

REQUEST FOR PRELIMINARY DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY
LIBBY, MCNEILL & LIBBY CANNING PLANT
13636 SOUTH WESTERN AVENUE, BLUE ISLAND, ILLINOIS

SUMMARY

The Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant, located at 13636 South Western Avenue in the City of Blue Island, Illinois, is a multi-story concrete and masonry industrial plant that was constructed between 1917 and 1919 to serve as the main Midwest processing plant for the Libby, McNeill & Libby Company, one of the world's leading producers of canned foods. Founded in Chicago in 1868 by brothers Arthur and Charles Libby and their partner, Archibald McNeill, the company pioneered the development of canned beef products and became a powerful player in Chicago's meatpacking industry by the end of the nineteenth century, operating a large processing plant at the Union Stockyards. During the twentieth century, Libby expanded its product lines to include a wide range of food product including canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, fish, milk products, and an extensive line of condiments. By the early 1920s, the company had constructed specialized processing facilities across the country and opened branch offices in Great Britain, France, Italy, and Belgium. The plant at Blue Island was constructed specifically for Libby's condiment lines, which included various juices, jellies, apple butter, salad dressings, mustard, baked beans, catsup, bottled olives, and pickles.

The Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant is locally significant under **Criterion A** for **Industry** for its association with the Libby Company. By 1919, when the Blue Island plant was completed, Libby, McNeill & Libby was the second largest producer of canned foods in the country. The building, designed by Philip Larmon, general superintendent for the Libby Company, is also locally significant under **Criterion C** for **Architecture** as an excellent and well-preserved example of a large-scale industrial manufacturing plant, and one of the largest industrial buildings in Blue Island.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant is located on the west side of South Western Avenue at the intersection of South Western Avenue and 135th Street in the city of Blue Island, approximately sixteen miles south of downtown Chicago. The plant is a massive grouping of inter-connected concrete and brick structures ranging from two to four stories. The main block of the building stretches 588 feet along South Western Avenue; a two-story brick structure projecting from the center of the east elevation originally served as the main office for the plant. Four large wings extend west from the rear of the main block, spaced to provide access for rail spurs that brought products directly to and from the building. A one-story metal truss structure constructed in the 1950s currently connects three of the four rear wings.

The two-story office is a flat-roofed structure set on a concrete water table (now painted) and features walls of red face brick with Classical Revival terra-cotta detailing. The structure is regularly fenestrated with groupings of one-over-one wood sash with single-pane wood transoms. The center entrance, which is the main entrance into the building, is a non-historic aluminum and glass assembly set in the original opening.

The main block of the building is four stories tall at its center, stepping down to three stories and

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then to two stories as it extends north and south. Two brick pent houses at the west end of the four-story center portion mark the location of the building's two main stairs and elevators. The concrete structure is clearly exposed on the exterior of the building, with broad concrete piers (now painted) and dark red brick spandrel panels. The piers and spandrels form window openings set with concrete lintels and sills. Many of the original steel factory sash remain, particularly on the north side of the main block. On the south side of the main block, all of the first floor windows and approximately half of the second floor windows have been replaced with glass block within the original openings. The first floor openings in many of the bays along Western Avenue have also been altered to house loading docks. The north and south elevations of the main block are of common brick and are un-fenestrated and unornamented. The west elevation of the main block is also common brick between exposed concrete structure, with large window openings on the second, third, and fourth floors. Many of the upper floor window openings have been infilled with brick.

The rear wings are simple concrete structures with common brick walls and flat roofs. The northernmost wing (the "Tomato Building" on the attached Sanborn map), completed in 1919, is a two-story structure with a large two-story brick penthouse. The building is regularly fenestrated, but many of the openings are now infilled with brick, glass block, and mechanical louvers. Some of the original multi-light metal windows remain. The two one-story wings near the center of the west elevation ("Shipping Building No. 1 and No. 2) were constructed in 1917-1918. The building's brick power plant with brick smoke stack is connected to the west end of the northern shipping wing. The southernmost wing ("Pickle Building") was also completed in 1918 and is the largest of the rear wings. The exposed south elevation houses many non-historic loading dock entrances.

