modern machines for labelling cans, packing and sealing cartons automatically.

Quick Freeze Free Flow Tunnel

One of the show pieces of Wattie's, valued at £75,000. It was designed in U.S.A. especially for this factory. The blast freeze tunnel was 100 ft. long and the moving belts 8 ft. wide. It required equipment of 800 h.p. to operate at zero temperature.

De-palletiser and Conveyor System for Unfilled Cans

This was the main supply line for empty cans to the factory. From this point, cans of varying sizes were delivered to any point of the processing department.

No. 1 Zero Chamber

Nothing was salvaged from this low-temperature store for holding frozen foods. Fortunately our other and much larger stores escaped damage.

Boiler Room

The biggest packaged units of their type in the Southern Hemisphere, consisting of two 400 h.p. and one 600 h.p. Cleaver Brook Boilers, also one Babcock Boiler. A touch-and-go save.

Compressed Air Plant

Modifications and extensions to this plant had been completed on the very morning of the outbreak. It was completely destroyed. Three 50 h.p. and one 40 h.p. motors driving four air compressors.

Millions and millions of empty Cans and Lids

This mountain of debris had to be moved before restoration operations could commence. While the fire was still raging, operators with front-end loaders began the mammoth task of clearing the still-smouldering mass. Hoses were used to quell the still burning debris in the loaded trucks before leaving the factory gates.



It is difficult to believe that this represents the interior of a once busy food processing plant. Twisted steelwork, wrecked machinery, charred debris of all kinds, and water everywhere – a sad and depressing sight.



The fire spread rapidly and within half an hour almost a quarter of the factory building was ablaze. Five machines from the Hastings Fire Service and one from the Napier Brigade attacked from four sides and by concentrating on confining the fire, managed to check its spread and eventually bring it under control. 9000 feet of hose and 21 leads were used.

Tension mounted at one point when the brick wall housing the steam boilers began to bulge and threatened to collapse. Warnings were issued to clear the area in case the boilers exploded.

Thousands of people and an unbroken line of cars extended right round the stricken factory area taxing the efforts of Police, Traffic Department, and Civil Emergency Units to prevent obstruction to the fire fighters. Smoke from the conflagration was seen from 50 miles away. St. John Ambulance Brigade together with our own Staff Nursing Sister treated casualties and burns at an emergency aid post. Salvation Army and neighbouring houses provided tea for the fire fighters.

Damage to factory plant consisted of

Complete destruction of laboratory, equipment and stock of essential oils.

Complete destruction of the quick-freezing free flow tunnel and No. 1 zero chamber.

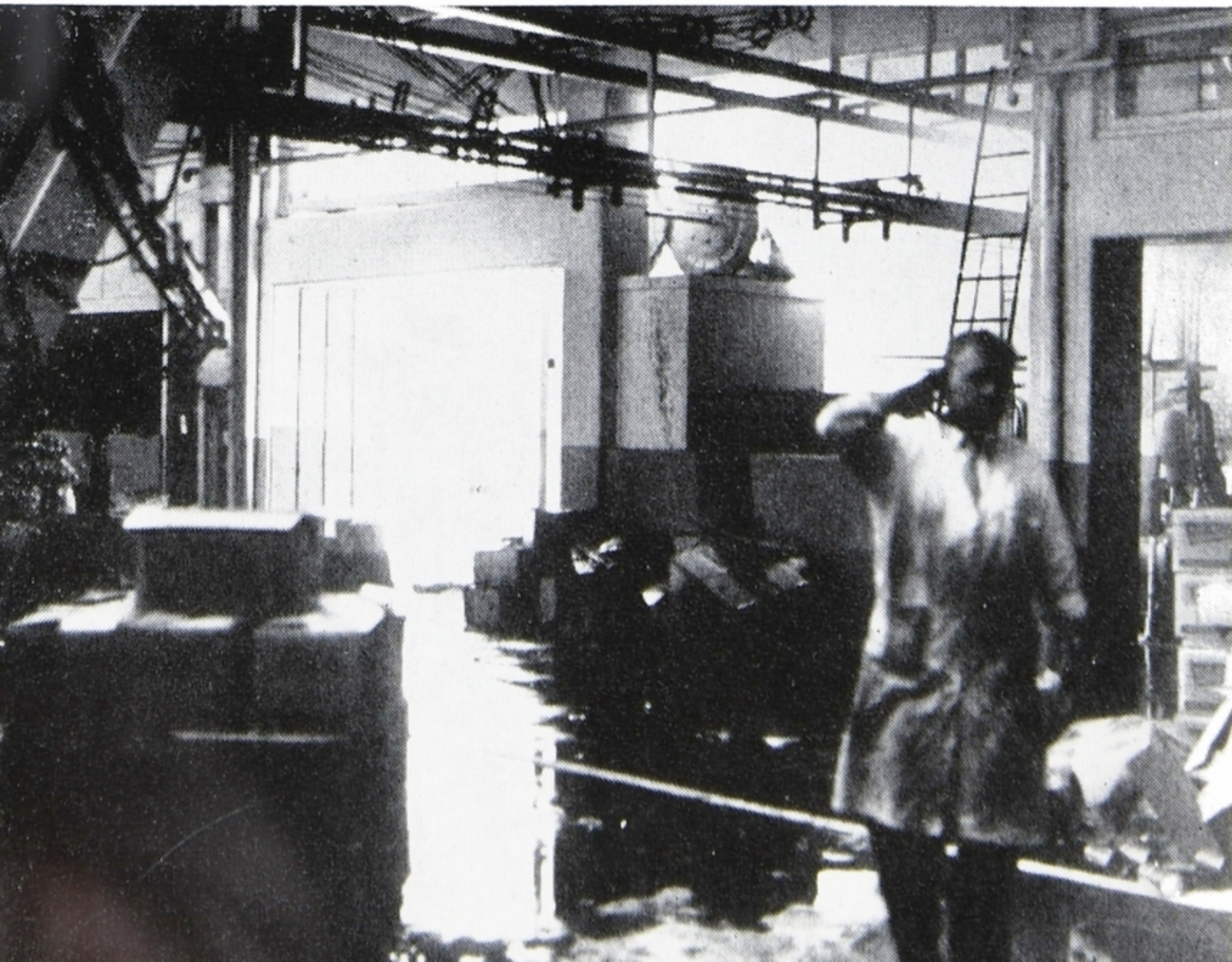
Compressed air plant and receiver destroyed.

