

Vegetable variety

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Pennsylvania is also a large mushroom producing area.

Bowman noted that vegetables are all done under contract with individual farmers. "We give the farmers all the assistance we can. We need their product when we contract with them. If the farmer doesn't make money then we're not in good shape." Bowman says they have inspectors in the field for insects, fungus and mold. "We try to make sure we get a good product."

Quality control begins in the field and continues through the whole processing plant. Since the quality of raw products may vary, Bowman explains that the quality will affect just what kind of finished product is processed. For instance, certain spinach may not be suitable for leaf spinach, but it is perfectly acceptable to be used for chopped spinach.

"We inspect and sort out the bad quality. We have our own quality control staff which monitors the product throughout the plant. The great majority of our product makes Fancy A quality," he states.

Frank Snively, president of Consumers, adds, "Quality control is a very important part of our operation." Snively is the third generation of his family in the business.

Federal inspection, of course, plays a big part in the operation of the plant. During the processing season there are delegated state inspectors present, and food and drug inspectors also look over their products. Bowman points out, "Our products are completely natural, with no additives." Labels for their products, nevertheless, must be approved by the appropriate federal agency in Washington.

Two thirds of Consumers' products are sold through institutional sales, with one third being available in retail outlets. Their label is "Dutch Farms," and they process for other private labels as well.

At the peak of the season, Consumers has about 200

people working for them. Bowman noted, "Everybody's local."

Bowman points out that their products are washed, inspected, blanched, cooled and frozen, in a process "identical" to that of the home freezer. The one difference is that their products are quick frozen in seven minutes by machinery which forces super cold air over the processed food.

One large non-farm aspect of the packing company is its ice business. The company was founded as "Consumers Ice Company," and through the years it provided ice to the community and to Penn Central Railroad whose line runs beside the buildings in downtown Lancaster.

Snively recalls that ice was sold door to door with men and teams of horses, and fifty cents would buy a 300 pound block of ice. Of course, one problem with manufacturing ice is that it is primarily a Summertime business, so, as was the custom with ice companies, Consumers branched into the coal business. This provided their employees with Winter work as well.

In 1938, the corporation decided to go into the locker business. In those early years, the company would process products for the farmers and store it in the lockers for them. In 1945, the company went into vegetable processing under the guidance of C.L. Snively who is now chairman of the board. Vegetables then became its mainstay and the use of locker plants slowed down. The coal business was dropped in 1945 as unprofitable.

The picture of the processing plant changed completely, and through the years the company experimented with freezing broccoli, asparagus, carrots, cauliflower, rhubarb, apples, cranberries and, as Snively says, "A multitude of items not practical."

He added, "We just kept in step with the changing times. Now the vegetable business has outgrown the ice business.

Nevertheless, if you

purchase ice at a vending machine or retail store, chances are it was supplied by Consumers. They sell nearly 14 million pounds per year.

There is an additional branch of the company which is marketing items which are current to the times, and that is Eastern Freeze Dried Corporation. Eastern got underway in 1965, when there was no other freeze dried operation in the east. They now market chives, mushrooms, chicken meat and pharmaceutical supplies. Bowman said, "We package mainly for industrial people who use it for ingredients. It would appear that it is a growing business." Some foods are processed for the back-packing crowd, but as Snively puts it, "It is a very expensive operation."

There is no question that Consumers Packing Company is a growing and integral part of the agricultural community. As Bowman says, "We are definitely growing. Our product lines have expanded and we have more vegetables than ever before. We process 12½ million pounds annually. We are now improving equipment to increase the number of pounds processed daily. We would like to continue to grow but we'd like to grow gradually."

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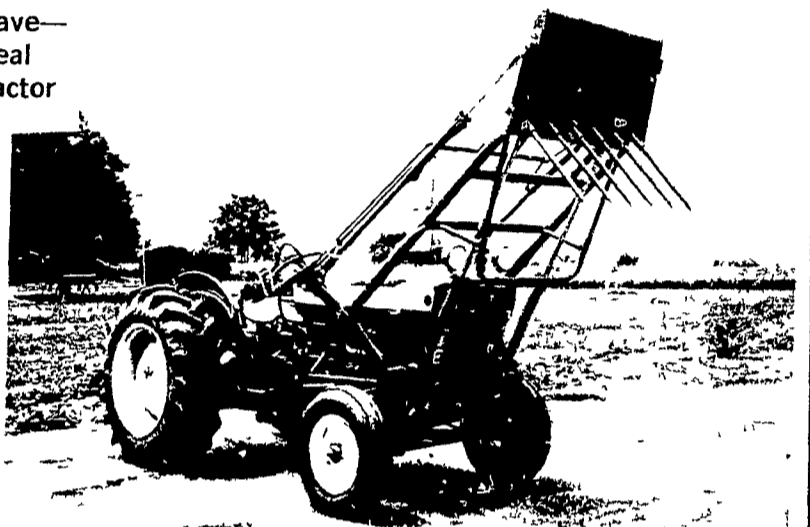


Quality control is an important part of the processing at Consumers. Ruth Lawrence, on the left, checks the packages as they come through the conveyor and Quality Control Supervisor Bertha Nitroy makes a random check.

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