Interior

From the main west entrance, a short flight of stairs leads through a vestibule to a set of historic wood and glass doors opening onto the office building. Wood paneling, dropped ceilings, and other non-historic finishes have been installed, but these finishes appear to additive and may be covering historic features. Stairs on either side of the interior vestibule doors lead up to the second floor, which is accessed through historic wood doors with wood and glass surround. The office spaces themselves have been reconfigured.

The interior of the building's main block and rear wings are open and utilitarian, with exposed concrete structural members, mechanicals, and masonry walls. The limited historic partition walls are primarily painted brick; non-historic partition walls are primarily concrete block or drywall.

Two enclosed utilitarian concrete stairs with simple pipe railings and two freight elevators are located near the center of the main block.

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HISTORY

The Libby, McNeill & Company Canning Plant in Blue Island exemplifies the Libby Company's importance in the development of the modern food processing industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The company was founded in Chicago in 1868 by brothers Arthur and Charles Libby and their partner, Archibald McNeill; initially, Libby produced a preserved meat product known as "barrel" beef (corned beef) at a plant on Sixteenth Street in Chicago. By the mid-1870s, new methods of preserving meat by canning were being developed, and the company introduced a distinctive pyramid-shaped metal container that would become a signature for its corned beef. By the late 1800s, the company had established a large slaughterhouse and processing facility at the Union Stock Yards that employed over 1,500 people and annually processed over 200,000 cattle into several million dollars' worth of canned meat. The company also maintained a wholesale meat market at Sixteenth Street and State Street, the location of its first plant, providing meats to local hotels and restaurants.

By 1900, all three of the company's original founders were dead, and the company became a subsidiary of the giant Chicago-based meatpacker Swift & Co. A 1901 Libby trade card boasted that the company's Chicago slaughterhouse and processing plant slaughtered 15,000 cattle weekly, employed 2,500, and produced 5,000,000 cans of meat products a month. Libby corned beef was a household name throughout American and in Europe.

Building on its great success with canned meats, Libby began expanding into canned fruits and vegetables and other preserved food products around the turn of the century. In 1907, the company established its first fruit-packing plant in Sunnyvale, California and introduced the country to canned fruit cocktail. Each subsequent expansion was carefully planned and sited to take advantage of a specific local crop. Canneries were established among the cling peach orchards of Selma, California (1911) and the tomato farms of Sacramento, California (1912); salmon canneries were opened in Washington and Alaska (1900 and 1916), which Libby stocked with fish caught by its own fleet of fishermen, and a second meat-processing facility was established in Fort Worth, Texas (1902). By 1920, Libby had also established canneries in Oregon and Colorado, pickling plants in Wisconsin, and milk condensing factories in Illinois, Oregon, California, and Washington. The company's expansion into pineapple during the early 1910s, as outlined by President W. F. Burrows in a 1920 article from *The National Provisioner*, is indicative of the extent to which Libby sought to control every step of the production process:

We needed canned pineapple to fill out our large line of canned foods, and ten years ago we established our own pineapple factories in the Hawaiian Islands. To insure ourselves a steady, dependable supply of raw material we acquired principal ownership in two companies which were engaged in growing pineapples for canning purposes, in addition to which we have developed unproductive lands into pineapple gardens and through our improved methods and better handling we have effected a saving of fruit that formerly went to waste, thus benefitting both producer and consumer.

