

Dried onions: Basic ingredient in K-rations

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Some events in a town's history leave a more memorable mark than was ever suspected at the time. Such is the story of Basic Vegetable Products. The original Vacaville location of Basic's operation was a tin shed on the Uhl ranch, where Shock's Furniture Interiors and Longs Drugs are currently situated on Monte Vista Avenue

Basic was to grow from these humble beginnings to become one the world's largest dehydration plants. The company was the vision of William M. Hume of Pasadena, who was favorably impressed by the promise of dehydration, even though previous and existing manufacturers' products weren't popular with the public due to poor flavor and quality.

Hume's partner was J.B. Pardick and together they opened a small onion dehydration operation in Corpus Christi, Texas. The year was 1932.

Disappointingly, it became immediately obvious that the Texas onion was too water-laden for proper dehydration and the operation was abandoned. It was also apparent that dehydration was a bit more complicated than just passing warm air over vegetables.

Still convinced of the potential of dehydration, Hume, his partner, his brother Jack and a chemical engineer set up a research lab in Hume's Pasadena garage. By 1933 they were ready to try a commercial enterprise again.

Their research had been successful. They perfected a process that retained the pungent flavor of onions and garlic, the onion even retaining the "tear" quality which gives it its strong flavor.

The partners also focused on the optimum area for growing a low-moisture onion, and Vacaville was selected.

Hume and Pardick rented Ed Uhl's prune dehydrator during his off-season. With a crew of 15 to 20 employees, Pardick oversaw the processing of 50,000 pounds of onions that first year. Business grew bit by bit and in 1935 the research headquarters in Hume's garage moved to Vacaville.

In June of that year, Martha E. Walters, who had a master's degree in food chemistry from Mills College, was employed to develop methods for quality control and to find the best ways to substitute dehydrated products for fresh in such foods as ketchup, chili sauce, sausages, soups and stews. Her experiments resulted in a product that did not lump as it was previously prone to do.

Despite the partners' success in developing a superior dehydrated product, consumers were reluctant to accept the goods because of the miserable products they had previously been introduced to. Scorched flavors had come to characterize such products. One commercial food packer had to be called on a total of 140 times by a Basic representative before he was convinced of the product's quality.

The product was marketed not only for its quality, but also for its ability to save labor, lower cost and provide uniform taste. Suggested use was for canned goods, such as soups, pork and beans, chili con carne and corned beef hash. It was pointed out that 1 ounce of onion powder was equal to 10 to 15 ounces of fresh onion, and garlic powder had five times the strength of fresh.

The campaign eventually met with success and by 1940, any reluctance to try Basic's dehydrated onions and garlic was history. At this point, the Army stepped in with war business that would be a milestone in Basic's story.

Impressed by food products they had sampled containing Basic's products, the Army called for direct samples, but required "chunks" of onions rather than powder. Basic had been successful with onion chips in grocery stores and sent these to the Army.

The Army readily accepted the Basic Onion and requisitioned all Basic's dried onions for the duration of the war. Mess hall output and K-rationed goods would never look back. Basic's onion products became standard ingredients in the mess halls' soups, stews and hash.

It was an instant hit with the soldiers overseas as it added just the right zip to their K-rations. As one lieutenant in New Guinea noted: "It is possible to use (dried onions) for lunch and dinner on canned sausages, meat, stew, etc., and no matter how bad the stuff is, it always tastes good with the onions."

It was at this juncture, 1940, that Basic left the Uhl ranch and set up a bigger operation in the Vacaville Fruit Growers' old facilities on Stevenson Street. Basic now employed 1,000 people and was producing many millions of pounds of product per year. Jobs at the new plant were advertised offering 48 hours work during the onion season and 40 hours off season. The company maintained bus service to and from the surrounding areas: from as far as Sacramento (\$6 for 30 trips) and from Vallejo in the other

direction.

Enticements for jobs at Basic were good pay, being centrally located, country living, homes and dormitories, and a safe, clean plant. A company cafeteria was open 24 hours a day.

Employees were required to don uniforms to maintain the sanitary conditions the plant promoted. Women wore dark blue dresses and blue caps, both with white accents. Men wore striped overalls, blue shirts and white caps.

Not only did the Basic onion serve to liven up the American troops' food supplies, but through the Lend-Lease government program it became a staple ingredient for the Allies.

During the war, many tried to jump on the bandwagon and dry vegetables commercially, but the results were always crude. Unlike Basic, they did not research methods for preparing the vegetables, removing moisture and packaging and storing properly.

Basic's big moment in time came at 3 p.m. March 3, 1944, at the company's plant headquarters, when Hume and other company officials were presented the coveted Army-Navy "E" flag, Uncle Sam's highest production award. It was given to Basic for outstanding performance producing supplies for the troops: Basic had dried 63 million pounds of onions in a year for the Army.

The flag was presented by Col. A.W. Stanley, director of procurement, California Quartermaster Depot of Oakland. Employees were awarded "E" pins.

The event was widely heralded in The Reporter as "one of the most memorable days in Vacaville's history." Businesses in town shut down for the day. The event was broadcast live over the McClatchy chain of radio stations.

That flag was proudly incorporated into the logo of Basic Vegetable Products Co.

On July 17, 1945, just after V-J Day, the "freeze order" by the Army was terminated on Basic's products, and Basic once again began an advertising campaign aimed at the civilian market. With the prestigious "E" flag, the company had a new image to flaunt.

Business boomed! Basic was running 24 hours a day, processing 400,000 pounds of onions daily. Basic's products were in such high demand that its postwar production almost matched the high volume it had been producing for the Army.

Basic Vegetable Products Co. was a major contributor for years to Vacaville's economic, social and cultural heritage. Many employees retired after decades of service. Often, members of the same family worked for the company, like Dolores Lopez's family.

Dolores, like many Basic employees, kept an ongoing scrapbook commemorating company picnics and parties and logging numerous news clippings about company leaders, events and issues.

For the outsider, passing by Vacaville meant a few miles of the strong odor of onion permeating the air. But for the residents of the town and surrounding area, it was truly the "sweet smell of success."

The company, which eventually became Basic American Foods Inc., closed its Vacaville dehydrator in 1986 and its local office in the spring of 1994. Its contribution to the town's history lives on, however, in the name of the annual September celebration: The Onion Festival.

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