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The Tomato Queen of San Joaquin

Ken Albala
University of the Pacific, kalbala@pacific.edu

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The Tomato Queen of San Joaquin

Few people today recognize the name of Tillie Lewis, yet she was one of the most influential figures in the history of food production in America. Not only was Flotill, the canning factory she started in Stockton, California, among the first to market U.S.-grown Roma tomatoes to mainstream consumers, but Tillie was an exemplary businesswoman who directed her company through labor tensions and racial issues and also founded Tasti-Diet Foods, the “first low-calorie food line to be marketed nationally on a retail basis.”

Tillie’s story relied on a great measure of self-mythologizing. She and Meyer Lewis, her husband and de facto publicity agent, constantly rewrote the narrative, which enthusiastic journalists turned into a classic American tale of rags to riches. Rewriting the story was also a marketing device to help identify Tillie with her products, especially the diet foods that purportedly helped with her own weight problem. Tillie was featured in the magazines Time, Life, and National Geographic, scores of newspapers, and on the Merv Griffin Show. Over the course of her life she held many titles, including “Horatio Alger in Petticoats” and “Tillie of the Valley.” A 1952 Reader’s Digest story called her
dropped out of school at age twelve to work, and married at sixteen, but that her obsession with tomatoes was partly responsible for the marriage breaking up after five years.

An article in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* claimed that Tillie had gone to work at age twelve, folding kimonos and earning $2.50 a week, two dollars of which she had to turn over to her father and stepmother. It quoted Tillie as saying, “I learned thrift early in life…and since then I’ve never bought anything I couldn’t pay for in 10 days.” All of these stories emphasized her humble birth and the difficult circumstances of her teenage years. None bothered to mention that Tillie had gone to work on Wall Street selling securities and had done well enough in the midst of the Depression to make twelve thousand dollars a year, most of which she was able to save. She also enrolled in night classes at New York University.

Tillie was born Myrtle Ehrlich in 1901, the daughter of a Brooklyn phonograph salesman; she took the nickname “Tillie” before dropping out of high school at the age of fifteen. (She later insisted, “No—I was not a drop out! Economic conditions made me a ‘force out’ after one year of high school.”) At sixteen she married a wholesale grocery distributor for whom she worked as a clerk. Most biographies claimed that Tillie developed a sudden and obsessive fascination with tomatoes. One biographer wrote that she was struck by the unique flavor of the pear-shaped pomodoros packed by Italian firms and sold in the grocery store where she worked; another embellished her story by noting that she had lost her mother soon after birth.

*Above: Tillie Lewis in a promotional brochure, “Presenting the House of Flotill,” ca. 1946. Courtesy of the Haggin Museum, Stockton, California*
Tomatoes were not, in fact, the guiding force in her life. Her involvement with them likely resulted from a shift in U.S. trade policy. Canned tomatoes were primarily sold to the Italian-American market. In 1930, when the United States government placed a 50 percent tariff on tomatoes imported from Italy, sales plummeted. American packers seized the opportunity to grow tomatoes in California, thereby undercutting Italian manufacturers and importers and eventually expanding sales to mainstream Americans by means of aggressive advertising campaigns. Tillie’s interest in tomatoes was a last-ditch business opportunity in an erratic economy, an attempt to climb out of the bankruptcy she had declared in 1932, when she claimed liabilities from stock transactions worth $57,716 and no assets. In other words, she had gone bust—a fact left out of her feel-good biographies.

Tillie’s innovative idea was to grow the “pomodoro” tomato, which we now call the Roma—the San Marzano type favored in Italy for making sauce. Late in life Tillie made a point of correcting interviewers, pointing out that pomodoro is merely the Italian word for tomato and not a different variety, but company records indicate that they called it a “pomodoro.” Her hunch that Italian Americans and, later, all Americans would come to prefer this tomato variety for sauce, and that tomato sauce would become thoroughly American in the process, proved correct.