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By 1918, Libby, McNeill & Libby had become the second largest producer of canned food in the nation and one of the biggest canneries in the world. As part of this tremendous expansion, in 1917 Libby, McNeil & Libby began construction of a sprawling new canning plant in the City of Blue Island outside of Chicago. During the company's early forays into preserved fruit and vegetable-based products, the Chicago plant at the Union Stock Yards had simply been enlarged and re-arranged to accommodate new product lines. However, as the Libby lines of pickles, jellies and jams, olives, salad dressings, and other condiments gained in popularity, producing these items in the middle of the country's largest stockyard became problematic. The Chicago plant was not convenient to local farmers who were bringing in raw materials, there was very limited room for any kind of physical expansion, and the company feared that the public would not accept the processing and packing of non-meat products in a stockyard environment.

The location chosen for the new plant, "a stretch of open prairie" just south of Blue Island's downtown, solved all of these issues. An article in the March 1922 issue of *Canning Age* that profiled the plant argued that "nothing like the present group of structures [at the Blue Island plant] would have been possible amid the crowded conditions which prevailed 'at the yards.'" Libby constructed a plant that met all modern standards of industrial efficiency at every step in the process, from the receiving and sorting of raw materials to the loading and shipping of the finished products. The building was divided to give space to specific food production processes. When the plant was completed in 1919, the primary items that it produced were tomato juice, catsup, and pickles. The northernmost rear wing was the "Tomato Building," with a rail spur on the south side where raw tomatoes were brought into the plant. The large south wing, the "Pickle Building," housed a kraut and dill pickle department, a pickle sorting room, a canning room, and a raised processing room. Pickle tanks and a vinegar house were located just south of the building, opposite the rail spur that brought cucumbers in from local farms.

The Blue Island plant was designed by Philip Larmon, who served as superintendent for Libby, McNeill & Libby and was involved in the design of many of the company's canneries and processing plants. Although not trained as an architect, Larmon had worked his way up in the Libby Company over three decades. Beginning as an assistant in the construction department in 1889, he was promoted to purchasing agent in 1903 and to general superintendent in 1913, in charge of managing plant design and construction at all of Libby's plants.

Over the next fifty years, the plant produced a wide array of Libby products that were shipped all over the world, including fruit juices, jellies, apple butter, salad dressings, mustard, baked beans, catsup, bottled olives, bottled and canned pickles and pickles in brine.

The Libby Company continued to be an industry leader through the 1960s. A 1966 article in *The Geneva Times* (out of Geneva, New York) highlighted the company's successes: thirty-two plants across five countries, 205 sales branches throughout the world, a food technology research facility in Chicago and agricultural research center in Wisconsin, over 200,000 acres of farmland supervised by 10,000 growers, over 16,000 seasonal and full-time employees, and approximately \$300 million in annual revenue.

Despite the continued demand for Libby products, the company made the decision to stop

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packaging foods at the Blue Island plant in 1968; in a December 31, 1967 *Chicago Tribune* article, company vice president Richard Griffith cited “the high cost of transportation of farm products as the primary reason for the shutdown,” as urban and industrial sprawl replaced the area farms that had once supplied the plant and the company was forced to transport produce from other areas.

In 1971, Nestle acquired Libby’s canned fruit and vegetable business. Libby’s canned pumpkin continued to be produced under the Libby name, but the company’s other product lines became part of Seneca Foods.

The Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant in Blue Island is currently leased to a variety of small manufacturing and start-up businesses.

