

BY MARGIE FUSCO,  
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**NORTHUMBERLAND** — Although its \$5 million in purchases don't really make it a major force in the state's vegetable market, Furman Foods, Inc., has earned a statewide reputation as a "producer's processor" and a friend of Pennsylvania agriculture.

"Furman is a good outfit to grow for. They realize the growers are the ones who put the tomatoes in the cans," says Joe Anchor, a third-generation farmer. Joe and his father are among the 322 farmers who will do contract growing for Furman Foods, Inc.

In 1984 these farmers, most of whom live within a 50-mile radius of the Northumberland, Pennsylvania, plant, realized \$5 million from 4,312 acres they planted. Nearly two-thirds of the acreage was in tomatoes, with the remainder in peas, snap beans, and peppers.

"Our product starts with the grower," says David Geise, president of the company and third-generation food processor. "What sets us apart from other processors is that we contract for a number of acres, not for a certain volume. We're not going to leave our growers with a large volume in the field. The farmer takes the risk of growing and dealing with the weather. We owe it to them to take the risk in the marketplace. We feel it's a pretty good balance."

Although the bumper tomato crop in 1984 has left the firm with a large surplus of canned tomato products, Geise has no second thoughts about the acreage system. "Last year the grower made out," he says. "Maybe this year will be more to our advantage. We both come out ahead in the long run, and that's what's important."

Geise notes that the company also works to be consistent in its standards for crops. "On a long year, we're not going to change our standards and leave the grower holding produce. We want to put out a consistent, high-quality product," he says, but adds that on short years the firm may lower their standards somewhat to take the produce that's available.

Geise's grandfather, John Wesley Furman, left the blasting powder mines in 1918 and borrowed money to buy a farm in Tuckahoe Valley, now called Northumberland. He worked nights on the railroad and farmed during the day.

When he produced a good tomato crop in 1921, Furman found he couldn't sell it all. Store owners suggested that he can the rest of his crop and sell it for winter.

That first year Furman and his wife processed 360 glass jars of tomatoes on their kitchen stove. The 30 dozen jars sold, and local stores began to ask for more. Soon the J.W. Furman Cannery had grown into an industry and began offering lines of other fresh packed vegetables as well as tomatoes.

In 1944, J.W. Furman turned the business over to two of his sons and two sons-in-law, including David Geise's father Norman. In the next year, the business packed 77,000 cases of produce. In 1969, that number passed the one million mark. Today Furman Foods, Inc., produces three million cases of food with 165 items under 1370 labels.

In 1980, Furman Foods acquired a processing plant in Allentown. "When we bought it, we didn't have a clear idea of where the produce would come from," Geise admits. The produce, it turned out, was in their own backyard.

Ten miles to the north, in Milton, American Home Foods was making a tough economic decision. After years of using locally grown tomatoes in their Chef Boy-ar-dee products, the company was going to shift to the



David Geise in his office, with just a few of the 1,370 labels used by Furman Foods, Inc.

less expensive California market, and drop its local growing program.

Joe Anchor and his father were among the local farmers who were losing out. "We just couldn't compete with the west coast," Joe recalls. After 30 years of tomato-growing, they were looking for a new market when Furman announced it would like to get in-

involved, to supply produce to the new Allentown facility.

In addition to picking up local growers, Furman was able to hire two former American Home Foods field men. Anchor says, "They got two of the best men in the business." He notes that they are very responsive to the farmers' needs.

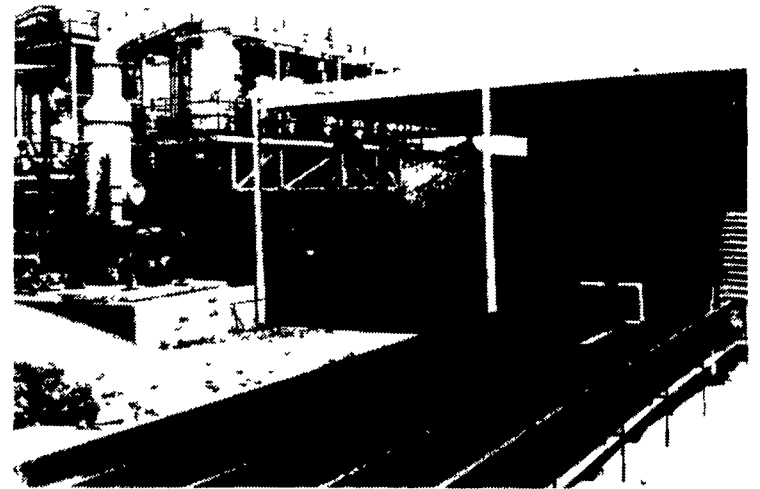
Subsequently, Furman Foods

made the decision to incorporate the Allentown facility into the Northumberland site and undertook a \$9 million expansion. The expansion has included adding two new evaporators, the first in the Eastern United States, that can save 50% of on energy over other cooking methods and can process 90 tons of tomatoes every hour.

The expansion has also allowed

the company to go from four to seven filling lines and has given the firm the capacity to process 106,000 lbs. of food per hour during peak season.

While looking forward, Furman Foods savors its strong ties to the past. It is primarily a family industry, with the fourth generation now coming in. The organization opens every board meeting with a



The receiving area at Furman's -- a new line, soon to receive fresh produce, stands in foreground, while left rear, are two evaporators which process 90 tons of tomatoes an hour during peak season.

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