Although experts at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden told Tillie that there was no way to grow pomodoros in the United States, she persevered and later claimed to have done the necessary research on soil and climate late at night in the New York Public Library. But there was only one way to be sure about the tomatoes: to save up money by living on crackers and jam and five-cent fries at the Automat so she could go to Italy to see for herself. Tillie’s biographers portray her as wide-eyed and eager to learn and text in Italian, clearly marketed to Italian Americans.

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There are wildly conflicting stories about Tillie’s first years in business. She was fond of telling a story about how the steam boiler broke down as they were about to start canning: “I know locomotives make steam so I called up the railroad and asked how much they would charge me to borrow one of their steam engines. The man was sympathetic and they said they would charge only the switching fee of $7.50. I said I’ll take two, and the tomatoes were saved.”

But if the public tale was one of gumption and success, archival documents tell a different story. The farmers who had been contracted to grow the new tomatoes miscalculated their yields and brought in far less than expected. Strapped for cash, Tillie went to a California bank and was turned down for a loan; she then went to the Banco di Napoli in New York, where she was offered ten thousand dollars. Tillie told Clarke Young, the vice-president of the bank: “If I were you and I looked at my statement. I
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in fact things were not going smoothly. Tax records for
the factory from downtown Stockton. Flotill also started a
daycare so that women could bring their children (less an
altruistic move than a pragmatic one). The labor shortages
were most acute during packing season, from March to
November, when workers held down two ten-hour shifts,
six or sometimes seven days a week. At the peak of canning
season Flotill had 3,500 employees, compared to only
250 off season.

To help alleviate the labor shortage even the faculty
wives of the local College of the Pacific volunteered their
time on production lines at the Stockton plant. At a celebra-
tion of their heroic efforts a certain “Professor M.R. Eiselen
blossomed out” in song with a quintet of faculty members
to the tune of My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean:

My Bonnie is Working for Tillie,
My Bonnie fills can with puree,
My Bonnie thinks housework is silly,
Oh Bring Back my Bonnie to me.21

The war years also demanded innovation to keep work-
ers from seeking more lucrative jobs. Flotill became a
model for employee benefits, establishing “a guaranteed
retirement income and insurance plan for senior employ-
ees.”22 The company also experimented with the production
of penicillin derived from local asparagus scraps. The labor
shortage was felt not only in the factory but also in the fields,
and it was exacerbated by the absence of Japanese workers,
who had been sent to detainment camps. Ultimately the
problem was solved by importing Mexican labor. These
were the earliest years of the bracero program that began

wouldn’t give me a cent...But if I considered integrity and
determination, I would give it to me.” Which of course he
did. She then said, “If ever I can do anything for you, please
don’t hesitate to come to me.” Several years later, when the
Italian government nationalized the banks, Clarke Young
wrote to Tillie, reminding her of the promise. She sent him
tickets to California, where he became vice-president and
treasurer of Flotill, a position in which he remained until
his retirement in 1968.

Over the next few years Tillie strengthened her hold on
the company. After Florindo died in 1937 she immediately
borrowed one hundred thousand dollars to buy out his
interest in the company—or so the biographies claim. A
year later she bought the plant she had been renting from
the Pacific Can Company, making her, at thirty-six, sole
manager and owner of the entire Flotill enterprise. But
in fact things were not going smoothly. Tax records for
the company list 85 percent of the stock owned by Italian
interests until March 1939. Tillie’s personal notes on the
tax records claim that there was no working capital and that
the company had been “bled almost dry by the del Gaizos,”
who refused to invest in improved equipment. Another
source of funding, described only in Tillie’s private tax file,
was obtained from one Violet Greener of Agabeg Occult
Church, Inc. in Los Angeles, in the sum of four thousand
dollars.18 From her tax records we learn that Tillie had to
pawn her jewelry to keep the company afloat.