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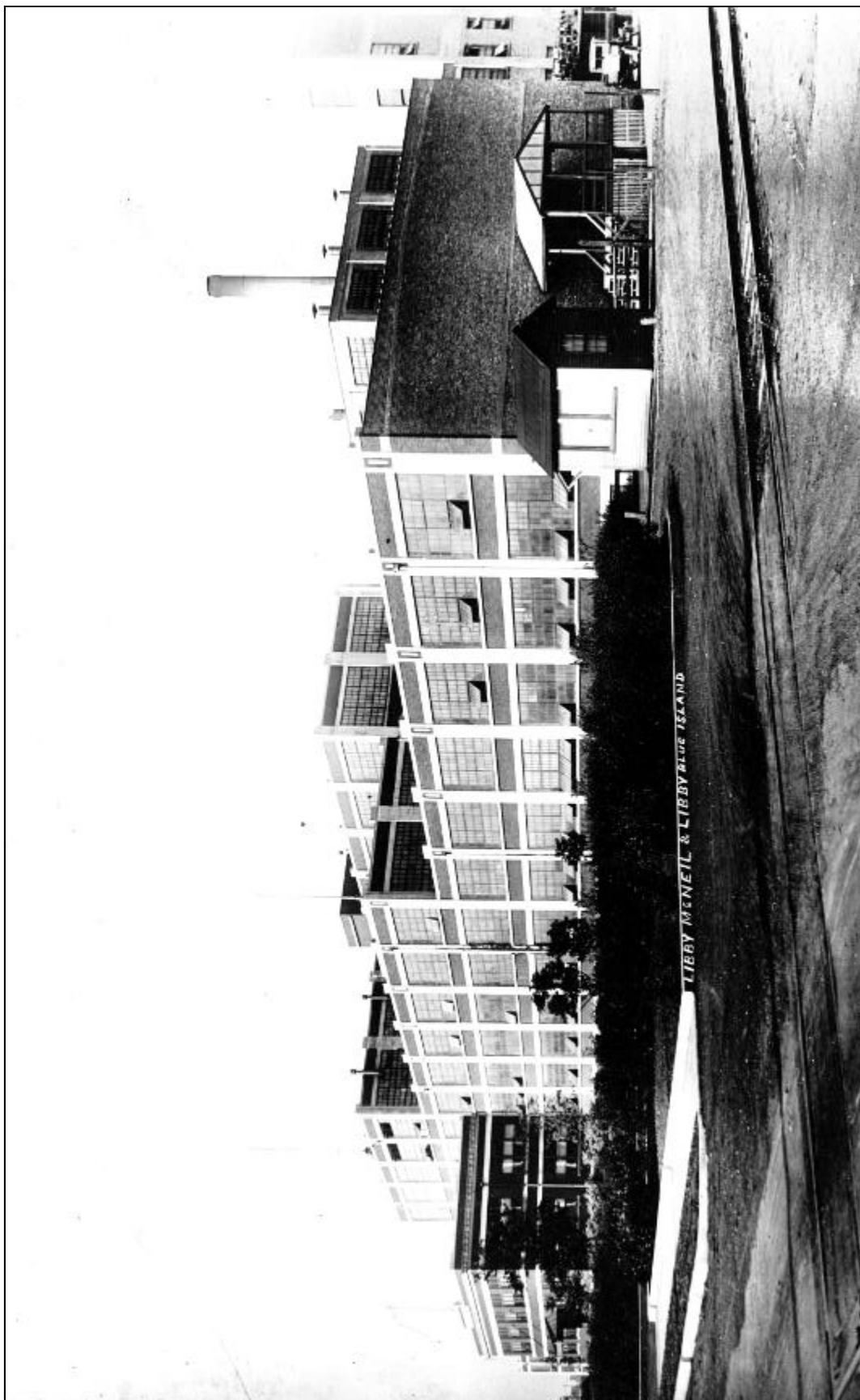


Image 1: Libby, McNeil & Libby Company Blue Island canning factory, circa 1925 (Photo courtesy of the City of Blue Island Department of Community Development)



Plant of Libby, McNeill & Libby, Blue Island, Illinois

Image 2: Libby, McNeil & Libby Company Blue Island canning factory, 1920s
(Photo from *Canning Age*)

