Production of White-Potato Starch

R. H. Treadway, W. W. Howerton

Starch from white potatoes was first produced in the United States in 1831 in a plant at Antrim, N. H. The industry grew rapidly. By 1880, more than 150 factories were operating in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota.

In some States, particularly Maine, varieties of potatoes were grown specifically for starch. They were not of high quality for cooking, but contained much more starch than the common varieties now grown. The practice of growing different types of potatoes for eating and for nonfood uses still is followed in the Netherlands and Germany.

Late in the nineteenth century the industry began to lose its strong position to cornstarch, which could be manufactured to sell at a lower price. Potato starch then became one of the specialty starches, which it still is.

Several points account for the lower cost of cornstarch. Although the acre yields of starch from potatoes and corn are comparable, corn is better adapted to mechanized methods of farming, which lower production costs. Corn dries out on the cob to a moisture content of 12 to 15 percent; in that condition it can be shelled, easily transported, and stored indefinitely before processing. Potatoes contain about 80 percent moisture, which means added bulk and weight in transportation, and they are so perishable that they require special methods of storage. The ease of storage of corn has made it possible to build large factories, which can process the raw material throughout the year, but potato-starch factories operate ordinarily only about 8 months of the year, from October through May. Valuable byproducts in corn wet milling (oil and gluten feed, for example) aid materially in making the industry profitable. The potato-starch industry has no byproduct except the extracted pulp, which a few manufacturers recover and sell as feed.

The higher cost of making potato starch affected the industry greatly. By 1900 the number of potato-starch plants had fallen from more than 150 to 63. Moreover, the industry tended to be concentrated in Aroostook County, Maine; 45 of the 63 factories were there. Aroostook County became a center for production of table-stock and seed potatoes, and the starch industry provided an outlet for the culls. In 1920, the twenty-odd factories in Maine had a daily capacity of less than 75 tons of starch. In 1940, Aroostook County had 27 starch factories, whose total daily capacity was more than 150 tons of starch. This greatly increased capacity was due mainly to construction of three modern continuous-process plants in 1938 and 1939. Now, 20 potato-starch factories in Maine have a capacity of about 135 tons a day.

In 1941, two plants were built in Idaho—one at Blackfoot and one at Twin Falls. The Twin Falls plant was rebuilt on a larger scale in 1948. A third plant was built in 1942 at St. Anthony. Another was established at Menan in 1944, but was later moved to Idaho Falls. With the construction of another plant at Idaho Falls and conversion of a glucose-sirup plant at Jerome to starch manufacture in 1948, Idaho now has six potato-starch fac-
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The production of white-potato starch in the United States has a total capacity of about 140 tons a day. The country's total capacity for potato-starch production, therefore, is now approximately 275 tons a day, or 110 million pounds for a 200-day operating year. Because the industry uses cull and surplus potatoes, the supply of raw material is not constant, and the industry rarely if ever operates at capacity for as much as 200 days a year.

About 98 percent of the starch we produce is made from corn. Nearly two-thirds of the total cornstarch produced, however, is used for manufacture of glucose sirup, dextrose, and modified starches. About 90 percent of the starch used as such in the United States, or 1,389 million pounds a year, is cornstarch. The maximum production of the potato-starch industry is believed to be approximately 89 million pounds, attained in the 1946-47 season, when Maine produced an estimated 44 million pounds and Idaho 45 million pounds. The average production in recent years has been somewhat below that record.

Potato starch is used in industry in about the following percentages: Textiles, 30; foods, 20; paper, 20; dextrins, 15; confectionery, 5; and miscellaneous, 10.

The textile industry uses potato starch mainly in sizing cotton warps, but some also for sizing spun rayon and worsted warps. Potato-starch pastes revert slowly to the gel state upon cooling and thus penetrate better into the interstices of the warp than do pastes of some other starches. Better penetration results in a better anchored film, which protects the warp from abrasion in the loom. Potato starch is outstanding in the strength it imparts to paper in beater sizing. Potato dextrins give relatively flexible films, which resist checking and remoisten readily.