After Italy entered World War II in 1940 investments
in the United States were curtailed. By the time the U.S.
entered the war the following year all imports were blocked.
The time was ripe for the California tomato industry to take
off, but the domestic front was not exactly smooth in the
late 1930s and 1940s. Disputes over union wages threatened
total disruption of production at Flotill. Ironically, the
problem was not that wages were too low, but that they were
too high. The Stockton Record reported that all canners
were having trouble paying the “highest wages in history,”
especially as lower wages outside the county were enabling
other companies to undersell the San Joaquin Valley pack-
ers.19 Tillie said she “would not open for the season under
conditions that meant trouble with the union.” She could
not pay the 52 and a half cents per hour for men and 40
cents for women while Stanislas County to the south was
paying only 40 and 33 and a half cents, respectively.

In the midst of these crises Tillie planned to expand
the company. She made over twenty trips to her New York
office on sales and marketing missions to promote canned
salad tomatoes, juice, spaghetti sauce, pear-shaped tomatoes,
paste, and concentrated juice.20 Flotill had just introduced
canned spaghetti, a forerunner to Chef Boyardee. Shipments
were made up and down the East Coast, and Tillie’s personal
logbook lists the shops that carried Flotill products.

The labor disputes culminated in a 1940 canners
strike called by the American Federation of Labor (AFL).
Even though Tillie was paying higher than union wages,
workers were still required to join the statewide strike. A
Flotill employee told Meyer Lewis, the western regional
director of the AFL, that Tillie was complying with union
demands and should not be punished by the strikers. So
Lewis went to Stockton to meet with Flotill workers and
within twenty minutes settled the strike. Then, as the sto-
rybook plot goes, Tillie hired him on the spot, and seven
years later she married him.

The war years were difficult for Flotill, even though the
company supplied the United States Army with C-Rations,
due to a serious labor shortage. The company had to meet
immediate demand by renting buses to bring workers to
the factory from downtown Stockton. Flotill also started a
daycare so that women could bring their children (less an
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problem was solved by importing Mexican labor. These
were the earliest years of the bracero program that began
with the harvest of sugar beets outside Stockton. In its twenty-two-year history, from 1942 to 1964, it brought in over four million workers. One farmer, K.G. Stark of Patterson, personally thanked Tillie for the program: “Your bringing in of Mexican Nationals was of great benefit to us. If it had not been for this labor our crops would have suffered immeasurably. The men did good work, and Flotill Products is to be congratulated on this contribution to the war effort.” Grower and shipper E.A. Couture was similarly grateful: “We feel indebted to Flotill Products for the cooperation which was afforded outside growers in allowing us to use the Nationals. We fully understand the expense and trouble that was necessary to arrange for bringing the Nationals in, as well as the daily routine of housing, feeding, caring for them.” Local farmers and processors praised the Mexican workers publicly, suggesting that their initial misgivings were unfounded.

The immediate postwar years called for readjustment. In 1947 Flotill expanded with the purchase of Penthouse Foods, at which point it was operating three plants, making Tillie the largest independent food processor west of the Mississippi. Nevertheless, Flotill nearly went bankrupt due to unsold cases of tomatoes. The company had to borrow 1.6 million dollars from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which it repaid by 1952.

Thinking back on these years, company secretary Alilea Haywood commented on Tillie’s business practices. “She used to call the business her ‘baby’ and treated all the employees as members of her ‘family.’ She was the matriarch—sometimes benevolent and sometimes exacting, but always with a goal of strengthening the company and making things better for her Flotill Family.” Haywood added that if Tillie had not been a businesswoman she would have made a great actress: “She could make you believe black was white and vice versa, just by her magnetic personality.”

In the 1950s the company’s rocky fortunes were reversed, thanks to both further expansion and another war. Flotill was the largest U.S. supplier of C-Rations during the Korean War. Above: The Flotill Automatic Can Feeder, 1940. Courtesy of the Haggin Museum, Stockton, California.
War, and the port of Stockton became the central embarkation point on the West Coast. In many ways C-Rations prefigured the mainstream diet that would emerge later in the decade. Each box contained a canned meal plus crackers, cocoa, coffee, dried milk, sugar, jam, cigarettes, and gum—enough for one man for one day. The contents of the cans changed weekly, from chicken and vegetables to frank and beans or meat and spaghetti, dishes that consumers themselves would soon be purchasing in convenient cans. In a certain sense, what Tillie Lewis was providing was the worst of American food in the 1950s.

