

# Dedication

This book is dedicated to production supervisors in the food processing industry. Many of the stories in this book contain accounts that describe their demanding job. In my experience of over 25 years in Food Processing, I can say that we all owe those most key people in food processing a debt of gratitude for caring about their work. Because of them, we can go to the grocery store, and expect to buy commercially safe food products. Thank you. Be proud of what you do.

# Foreword

I spent over 20 years working for four different food processing companies, making thousands of different products. I have a lot of stories. The stories are not in any chronological order.

I wrote this because I did not want to become one of those old guys who repeat the same stories over and over to people who heard them already and are too polite to walk away. So I figured I should write these tasty tales of bungling for posterity. That way, they can just go get a copy of this book and I can spare them the oral version.

# Disclaimer

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Don't blame any of today's workers on what was done in any of the stories mentioned here. I have not been in the Food Processing Industry for 15 years. The companies have changed hands and the same people are not there. I changed all the names.

# Rancid Tales

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*My years in the Food Processing Industry*

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Smashwords Edition

Also by Den Warren: The fiction series *KINGS and CLANS*

*Kings and Clans of the Midwest*

*Ayanna*

<https://denwarren.wordpress.com/>

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A dystopian setting depicting the US dollar collapse, causing an apocalyptic breakdown of the economy. The result is people fighting over limited resources.

Factions are populated by colorful characters who engage in conflict for their survival. The series is fast-moving, action-packed and entertaining. Thank you for considering it.

# Operation Misfortune Cookie

One of the many jobs I did while in the food industry was working as a Tech in a quality lab. My primary function in that particular lab was to assure the quality of our products.

One of our many products at that Company was fortune cookies. The cookies were produced for us by another company as a pass-through item. The niche item was processed by a small Chinese-American bakery, but we would still validate the quality of the cookies as they bore our brand logo.

Don was a guy who always came into the lab to "check" the quality report of the particular line he was on, but not really in charge of. This follow-up by him should have really only taken a few seconds a day. Unless he was really mad at me, which sometimes happened, he would come into the air conditioned lab to take refuge from the heat for ten to twenty minutes.

Don was always snacking, and he would munch on the test cookies when a sample box was being inspected. These got thrown out anyway.

Then Don would check his fortune. These fortunes were always very fortuitous. In fact, I had heard that we had a lawyer look them over before they were published in the cookie to make sure the Company could not be liable for whatever it said.

Don was the ignorant sort who believed in the authenticity of the spontaneity of professional wrestling. Don spent his entire lifetime not really wanting to learn anything productive.

Don's brother-in-law worked in the same place, on the same shift. When it came to Don, his brother-in-law was a one man truth squad. The brother-in-law would tell us that Don was lying about his military service; about being from Kentucky; on and on. But then, I couldn't say if his brother-in-law was totally trustworthy either. Don's brother-in-law was a hair trigger hothead, beyond anything someone would want to taunt or confront.

Don was also given to much drama. At least once, maybe twice, he demolished his television after a Dallas Cowboys loss. I used to tell him before a game that he needed to put chicken wire in front of his TV.

Don's dramatic unpredictability tended to intimidate the newer workers, and he knew it, so he would play the bully. But as factory life is so boring, a dramatic person can be of some real entertainment value, and make the time pass more bearably. So naturally, some of us would proactively seek to prompt a dramatic display from him. Once the newer guys saw us clowning on him, they would relax.

The best way to taunt Don was to disparage one of his sports teams. He never went for the local teams, which in a rural area means within a three hour drive. Don only went for teams with a solid sustained winning history. I guess that somehow that made him a winner personally.

All anyone had to do was to badmouth his wrestling show or NASCAR to get his goat. We even badmouthed things he liked whether we liked them or not. We took any kind of a stand that we couldn't care less about just to make him mad.

Another easy way to goad him was by ripping on Democrats. He had no concept why he was aligned with Democrats, in fact he talked like a conservative, but he hated Republicans. He knew who he hated. No matter what you asked him, you couldn't get a straight intelligent answer from him.