The size, structure, and shape of the starch granules have undergone scrutiny by technicians using the optical microscope. The molecular arrangement has been studied in detail by X-ray specialists. The structure of the granules has been further explored with the electron microscope. The molecular weight of potato-starch fractions have been determined with specially designed light-scattering equipment.

Factors influencing the paste consistency and gel firmness of potato starch have been investigated at length. Although it has long been known that the presence of calcium lowers the consistency of pastes, workers in the Eastern Laboratory found that even traces of calcium have a pronounced effect. So sensitive is the paste consistency to minute amounts of calcium that changes in the hardness of processing water from season to season result in changes in the final product, previously unexplained.

Little by little the fundamental causes for the unique properties of potato starch—its large granule size, its relatively high molecular weight, and the peculiar packing of matter in its molecule—are being unfolded. Research on technical applications will follow the fundamental studies. The largest potential fields of expansion appear to be in the paper and food industries.

Apparently it is not economical now for American farmers to grow potatoes just for industrial use. Starch manufacture, however, is to be regarded as an integral part of a well-organized potato industry, which markets its best potatoes for eating and processes the substandard grades. Marketing agreements in the potato industry are leading to these practices now more than
ever before. Starch factories provide an outlet for potatoes that should be kept off the food market in order to make effective the slogan, “Sell the best—and process the rest.” The higher price that the public will pay for uniformly high-quality potatoes should make it possible to place a lower value on substandard potatoes diverted to industrial processing.

In our more modern potato-starch factories, the operations are essentially continuous. A typical Maine factory can produce about 10 tons of starch in a 24-hour day, for which it will use 80 to 90 tons of potatoes. An analysis of the potatoes processed shows these components, in percentages: Starch 13; protein, 2; cellulose material, 1.5; sugars, 0.5; mineral (ash), 1; miscellaneous minor constituents, 1; water, 81. (Potatoes received by the Idaho starch plants average 15 or 16 percent starch.)

Storage facilities in the factory can handle as much as 4,000 barrels, each weighing 165 pounds, of potatoes.

A description of the process used by one of the modern plants is given here, but we must stress that the equipment and methods used in other modern factories may differ in some respects from the one we describe.

The potatoes to be processed are removed from storage by a flume to a conveyor, which dumps them into a washing trough where they are tumbled in water to free them of dirt. The potatoes are then elevated to a hopper and metered through a screw conveyor to a rasp, which reduces them to a slurry. The slurry is diluted with water containing sulfur dioxide and is pumped to a screening battery, in which most of the cellulose material, or pulp, is separated from the starch granules. The screening battery has a series of screens and sieves, one mounted above the other in this order: Shaker screen, bottom rotary brush sieve, top shaker screen, and top rotary brush sieve.

The potato slurry from the rasp is pumped onto the bottom sieve, which has perforated holes 0.03 inch in diameter. Here the starch milk (primarily starch granules suspended in water) passes through, and the pulp discharges over the end of the sieve. The pulp is diluted with water and passes into an attrition—or disc—mill for further grinding-rubbing to release more starch. The mill has two carborundum-type plates mounted closely together, one of which rotates. The starch milk, along with finely divided pulp from the bottom sieve, falls onto the bottom 80-mesh shaker screen. The starch milk runs through, and most of the fine pulp drops off the end of the screen and is combined with the reground pulp from the attrition mill. The combined pulp is pumped to the top sieve (which has perforated holes 0.02 inch in diameter) and is washed with a spray of water. The fine pulp and starch milk pass through the sieve and drop onto the top 100-mesh shaker screen. The starch milk continues through to the bottom shaker screen, and the fine pulp from the top shaker screen and the coarse pulp from the top sieve combine and are discharged to the sewer.