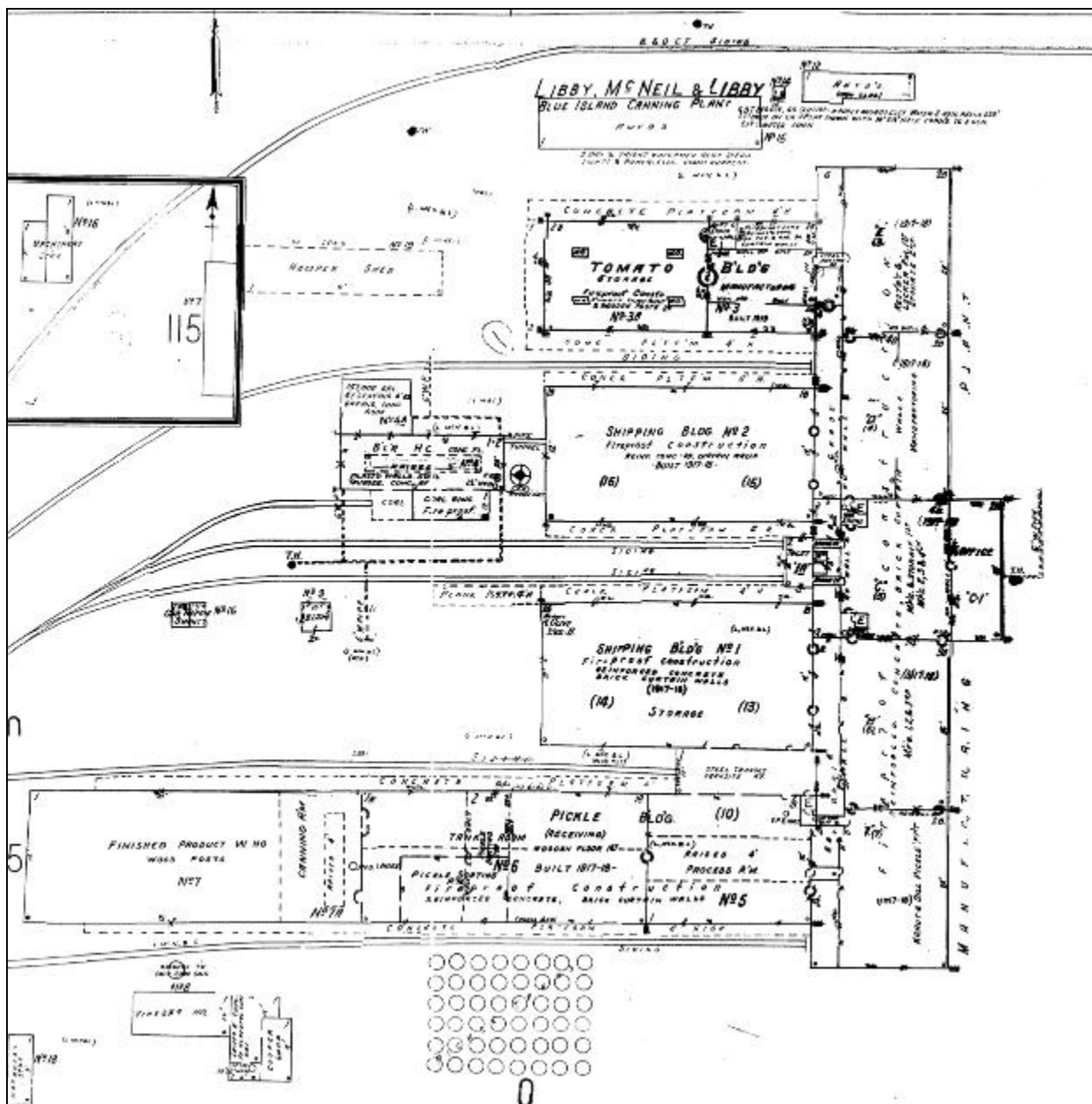


Image 3: Sanborn Insurance Map of "Libby, McNeil & Libby Company Blue Island Canning Plant", 1949



Image 4: Circa 1880 advertisement for Libby, McNeill & Libby showing signature pyramid-shaped packaging