This time in the lab I was ready for him. I took some forceps and slipped out the "nothing is ever wrong in the unicorn, butterfly, bluebird, rainbow world" paper fortune from among its unyielding crispy fold. I surgically inserted another fortune of my own composition, that was printed in the same fortune cookie red ink.

"The Lakers will lose tonight."

The Lakers were involved in a best-of-seven series with another team, whom I forget. The Lakers were heavy favorites. Of course, the Lakers were one of Don's teams.

I placed the Laker cookie on the edge of the tray, a little off by itself. It was in the perfect position for someone of low energy to nab.

As expected, Don came into the lab. He did not seem interested in the cookies for some reason. All that effort for nothing.

He was in a loitering mood though, and after leaning on the table near the tray, he eventually decided upon a little snack. Bingo. He grabbed the right cookie.

I figured he would get a little sore at being punked, which was of course, the objective. Then he would give me the business, and I could laugh at his drama and tell everyone about the ploy.

He opened the cookie and read the fortune. His eyes got as big as half-dollars. He started choking on the crispy treat. I was waiting for him to start yelling at me.

Instead, he was actually taking the fortune to heart. Given his tendencies, I shouldn't have expected anything different.

"Is something wrong, Don?"

He read the fortune again to himself in astonishment. "Hmmm. . .That must be the first sports fortune I have seen."

This was way better than expected. He was seriously worried over the cookie, and the night's game.

Since the ruse was not over, I had to go along with it until its conclusion, as did everyone else who knew about it.

Don's arch-nemesis, Willie, was telling him that he also went into the lab and got a fortune cookie. Willie said the cookie read that another one of Don's teams was going to lose. Willie said Don was really squirming, and did not respond.

I feared Willie's greedy overplaying the ploy would ruin the whole thing, but it seemed there was no limit to Don's gullibility.

As it turned out, strangely enough, the Lakers *did* lose that game. In fact, they lost four in a row and lost the series they were supposed to win. It almost caused us to take pause. . . okay, not really.

Don feared the innocent looking cookies with their sinister reality altering fortunes within, and passed on eating them for quite awhile after that. But even his refusals were in a dramatic fearful fashion, which also provided bonus fun. So I kept up the warnings of caution.

Surreal: During my years I was exposed to quite a bit of food science. But it seemed wrong to me when very good cooks would ask me questions about food, such as shelf life or heat penetration. I have been able to answer their questions. It's just good that they don't ask me to inspect their kitchen. I'm certain they wouldn't like it. I have taken up cooking myself and am passable at it.

# Mysterious Slamming

I was working in a small room that made the "skins" to egg rolls. It was a new operation at the time. I handled the actual skin making machine. Another operator ran the dough mixer.

Every once in awhile we would hear this slamming noise. It was loud enough to startle us. We looked around and everything would be totally normal. Maybe a couple of hours later it would do it again.

The mysterious slamming would occur every day. In fact, it seemed to increase in frequency. This was getting to be a real distraction. The banging seemed to be coming from the direction of our stainless steel starch holding tank mounted on the wall. The tank had about a 40 gallon capacity.

We did not have the slightest clue what to do about the annoyance. We reported this condition, but when the anomaly did not affect the process and was only a pain to us, it went on largely ignored.

It didn't help that my co-worker in the room was maybe the biggest complainer who I have ever met. No one wanted to work with her. In fact, I'm pretty sure that because it was her, that they were all glad we were having the problem. Personally, I had no problem working with her.



Being in the Skin room was otherwise a pretty good job, I thought. I would stay on a job until I got bored with it, then I would just change jobs within the Company.

One day when the bang occurred, the Dough Mixer Operator yelled out. I remember not being able to get out of her what was going on. She said something about a spark. After that, she had no inclination to go near my machine. Her mind-set did not give me a warm and fuzzy feeling about my proximity to the starch bin. I kept watching her to see where she was looking.

One day this thing was popping like crazy so I kept watching for it. "Whoa!" There was a three foot long streak of blue lightning that jumped from the outside of a PVC pipe that pulled recycled starch from the line into the tank.