The starch milk from the screening battery—that is, the starch milk through the bottom shaker screen—goes to a continuous centrifuge, where the protein water is removed from the starch and discarded to the sewer. The protein water contains about 1 percent total solids, which comprise mainly soluble protein, with some fine starch and fine pulp. The starch from the separator is diluted with water and pumped to a 120-mesh shaker screen, where more fine pulp is removed. The starch milk then passes to starch tables for final purification. At that stage, the starch settles on the tables, and any residual fine pulp passes off the end. The tables are about 40 feet long, with a slope of about one-thirty-second inch to the foot. They fill up in about 4 hours. The starch cake from the tables is shoveled into a conveyor, where it is diluted with water; then it flows into a storage tank or pit. The density of the
starch milk is adjusted in a make-up tank. Then the milk is fed to a continuous rotary vacuum filter, which dewatered the starch to about 40 percent moisture and delivers it as a broken cake to a continuous-belt, hot-air drier. The pieces of starch cake, dried to a moisture content of about 16 percent, are transferred to a pulverizer, where they are reduced to a powder. The starch is loaded into 200-pound, kraft-lined burlap bags.

The finished starch typically has the following composition in percentages on a moisture-free basis: Starch, 98; ash, 0.3; and cold-water solubles, 0.1. It has traces of nitrogen and sugars.

The disposal of waste materials from starch factories remains a problem. It is becoming more acute, particularly since Federal and State regulations on stream pollution have become more stringent. A factory that produces 10 tons of starch a day discharges about 4,500 pounds of waste pulp solids and 6,500 pounds of protein water solids during that period. The pulp contains about 4 percent solids.

Analysis of a sample of dried waste pulp showed the following percentage composition: Moisture, 4.5; starch, 54.6; uronic acid anhydride, 16; pectin, 12; pentosans, 9.5; crude fiber, 15.6; ash, 1.0; fat, 0.4; protein, 5.9; sugars, a trace. (The total is more than 100 percent, probably because of overlapping in the uronic acid anhydride, pectin, and pentosan determinations.)

The following procedure is suggested for recovery of the waste pulp; it is based on experience in recovering pulp from 2 million pounds of potatoes and on German technical processes:

The pulp would first be discharged into a tank and mixed with lime. The limed pulp would be partly dewatered on a vibrating screen, further dewatered by passage through continuous rotary presses, and then dried in a steam-tube rotary drier.

Wet waste potato pulp is frequently used as hog feed in Europe, and has been so used in the United States. The dried pulp has also been fed to livestock, usually mixed with a high-protein feed.

The protein water from a potato-starch factory contains about 1 percent total solids—about 0.6 percent protein, 0.1 percent starch, and the remainder principally fiber and sugars. No economical method is known for recovery of the solids from protein water because of the great dilution.

R. K. Eskew, of the Eastern Laboratory, made a survey of potato-starch processing in Europe in the summer of 1947. He reported that protein is recovered in starch factories, particularly in Germany, by diluting the potato slurry, immediately after the initial grinding, and passing it through a Jahn or Uhland continuous centrifugal separator to recover the protein solution in more concentrated form than ordinary “protein water.” The protein is then coagulated by heat or chemicals, dewatered, and dried. Protein water is also reported to have been concentrated under vacuum at 113° F. to 48 percent solids and then dried in admixture with dewatered pulp. During periods of protein shortage, potato protein has been recovered in Germany for enrichment of soups.

Apparently an economical method, used in some European countries, for preventing stream contamination with waste protein water is to spray the effluent on fields after the potatoes have been harvested. Some benefit is gained through action of the effluent water as a fertilizer.

A pilot plant has been set up in the Eastern Laboratory for studying the technology of manufacturing white-potato starch in order to develop practical methods of improving quality, increasing starch yields, simplifying operations, and recovering waste materials. To provide a background for planning the plant, we studied processing operations in the factories in Maine and Idaho.

