

WATTIE'S CELEBRATES 60 YEARS OF PROCESSING IN HAWKE'S BAY

A major part of Hawke's Bay's industrial heart and the people of the district have the opportunity to come together on Sunday (20 March) to celebrate a significant birthday - the 60th year of Wattie's processing in the region.

The processing activities of Wattie's over the years since it was set up in King Street, Hastings, have been so much a part of the community that it seems appropriate that the celebration of the factory's 60th Birthday should be marked with a "Street Party" and an open invitation to the people of the district to come along.

Everyone is welcome at the "party" which will take place in front of the factory in King Street between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. The street will be specially closed for the occasion and a host of entertainment, for adults and children alike, has been planned.

Tour the factory

March is the busiest month of the year at Wattie's and at the present time the factory is in full swing, coping with the annual harvest of tomatoes, sweetcorn and peaches, the main crops at this time of the year.

A rare opportunity is being presented for members of the public to view the seasonal operations at the peak of the harvest.

Visits to the factory are in constant demand at this time of the year, but the sheer logistics of handling the volume of requests to view the processing mean that many must be disappointed. The trend in recent years has been to try to accommodate as many as possible of the school parties using the factory visit as an adjunct of their education, as well as special interest groups who, like the schools, come from far and wide to see New Zealand's largest canning factory in operation. The end result is that there are probably more people from outside the region than from within who get the chance to see the factory working at its peak.

Wattie's staff recognise, however, that there is a large number of people from the district who would like to look over the plant while it is truly humming along.

A practical and well signposted route through the factory has thus been planned and will be open to all who wish to take advantage of the occasion. Staff members will be posted along the route to provide information and explain the processes taking place.

Visitors will be able to view the extensive tomato processing operation which handles around 40,000 tonnes of tomatoes from the Heretaunga Plains during the season. The sweetcorn lines and peach processing can also be viewed from the planned route, as can the production of Wattie's tomato sauce which has now been made at this factory for some fifty years.

The tour of the factory will take visitors past the very high-tech labelling machines, always a feature for visiting parties, and through the massive finished product area which comes as a surprise to those viewing it for the first time.

No specific charge will be made to visitors viewing the factory. A "gold coin" donation, however, will be encouraged by staff who see this as an opportunity to assist the work of the local branch of CCS (formerly the Crippled Children's Society) to whom all proceeds will go.

Street activities

Street closure of the section of King Street North fronting the factory has been arranged to make room for a feast of interesting and entertaining activities for both families and individuals, young and old!

Around twenty separate stalls will feature the work of Hawke's Bay based craftspeople who have become renowned for the variety and quality of their creative pieces. Constant innovation among these artists and artisans ensures a large and enthusiastic following and the ever-present opportunity for new discoveries.

Young children (and many not so young!) will be captivated by the scale model train and track specially set up for the street party, as they will by the presence of "Getti" - Wattie's chief inspector of spaghetti production - whose rare public appearances are always a hit. Expect the youngsters to be entranced, too, by the regular performances of the puppet show.

Throughout the five hours of the celebration, staff from the factory will be providing product demonstrations and tasting opportunities of some of the quality foods they have had a hand in producing. The enthusiasm with which staff have been preparing for this function displays once again their commitment to keeping these Hastings products right at the top in a highly competitive industry.

A touch of culture will be added to the occasion by the dance troupe who will be giving demonstrations of a variety of national dances.

And the inner being has not been forgotten. Members of the Lions Clubs of Hastings and Napier have agreed to ensure that those feeling a little peckish will have every opportunity to satisfy their needs at a variety of food stalls!

A BRIEF HISTORY

The company operating in Hastings in 1994, J Wattie Foods Limited, is the direct descendant of the fruit and vegetable processing business founded on the King Street site by the late Sir James Wattie (1902-1974) in 1934. Since that time processing has been carried out continuously on the site.