We studied the crazy phenomenon. The zapping was static electricity generated from starch sucking through the pipe. The micro-lightning jumping to the tank caused a dust explosion inside the tank. The slamming was the heavy stainless steel lid of the starch tank popping up with the explosion and slamming down with gravity.

Maybe the increase in explosions that day was due to a lack of humidity in the skin room or something. Conditions were just right for it though. I turned off the light in the room so people passing by could see the fantasia that was our work area. It was indeed a glorious display. It attracted quite a bit of attention as people were standing around being unproductive on the clock beholding its awesomeness.

Finally, the drain on human resources warranted some attention by supervision. Maintenance sent a guy over to figure out what to do. He was baffled and did not believe us until he saw it. He ended up running a grounding wire from the pipe to the floor. This solved the problem. He explained that the static electricity did not have much voltage, but had like, a million amps. We did not miss having it around.

## Parking Lot Intervention

I was in the parking lot walking into work. I heard a scream and some slamming. I ran over and saw a guy who was a crew leader. He was slamming a woman up against the now caved-in fender of a pickup truck.

I pulled the guy off of her, and told him to stop. He gave me a shove, after which I just looked at him. He backed off after that.

The owner of the truck was really mad about his truck.

That was pretty much it. I was called into the office and gave my report. The woman beater got fired. The woman went to the hospital, and when she got out, she said I saved her life. We'll never know if that was true or not.

## Literally Pushing His Button

I was in filling in for the second shift production manager. I was in the production office doing the production paperwork when the phone rang. It was a guy who came to the company to deliver a bulk tanker of soy sauce. He said that I needed to call Ned from Receiving to unload it.

I told the driver that Ned was on day shift and had just left. He said that Ned always unloads it. I went back to see if I could avoid bothering Ned by doing something myself about it. I asked him what was involved with unloading it. He said that he hooked the hose up and all that I had to do was check the connection and push the button to the pump.

So I checked the connection and pushed the button. The deliveryman gave me a strange look.

"That's it?" I asked, since the driver made me wonder.

"That's it."

Okay. That's overly simple, I thought, so I went back to the paperwork.

A little while later Ned broke my concentration by screaming and cussing at me at the top of his lungs. "Why are you doing my job?"

"What? Because I pushed one button?"

He was still throwing a world class tantrum. Obviously to try and intimidate and bully me. He was the Chief Union Steward and no doubt felt that it was his place to be the tough guy.

I realized that this deliveryman knew about the smelly arrangement. Ned could have "unloaded" the soy sauce on his regular shift. He just wanted call back pay to come back and do nothing.

I stood my ground. I told him, "We are not going to call you in and give you four hours of pay just to push one button." He obviously knew the tanker was coming in so he could have stayed over and done some real work for an hour until the tanker arrived.

Ned stormed out of the office with determination. He headed down the hall. No doubt he went to cry to one of the big dogs about how he was going to file a grievance. I thought that maybe my stand would only confirm to upper management that I would not yield to such tactics and they would see that as a plus.

I readied myself for a battle that I had no intention whatsoever of losing. Strangely enough, I never heard one word of this again. Ned may have had a deal with management on this. In which case, I should have ratted his arrangement to his rank and file members. Maybe he realized his stance would not be acceptable and he would not prevail. On top of that, I would write him up for his screaming and cussing at me.

One of the few regrets I have from those days is that I did not more aggressively pursue writing him up. I was a Union Steward once. I knew that pasting Ned with a write-up that stuck would be a big torpedo to the hull of his big battleship sized ego. On the

other hand, I did not feel that I had firm backing from a wavering management.

Years later after this occurrence, I related this story to another guy at a different company. He threw a big fit saying that I took this guy's job. Perhaps you as the reader agree that I was in the wrong. "Nuts" to you.

I maintain that this evil practice of featherbedding is nothing short of legalized extortion and jeopardized the health and longevity of the company.

Lock Out Tag Out: The sanitation supervisor wanted to find who had the lock on the panel that was for the big mixer across the room so she could start it. The owner of the lock was nowhere to be found so she went and got the big bolt cutters and cut the lock. Then the guy who was cleaning the mixer hopped out of it a couple of seconds before she got it started. We were still worried there might be a fatality.