The advertisement features a top illustration of a tomato field with workers and a distant factory. A large wooden basket overflowing with tomatoes is positioned on the left, with a stream of tomatoes falling from it and forming a vertical line down the page. The brand name 'Libby's' is written in a large, stylized script. Below it, the product name 'Pure Tomato Catchup' is printed in a bold, sans-serif font. A paragraph of text describes the product's quality and uses. A smaller paragraph encourages consumers to ask for the product at their grocers. The manufacturer's name, 'Libby, McNeill & Libby, Chicago', is listed. On the right, a glass bottle of the catchup is shown, featuring a neck label that reads 'NATURAL FLAVOR AND COLOR FREE FROM PRESERVATIVE' and a main label with the 'Libby's' logo and product name.

Libby's
Pure Tomato Catchup

Made from carefully selected, vine-ripened, rich, red, whole tomatoes.

Its distinctive, spicy flavor makes it delicious on meats, fish and oysters—splendid for seasoning soups, sauces, and gravies.

Ask for Libby's at your grocers

Libby, McNeill & Libby
Chicago

NATURAL FLAVOR AND COLOR
FREE FROM PRESERVATIVE

Libby's
Pure Tomato Catchup
MADE AND GUARANTEED BY
Libby, McNeill & Libby
Chicago
ESTD. 1875

Image 4: 1944 advertisement for Libby's "Catchup"



Crisp, spicy pickles...iced tomato juice —here's to appetite!

Could *you* resist, when the toast is drunk in chill and sparkling tomato juice, confirmed with a bewildering array of appetizers?

And such appetizers! Triangles of salty caviar... toast fingers heaped with salmon salad... the crimson and gold of tomatoes and mayonnaise. And over them, and between them, and inside of them—pickles! Libby's Pickles, crisp as garden-fresh celery, spicy as Christmas pies.

You want to use them lavishly—those crunchy, delicious pickles of Libby's. Use them in

appetizers, with meats, in salads. For they will do for your meals what wit does for conversation—make them lively... piquant... irresistible.

Made from selected, pedigreed cucumbers, flavored to the heart with a special spicy cure—Libby's Pickles are the very finest you can serve. Ask your grocer for Libby's Dill, and for Libby's Home Made Style Pickles.

Libby's
100
Foods
Famous
Around The World

RADIO! Laugh with Ray Pickles, Thursdays, Fridays, Mary Hale, Martin's Household Period—Wednesdays. All three over WJZ and N. B. C. chain, 10 A. M. Eastern Time. Also Mary Hale Martin's talks for West Coast listeners, 10:35 Pacific, 11:15 Mountain Time.



APPETIZERS

Place a slice of toast, topped with a Libby's Home Made Style Pickle, and crossed pickles to strips, in the center of a round platter. Around it arrange toast triangles spread with caviar, and toast fingers spread with salmon salad mixed with Libby's Dill Pickles, chopped. Beyond these place halves of eggs, stuffed with salmon salad and mayonnaise, alternating with half Dill Pickles. Around the outer edge of the platter arrange tomato slices piled with mayonnaise and topped with Home Made Style Pickles. Serve with Libby's Tomato Juice in cocktail glasses.



Tomato Juice



Port & Beans



Corn



Peas



String Beans

LIBBY MCNEILL & LIBBY - CHICAGO

Image 5: Circa 1950 advertisement for Libby products made in the Blue Island Plant