We have not had time to study com-
pletely the operations and make recommendations for best processing methods. Grinding the potatoes is one operation that we began to study in 1950. We are experimenting with several types of grinding machines to determine which will release the most starch without excessive power consumption and excessive production of fine pulp. The fine pulp is objectionable, because it goes through the screens with the starch milk during subsequent screening operations, making purification of the milk more difficult.

Preliminary experiments have shown that a vertical-type hammer mill is about equivalent to a rasp in releasing starch. If this is confirmed in further experiments, it will be advantageous—the hammer mill is commercially available, whereas the rasp is not. (Some of the starch factories now use vertical-type hammer mills.)

In current operations, about 10 percent of the starch present in the potato remains in the waste pulp, because it has not been freed in the grinding. On the dry basis, the starch ordinarily constitutes about 45 percent of the weight of the waste pulp. We will try to reduce the amount of starch that goes to waste by further study of the grinding operations.

Screening is another important operation in the starch process under investigation. Experiments have shown that the purity of the starch milk at that stage is appreciably improved by using finer mesh screens for separating the pulp than are now generally used.

These are only two of the phases of starch manufacturing under investigation. Other studies are planned. One has to do with the recovery of waste materials. Even though the potato-starch industry is old, we believe that opportunities exist for improving the engineering aspects of the processing. Because it is an industry of many small manufacturers, the companies themselves have not had adequate technical staffs to undertake such research and development. By thorough modernization along lines that will give high-quality starch in maximum yield, the starch manufacturer should continue to serve as an important adjunct to the table-stock potato industry and to supply consumers who demand the special properties of potato starch.

R. H. Treadway was born in Indiana and did undergraduate and graduate work at Indiana University. From 1936 to 1941 he was engaged in chemical research with the E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. and the A. E. Staley Manufacturing Co. Since 1941, Dr. Treadway has been employed as a chemist in the carbohydrate division of the Eastern Laboratory.

W. W. Howerton is a native of North Carolina and is a graduate in chemical engineering of the Georgia Institute of Technology. From 1936 to 1941 he was employed by Swann & Co. and Joseph E. Seagram & Sons in research and production work. During the early part of the war he engaged in chemical warfare development with the Chemical Corps. Since 1942 he has been employed as a chemical engineer at the Eastern Laboratory, where he has worked on process development of natural and synthetic rubbers and potato starch.

After a fire in a Dublin, Ireland, textile mill many years ago, it was noticed that the starch stored there for sizing purposes had turned brown, but that its usefulness as an adhesive had greatly increased. The roasted starch, unlike the original material, was soluble in cold water and could be made into a paste of high solids concentration. Today, more than 150 million pounds of dextrins, or roasted starches, are produced annually in the United States for use on postage stamps, envelope flaps, and gummed paper.—I. A. Wolff, Northern Regional Research Laboratory.
LOUIS LUMIÈRE in 1904 made the first successful color screen for the unit process of color photography. Mixing dyed starch grains in the ratio of four green to three red to one blue, he dusted them on a glass plate at the rate of approximately 147,000 to the square inch. The space between the grains he filled with a fine powder, such as carbon black. Over all he then spread a thin layer of photographic emulsion, thus producing a color-sensitive photographic plate. Lumiére’s method with its starch screen was widely used until it was replaced by the subtractive process—a modern method of recording color.—L. J. Gundrum, Northern Regional Research Laboratory.

DISEASE-PRODUCING BACTERIA that are resistant to antibiotic drugs have not developed to the extent once predicted. Resistant forms do occasionally arise, however, as with penicillin and more frequently with streptomycin. Some bacterial forms have literally acquired a taste for streptomycin and will not grow in the absence of that drug. Professors Miller and Bohnhoff, of the University of Chicago, first experienced this change in a meningococcus variant, type B. Other workers have since isolated several bacterial types which require streptomycin for growth. Theoretically, these streptomycin-requiring organisms are interesting from the standpoint of their metabolism; practically, they can be used to determine quickly whether an unknown Streptomyces is producing streptomycin or some other antibiotic.—Robert G. Benedict, Northern Region Research Laboratory.

