

# A long-standing company provides rural jobs

by Heidi Riley

Food Processing

**T**wenty-one years ago, **Garry Smith** was looking for a career change. He had graduated from UPEI with a Business degree, spent 10 years in the banking industry, and then owned and operated an automotive business.

With no experience in food processing, Garry bought the **Waddell's Poultry** processing plant in Crapaud, believing the business could provide for his family of five children.

## Previous experience helps to sustain self employment

Garry's business education and banking experience was a great help when deciding to buy the plant. **William Waddell**, the previous owner, stayed on for a year, which gave the new owners time to get familiar with business operations.

## Products

Waddell's products are available in stores across PEI. They process chicken for the fresh and frozen food market. They also process turkeys for the Christmas market. Their canned products are unique. "No one else in the Maritimes produces canned chicken," says Garry. They also use beef from the Atlantic Beef processing plant in Albany. "As far as I know, we are the only ones in North America who produce canned beef."

The business began with farmers sending their live birds to Waddell's to have them processed for the freezer. They also had commercial accounts with stores. The plant had surplus product and began a canning operation using an outside service. "We also supplied Island restaurants," says Garry. "That part of the business grew to 13 accounts."



**Garry and Simonne Smith have been operating Waddell's Poultry since 1988. When Garry bought the plant, it had seven employees. Now there are 15 to 18. Simonne and daughter-in-law Sherry run the office, and their two sons Micah and Jonathan also work at the plant.**

## Bridge helps to expand the business

Eleven years ago, the opening of the Confederation Bridge boosted the business by making off-Island product available for the first time. "The day after the bridge opened, we were hauling live poultry from the mainland."

They expanded the premises and set up their own cannery. Then they expanded to a second site: the old Crapaud creamery. With larger coolers, freezers and equipment, they could process more birds. "This allowed us to expand our output at a time when farms were shifting from small family operations to industrial-size farms."

## Work is seasonal

"From August to January, we run flat out," says Garry. "We hire 16 to 17 employees, and we have as many as 32 for the ten days when we process turkeys for the Christmas market. Mid-January to mid-March is very quiet."

## Staffing

"Finding people willing to work short-term is becoming more difficult. We have been fortunate to have a good steady staff base for the most part. In some years, we turn over up to 60 people to retain 16 to 18 working staff. Not everyone fits into a career here."

"Two long-time staff members have retired or have moved to another career. Replacing them has been difficult. This past week things have turned around. A few people applied and are on site right now. The majority of our hiring comes from our staff passing around the word that we are hiring."

## What does it take to work here?

There is one 8-hour shift per day. Some workers have a longer day because they are more involved in opening, closing, final clean-up and sanitizing. "This work is not highly skilled," says Gary. "It's more about being attentive and careful to properly handle the food

and safeguard themselves working with heavy equipment, forklifts, automated equipment, and cutting knives."

## Training

"We generally start people where they can get an overview of what happens in the plant. Some people are very adaptable, and they learn to handle knives and equipment very safely and quickly."

## Work experience is valuable

"In a small company, you have to be versatile and able to go from one section to another as the flow of the work changes. Employees who get cross-trained can use this valuable experience at other food processing plants."

## Truck drivers hard to find

As the plant expanded, larger trucks were needed to transport the product. "We went from a pickup truck to bigger trailers, and now we have two 53-foot units. We can haul 10,000 birds every day. It's very difficult to keep a licensed heavy equipment truck driver around because we don't haul every day."

"We hire truck drivers as we need them. In certain seasons they are extremely difficult to find. Last week I had to call 40 or 50 different people in order to find someone who could drive. Everyone was busy in the potato industry. We have our own poultry trailer and now we hire an external trucking company to use their truck to pull our trailer."

## Career changing

"People change careers more now than ever before. I'm on my fourth career, and I don't regret any of it. Every career change has offered new insight and motivation. You learn something from every job that you can use in your next job."