Complete destruction of new beer canister lacquering plant – the only one of its kind in New Zealand.

Severe damage to four automatic labelling and packing units.

Destruction of much other equipment and a large range of spare parts.

Main steam supply line from the boiler to processing department totally destroyed together with a large section of the water and gas systems, and scores of electric motors, switchboards and electric wiring in burnt-out section destroyed.



Above:

Fire Chief Harlen, who directed fire fighting operations, ankle deep in water, surveys the scene.

Left:

A staff member shields his head from the fierce heat. This picture was taken from the processing department, looking through the factory to the blazing inferno.



Losses of Stock included

Greater part of stock of labels.
 Whole stock of outer cartons.
 Entire stock of waxed and plastic containers for frozen goods.
 Large quantity of ingredients.
 Millions and millions of lids for cans.
 Vast quantity of empty cans.
 Quantities of frozen, canned and bottled new season's foods.
 Total losses of plant and stocks amounted to an estimated half million pounds.

Once the fire was contained, attention was directed towards getting the factory back into production and it was this race against time that captured the imagination of the whole district and invoked widespread admiration.

Within six hours of the fire, large stocks of green beans and tomatoes were on their way by truck and rail to the Company's Gisborne factory, and arrangements made to hold stocks of pears in cool storage.

A fleet of trucks and loaders commenced operations on the removal of hundreds of tons of burnt debris while the fire was still raging. This clearing operation was to continue unabated for two days and nights.

Tuesday morning saw the vital six-inch steam pipes being installed, while urgent orders were placed for all necessary equipment that had been destroyed. Engineers set about restoring damaged machinery and getting the steam supply through the factory.

Above:

An interesting shot which shows how nearly the boiler room was engulfed. These boilers are the largest in New Zealand. Had they been destroyed, the factory would have been immobilised for months. A most fortunate save.

Right:

Between 30 and 40 casualties received treatment for burns and injuries. Staff Sister Thompson applying a dressing at her emergency post.



A message was sent out to all sales representatives and all distributors of Wattie's Foods that production would recommence by Wednesday evening and that full supplies of all lines would be available and orders received as usual.

Wednesday continued the race against time and with an hour to go, the last section of steam pipe was raised and bolted into position. Boilers had been lit in readiness at 3 p.m. At 5 p.m. many of the staff remained to see the last dramatic moments of the race.

At precisely 5.20 p.m. a series of short blasts on the factory whistle announced victory.

6 p.m. saw a full night shift swing into action, and at 7.10 p.m. the first cans passed along the conveyor line and slid into the automatic cookers.

It is gratifying to record that all factory hands were retained and that they joined in the hard and often unpleasant cleaning-up operations. There were no losses sustained by growers and suppliers of produce to the factory and virtually only 24 hours harvesting time was lost by them.



This picture, taken three days after the fire, shows the remarkable progress of reconstruction.

The new empty can feed line to the processing department is already in operation.

No one will go short!

By a stroke of providence, only a very small percentage of our canned foods were destroyed.

Virtually, no loss of crops was suffered with production so quickly under way, so with pride and satisfaction we are able to announce that the chain of production will continue at top speed, with only a slight pause for adjustment to a new set of conditions.

Wattie's Canned and Frozen Foods will be available in quantity, as in the past.

Wattie's

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