# Crybaby Don

*Author's Note: This is the same Don mentioned in the story "Misfortune Cookie".*

Don was a very ambition-challenged worker. He had a job that could be done while leaning most of the time. The real lazy part comes in where he finally after all of that leaning, should have been doing something, but still maintained a static state of inactivity.

One of my numerous jobs at this food processing company was to prepare egg roll ingredients for frozen egg rolls. We would run hundreds of pounds of meat and vegetables through a slicer. Then we would weigh out the ingredients into stainless steel barrels. Then flip the barrels into a vat of boiling water. After that, we raked the vegetables into a conveyor.

We were busy all the time. We did hard physical work with all of the lifting. We were young and strong so it was a decent job for us. There was not so much in the way of headaches on the job.

Yet Don was a big pain. We would page him to bring mung bean sprouts to us which was about all of the physical activity Don would ever see. The sprouts would arrive in large wheeled tubs about the size of a compact car. It took some effort to move them.

Don knew that if he would ignore us long enough, to keep the line from going down, we would go all the way over there and get the tubs ourselves, then bring back the empties for him. Don was also supposed to pick the empties up. When we did bring them

back, we would see Don leaning on some equipment, and looking at it as if it would not run and needed his expert attention.

This behavior caused us to become very disappointed in Don.

Sometimes we chose to leave his empty tubs pile up in our department. A couple of times we moved them to the far side of the department so he would have to go get them. That really tweaked him off.

On other occasions we would take the abundance of tubs back all at once.

Don would say, "Set it over there."

Instead we belligerently jammed them all right in his way so he couldn't move. He was red hot. We put water from the drinking fountain into our fists and then rubbed our eyes like we were crying, with water running down.

"WAH!"

Everyone in his department was hooting and laughing at him. People in Don's department, other than him, worked extremely hard. They worked even harder than us, and Don did nothing to help them out.

Whenever we would page Don at lunch time for full tubs, he would come back over the loudspeaker, "I'm at lunch!" The pages both ways could be heard all over the plant. My partner and I took a liking to hearing him yell on the intercom. So if we needed some sprouts near his lunch time, we would wait a bit after we called to see if he would yell. He never disappointed. Then when he did

bring the tanks over, he would slam them into the wall or equipment to show his disapproval of us.

One time I boldly paged Don while he was at lunch and waited a few seconds.

He screamed the obligatory, "I'm at lunch!"

Then I came back with a page, "Next time check to see if we need any before you go." That got the supervisor's attention since he knew Don would be furious. So, the supervisor told me that was not an appropriate page. I asked him if it would be appropriate for him to yell at us over the intercom when he should have supplied us. The supervisor said he would straighten it out.

Boy was Don mad when he brought the sprouts over. He almost slammed them into the line. He would have been a cooked goose if that would have happened. We showed our empathy for his plight by pointing at him and laughing as hard as possible.

Kosherization: At one company we paid to have a rabbi come in and declare an item was kosher so we could get their seal. Sometimes the Company would choose to ignore their blessing and run without it. Not my call. Realistically though, our cleaning process was far superior to what they expected.



# Canadian Adventure

My first regular job in the food processing industry as a sanitor. A sanitor is a person who cleans the production equipment to a spotless condition. It was not too bad of a job to have at the time. Almost the whole crew were either Mexicans, or Mexican-Americans. At least one guy was from Puerto Rico.

I got along real well with most of them. Some became close friends. We would play softball, touch football, and basketball. I even had a wrestling match with Armando, who was an accomplished State wrestler in high school. Though he was smaller, he surprised me with a quick takedown. It was all I could handle to keep up with him and I had to concede a loss to him.

I went to the Latin-American club, and we would go to each others' social events. Armando was to be in my wedding party in a few months.

Our shift would get over at about 10:30 pm. It was Friday night and we seldom had to work Saturday or stay late at that job. We were in the restroom and I was looking at my infected tonsils in the mirror. I kept getting tonsillitis and was finally getting over it. Armando was there with Dan, another Mexican-American.

They asked me if I wanted to go to Canada.

"Huh? When?"

"After work."

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