

# BC TREE FRUITS' *75-Year Odyssey* The Apple of the Industry's Eye

By Devon Brooks

IT WAS 1936 – THE CBC HAD JUST BEEN CREATED, WILLIAM LYON MACKENZIE KING WAS PRIME MINISTER AND THE DEPRESSION WAS RAGING. IT WAS ALSO THE YEAR BC TREE FRUITS BLOSSOMED.

In the three quarters of a century since then, the organization, with its hundreds of farmer members have struggled, seen good times, fought, and adapted repeatedly to constant change.

The real story begins in the 1880s as more and more farmers came to the Okanagan. By 1927, 3.5 million boxes of apples were grown (a million and a half more boxes than today).

## FEAST AND FAMINE

Over the next four decades farming cooperatives formed and fell apart, because in tough years farmers were more likely to work together, but in good years they preferred to sell on their own.

When the economy was crushed by the Depression the fruit industry was not spared, and most farmers were ready to adopt a plan forcing everyone into a cooperative.

A 1939 plebiscite directed the B.C. Fruit Board to give full control of domestic sales (extended to all international sales by 1941) to BC Tree Fruits. "Fruit police" ensured compliance, more easily done in an era when transportation was limited to horse and a single rail line.

Ironically, the war years in Europe were



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good years for selling B.C. fruit because competition was down and all remaining food production was essential. By 1945, a 40-pound box of apples sold for a whopping \$1.78, up from 83¢ in '39 and well past the price growers were demanding in 1933 when their strike slogan was 'a cent a pound or on the ground'.

The end of war brought on more competition along with steep freight rate increases. Mother Nature also took a hand, sending the coldest deep freeze on record. It destroyed nearly one-fifth of all plantings in the winter of 1950-51, with millions more trees damaged.

Replanting was sabotaged by another extreme cold snap in 1955.

## SHIFTING GROUND

Some farmers blamed BC Tree Fruits as a culprit for low returns, which in reality were created by circumstances mostly beyond the agency's control.

Under pressure from unhappy growers the province instigated a Royal Commission in 1958, chaired by Dean E.D. MacPhee.

MacPhee made several recommendations, but his most important observation – that orchardist holdings were

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