Image 6: Aerial view of Libby plant circa 1980, looking southwest

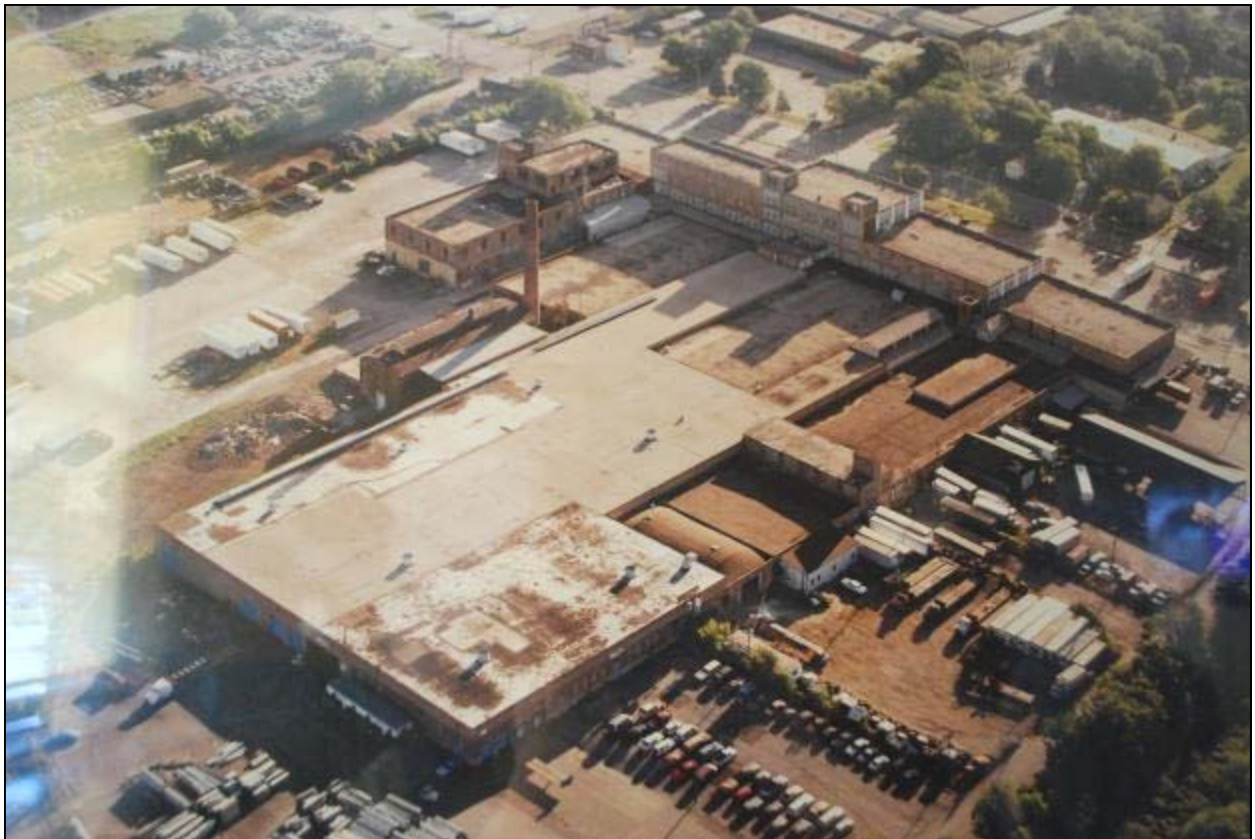


Image 7: Same, looking northeast



Image 8: Main (east) elevation of Libby plant, looking southwest (2012)



Image 9: Same, looking northwest (2012)



Image 10: Main (east) elevation of Libby plant with Office Building in foreground (2012)



Image 11: Same (2012)



Image 12: Parapet detail of Office Building with “Libby McNeil & Libby” terra cotta panel (2012)



Image 13: Terra cotta cornice detail on Office Building (2012)



Image 14: East (main) elevation of north wing (2012)



Image 15: Same (2012)



Image 16: Rear wings looking southwest (2012)



Image 17: North elevation of rear wing (2012)



Image 18: Entrance vestibule to Office Building (2012)



Image 19: Entrance to second floor of Office Building (2012)



Image 20: Interior corridor (2012)



Image 21: Interior floor, typical (2012)



Image 22: Interior floor with skylight (2012)



Image 23: Interior floor, typical (2012)



Image 24: Window bay on upper floor (2012)



Image 25: Power house interior (2012)