The first processing by the fledgling company was the production of fruit pulp for an Auckland jam manufacturer who had been importing pulp from Tasmania. In that first season a small amount of jam was made and quantities of peaches and pears were processed.

From its beginnings in a four-roomed cottage, the company grew through the 'thirties to become sufficiently substantial by the time of the Second World War to gain supply contract for the Allied forces in the Pacific. It was this association which led to the first can-making line being introduced late in 1943.

A second factory was opened in Gisborne, in time for the 1951-52 season. This was to be followed by others in both the North and South Islands, all trading under the name of "J Wattie Canneries Ltd" and directed from Hastings.

By the end of the 'sixties, despite a disastrous fire in February 1962, which burnt the heart out of the then Hastings factory, the company had become very significant in the New Zealand food processing industry. At that time, two important mergers - with the General Foods Corporation (NZ) Ltd and with Cropper-NRM Ltd - took place, resulting in the formation of Wattie Industries Ltd.

Within this group, J Wattie Canneries Ltd continued to grow and prosper through the decade of the 'seventies, introducing new products and technologies, and developing market shares, so that it became firmly established as New Zealand's leading food processor.

Through a series of cross-shareholdings in the early 'eighties, Wattie Industries Ltd developed an association with the Goodman Group Ltd (later Goodman Fielder Ltd) which culminated in 1987 with the completion of a merger to form Goodman Fielder Wattie Ltd, a truly Australasian company with major international activities in the food processing business.

In the same year, 1987, J Wattie Canneries Ltd was restructured and split into five separate business units. The unit charged with the responsibility for processing and marketing canned

and shelf-stable products was named J Wattie Foods Ltd and inherited the Hastings site where Wattie's had begun.

A decision by Goodman Fielder Wattie Ltd to concentrate more closely on its core business saw a proposal emerge early in 1992 to float publicly a new company on the New Zealand stock exchange. This company would basically comprise five, business units - J Wattie Foods Ltd, Wattie Frozen Foods Ltd, Best Friend Pet Food Company Ltd, Tip Top Ice Cream Company Ltd and Tegel Poultry Ltd - all of which had formerly been a part of the Wattie Industries group.

This new company was to be called Wattie's Ltd and based in Auckland, rather than Sydney which had become the established headquarters of Goodman Fielder Wattie Ltd.

Considerable international interest was shown in the newly structured organisation, with the result that in October, 1992, shortly before the public float was to take place, the H J Heinz Company made a successful bid to purchase the whole of Wattie's Ltd, including the Hastings operation of J Wattie Foods Ltd.

Who could have foreseen, back there in 1934, when the little group of people began a small business in Hastings, that Wattie's would one day become a significant unit within one of the world's greatest food companies? Its success stands as a tribute to the founder and to generations of Hawke's Bay people who believed in it, and who dedicated themselves always to the task of being best in their field.

THE FIRST CONTRACT

The first contract for supply signed by Wattie's was with Colonel J.P. Stevenson, managing director of the Auckland jam and sauce manufacturers, Whittome Stevenson and Co. Ltd, who at that stage were purchasing their fruit pulp supplies from Tasmania.

The contract was signed by James Wattie, company manager, Harold George Carr, public accountant, and Arthur Stanley Tonkin, solicitor. They contracted to supply 82 tons of pulped fruit which "should be acceptable by the purchaser only if of good standard and of merchantable quality, except that if unable to supply because of no fault, omission or neglect by the vendor, J Wattie Canneries Ltd should not be subject to penalty." - Even then, the founders were conscious that the business they were entering was subject to climatic hazards such as frost and hail and horticultural risks such as pests and diseases!

The contract spelt out the details which included 12 tons each of peach pulp and nectarine pulp at three pence per pound; 30 tons of plum pulp from 12 varieties, including Damsons, at two pence three farthings per pound; 8 tons of gooseberries (topped and tailed) at three pence one farthing; 14 tons of apricot pulp at three pence three farthings; and some five tons in total of loganberries, black currants and blackberries, at four pence per pound.