Tillie’s other major innovation of the 1950s was to create a new line of diet foods. She officially launched the Tasti-Diet in 1952 with the slogan “Sweet to the taste, but kind to the waist.” Within a few years the diet had gained official endorsement by the American Medical Association. It was not just another weight-loss diet but a brilliant marketing strategy designed to offer consumers a wide array of foods for which they would not have to sacrifice anything or make difficult decisions, and it appeared decades before the now-familiar WeightWatchers or Jenny Craig meals. Because the Tasti-Diet was also marketed to nutritionists, it represented a remarkable collusion between food manufacturers and health professionals. The diet itself consisted of little more than a reduction to 1,200 calories a day, in the form of salad dressings, condiments, canned fruit and vegetables, soups, desserts, and “sweetnin”—all based on saccharine.

Accompanying the diet was a promotional spin that was arguably the most fascinating episode in Tillie’s history. First, a story was invented that a doctor had scolded her for being overweight (although judging from pictures, Tillie was never obese). An article among her papers, clipped from an unidentified Newark, New Jersey, newspaper,
begins: “Once upon a time a short, rather plump woman went to see her doctor about losing weight,” while one in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat relates that Tillie’s doctor told her sternly, “Look, you’re in the canny business, if anyone can do something about it, you can.” So Tillie asked the company’s food chemist, Claire A. Weast, to set up a laboratory to formulate the new diet foods, which he did in his own kitchen in Manteca. Ingenious advertisements claiming that Tillie had lost twenty-six pounds on the diet used her personal story to appeal to readers, and she gradually came to be closely identified with her diet products. One ad read: “There’s good news for folks who must diet to reduce! Especially for folks who, like myself, are afflicted with a sweet tooth and can’t resist the rich, sweet foods that carry such a heavy penalty of fattening calories. Is that your trouble too?” Tillie went on a whirlwind publicity campaign and kept a scrapbook of her trips around the country. Ads ran in papers nationwide, and she appeared on national TV cooking shows. She also sent free dieting packages to doctors so that they would prescribe the diet for their overweight patients.

The Tasti-Diet was billed as a modern diet, different from everything that had appeared before: it was simple and effortless, requiring only the purchase of certain branded products. As an ad in the Chicago Tribune proclaimed, “Here is the real secret for successful, joyous, no-will-power-needed dieting. No going without for you.” The menus for the twenty-one-day Tasti-Diet promised “that calorie counting is not needed, that dieting can be pleasant, and that a slimmer, more youthful and more attractive figure can and will be yours under this reducing plan.” Science could solve what willpower could not.

Merely by following the Tasti-Diet, 2.3 pounds would miraculously be lost in a week. The American public ate it up. Ads touting the Tasti-Diet Menu Plan ran nationwide for twenty-one days and referred to Tillie as a “noted nutrition expert” who developed the 21 day low calorie diet... when she found thru research that dieters cheated when deprived of their favorites.” The favorites in this case were familiar desserts, which Tillie replicated with saccharine. She also produced a dietetic gelatin dessert made with canned fruit, whipped up and served in a parfait glass. She was not averse to scare tactics. A 1955 article about the Tasti-Diet warned that “obesity...probably is America’s No. 1 public enemy. Forty or fifty million people are overweight. This makes them subject to many serious diseases.” The article also turned the diet into a personal mission for Tillie, who confessed that “years ago, when my physician told me I had to lose weight, he warned me of the ‘black mood,’ the irritability, the rebellion that would come over me because I had to give up the foods that I liked best...I vowed that I would find an easier way.”

In an ad for the twentieth day of the diet one thirty-four-year-old mother of three testified that she lost thirty-one pounds on the plan, which changed her life. Now she and her husband enjoyed dancing and bowling together. “We really share each other’s lives again.” Such testimonials reinforced the notion that a woman’s self-worth was reflected only through the eyes of a man, and that without a slim figure real affection was impossible. As with all diets, although there was an appeal to health, what was really being sold was happiness and love, an improved and transformed life.

Another success story was related by Mrs. Lillian Korzen of Chicago, whose husband had taken her to court for divorce because, at five feet and 190 pounds, she was “just too fat.” The judge suggested a five-month delay in the proceedings if she could lose fifty pounds. Tillie put her on the Tasti-Diet, and it worked, providing “living proof” of the plan’s success. The plan’s ultimate goal was to instill feelings of guilt in female readers, to make them scrutinize their own bodies and purchase diet foods to stave off possible rejection by their husbands.

It is interesting to consider what the cans contained: saccharine-sweetened peaches, cherries, apricots, and grapefruits; also corn, carrots, asparagus, and green beans—foods that need neither canning nor sweetening. There were also desserts like raspberry gelatin, chocolate topping, butterscotch pudding, and French Custard Flavor Dessert, all intended to give the impression that dessert could be an integral part of a weight-loss diet. Tasti-Diet foods simply contained fewer calories than nondiet products. For instance, Tillie’s peaches contained 33 calories per 100 gram serving, compared to 86 in standard brands, a 62 percent reduction. Of course, a fresh peach contains far fewer calories, but comparisons were given only to other canned goods. In 1954 Tillie introduced a line of diet soft drinks—ginger ale, cola, root beer, lemon-lime, black cherry, and raspberry. There was even a drink dubbed “The Tilly” [sic], which consisted of 1 jigger of gin, the juice of half a lime, cracked ice, and fresh mint added to a glass of low-calorie ginger ale.

As for Tillie’s own dieting and rescue from obesity, only one biography lets slip a fascinating truth. “She keeps her figure not by dieting exactly; as she explains it she just eats less of everything. Smaller-than-normal portions and no seconds, ever. She dotes on Italian food but satisfies herself with half a glass of wine, half a plate of spaghetti.” So Tillie’s secret did not lie in her own products.
In 1961 Tillie officially changed the name of the Flotill Company to Tillie Lewis Foods, and it went public as the largest packer of peeled tomatoes in the country, offering half a dozen brands as well as private labeling for supermarkets such as A&P, Safeway, Kroger, and Acme. Tillie also bought the Anderson Soup Company of pea soup fame and in 1963 bought the Patterson Canning Company. Press accounts informed readers of how she installed the first American-manufactured hydrostatic cooker, a giant, six-story pressure cooker that cost a quarter of a million dollars. Tillie Lewis Foods was all expansion, internal improvement, and good PR.

But everything began to change in 1965 and 1966, when Tillie Lewis Foods was sold to the Ogden Corporation for sixteen million dollars. Ogden, a powerhouse in shipbuilding and scrap metal, had decided to expand into food processing with the Ogden Foods Products Corporation. As chairwoman of the corporation’s board, Tillie continued to run the business for a few years. With her prominence as a food expert she was invited to serve as a delegate to the 1968 Food and Agriculture Organization Conference in Rome that was specifically charged with the task of overcoming world hunger (she later rued the conference’s failings). She eventually retired in May 1971 and in 1973 was awarded an honorary doctorate in business administration from the University of the Pacific. In the same year Forbes magazine listed her among the “Ten Highest Ranking Women in Big Business.”

Despite expansion, a shift to mechanized harvesting, and improved agricultural methods, not all went well for the company once Tillie retired. The production figures for tomatoes clearly show the impact of the green revolution and factory farming. In 1954 1,343,600 tons of tomatoes were grown on 79,500 acres, a yield of 16.9 tons per acre. By 1974 5,847,650 tons were being harvested from 254,000 acres, representing not just a huge increase in acreage but also an astonishing 23.4 tons per acre yield.1 However, when supply exceeds demand, prices plummet, and by 1977 there was no profit whatsoever for Tillie Lewis Foods. Although farms and the factory were producing at record levels, prices remained low, and with the end of the bracero system growers were encouraged to invest in mechanical harvesters. The result was that even as the farmer grew ten cans’ worth of tomatoes, the packer canned only eight, and the consumer ate six. There was simply no way to generate profit.2

Nevertheless, in an effort to move away from seasonal and unpredictable produce and sell big brands using dependable ingredients, Ogden bought the Progresso Company in 1979 for seventy million dollars. The plants that processed private labels for supermarkets were closed down, and headquarters were moved to New Jersey to focus on the Progresso brand. In 1986 Ogden Food Corporation was sold to IC Industries for $320 million. Considering that Ogden had bought Tillie Lewis Foods for sixteen million, that was not a bad deal. In 1987 the original Flotill canning was closed, and Progresso, Hain, and other IC brands became part of Pet, Inc.

Tillie Lewis died in 1977, leaving one hundred thousand dollars each to University of the Pacific and to Temple Israel in Stockton, in whose cemetery she is buried. After her death the theater at Delta College was named the Tillie Lewis Theater in recognition of her contributions. As for the tomato packing industry that she pioneered, by 1987 only nineteen canneries were left in California, from the forty that had operated in the 1960s. One worker, Mac Martinez, called this last decade a “slow cruel and mean” death. “In the days it was a family company, everyone felt that there was camaraderie and company spirit. But then, it all became part of larger corporate goals.”3 Martinez claimed he had seen Tillie’s ghost stalking the canning hallways and checking production at 2:00 A.M., angry that her company had been ruined. Today, the cannery buildings still exist, but they are occupied by other businesses. Not many of the original workers are still around, and few recall the name of Tillie Lewis. Fewer still remember the central place she held in American food and history.

NOTES
5. Wooter, “Tillie of the Valley.”
7. Interview typescript, Tillie Lewis Collection (hereafter TLC), Biographies Box, Haggin Museum.
8. Correspondence regarding biographical story by Alice Packard, TLC, Biographies Box, Haggin Museum.
10. Tillie used the word *pomodoro* in her early correspondence, but she later corrected a biographer, stating that the word simply means “tomato.” *TLC*, Biographies Box, Haggin Museum.


12. Lewis, “The Tomato Lady.”


14. Trenton Evening Times (incomplete clipping in *TLC*, Biographies Box, Haggin Museum).

15. An article published in Italian noted that this new plant was unique in the United States and would cost $150,000 dollars. It also named the Italians sent to run the factory, among whom was Vincenzo del Gaizo, Florindo’s son. See *Il Sole*, 12 June 1935.

16. Morgan and Morgan, “California’s Surprising Delta.”


22. This program, which started with one hundred employees and was later extended to more, offered retirement income beginning at age sixty-five. See *Western Canner and Packer*, November 1943.


27. Tasti-Diet scrapbook, Haggin Museum.

28. During these years Flotill also developed a concentrated egg product low in calories and cholesterol, and 100 percent salmonella free, for use in food processing, bakeries, restaurants, hospitals, and the armed forces. It was especially promoted for use in cake mixes. As early as 1952 this egg substitute was referred to as Eggstra, but its original name was “Ovocomp.” Poppy Cannon, who wrote an entire cookbook on canned foods, offered to help market it. Cannon later published a story about Tillie in *Fast Gourmet* (see note 2), and there survives a letter from 1974 in which Cannon tells her that the recipe on the Eggstra package should specify warm water, because cold causes the mixture to lump. *TLC*, Correspondence Box 1955-1974, Haggin Museum.


30. Alice Packard biography, *TLC*, Biographies Box, Haggin Museum.


32. Dick Clever in the *Stockton Record*, 2 September 1979.

33. Clipping from the *Stockton Record*, 8 February 1987.