THE LATE Dr. A. J. Pieters of the Department of Agriculture told me in 1923 how the first packet of Korean lespedeza seed was almost discarded. The seed came with a letter from the Rev. Ralph G. Mills of Seoul, Korea. The letter stated the plants resembled Medicago sativa, the botanical name for alfalfa. Probably because of this statement the packet of seed went to R. A. Oakley, who was handling the Department’s alfalfa work. He routed it to Dr. Pieters, who had taken over the lespedeza investigations. The statement that lespedeza plants resembled alfalfa raised a doubt in Dr. Pieters’ mind about the judgment of the seed collector. He held the seed about a year before he decided to plant them. A superior new species of annual lespedeza of multimillion-dollar value to the farmers of this country started with this planting. The time element of this story checks with the recorded introduction in 1919 and the first planting in 1921.—Paul Tabor, Soil Conservation Service, Spartanburg, S. C.

SORGHUM to many people means a crop used for making molasses. But that use accounts for only about 1 percent of the domestic acreage, and less than 0.05 percent of the world acreage in this crop. The importance of sorghum for food, feed grain, and forage, as well as for various industrial uses, is not generally known. And the same holds true for flax. Every schoolboy learns that linen is made from flax. Relatively few people know that less than 0.05 percent of the American flax crop, and less than 20 percent of the world flax crop, is for making linen. Most of the acreage is seed flax grown for the manufacture of linseed oil and linseed cake.—John H. Martin, Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils and Agricultural Engineering.
The growing development of organic raw materials for the use of industry in war and peace intensifies the need for conserving the soil and water that produce them. Efficient land use will support this development; continued waste of soil and water would retard and weaken it.

This country's remaining productive land is called on to meet twin pressures: Steadily growing population to be fed and rapidly increasing use of farm-produced raw materials in manufacturing. The land-produced materials of industry include crops grown specifically for that purpose and for other purposes. Most of them cannot be returned to the land to renew the productivity.

Regardless of its end use, any crop requires so much land and so much soil fertility to produce it. Our acreage of good productive land is limited. Approximately 460 million acres of this good land can be considered available for continued safe cultivation. It includes about 70 million acres not yet in use but which can be developed for cultivation. It excludes some 70 to 100 million acres, which now is in use but is not suitable for cultivation. All but about 100 million acres of this 460 million acres must be protected from erosion and waterlogging.

Clearly, then, the more we draw on this fixed acreage of good, productive land for food, industrial raw materials, and so on for our growing population, the more necessary becomes the permanent maintenance of that land's producing ability.

Of particular concern from the standpoint of national defense, in which productive land is so vital, is the fact that we cannot stockpile soil as we can metals and other essentials. Neither can we replenish wasted soil by digging a new supply up out of the earth or shipping it in from other countries.

Productive land, unlike other natural resources, is characterized by the element of life—fruitfulness—placed by nature in the thin mantle of productive soil occurring over a limited portion of the earth's surface. We must maintain the productiveness of the land while we use it.

By the same token, water conservation becomes of increasing importance on farm lands and pasture lands and in forests. That calls for planning ahead for watershed protection for all new installations, including processing and manufacturing plants located within reach of land-produced raw materials. The conservation measures that control soil erosion and other damage to the land also help prevent wasteful run-off of rain and snow water. They lessen flood damage, silting up of power and other reservoirs, and water shortages affecting key manufacturing plants and urban interests.

The first requirement is to look at the land and the way it is being used, from the standpoint of both soil and water wastage—or better, soil and water conservation. Such an inventory shows the productive capabilities of the land, as based on such interrelated factors as soil, slope, past erosion, and susceptibility to future erosion and run-off. Thus we establish the only sound base for treatment and use of each kind of land for its continued safe and economical utilization, whether that be for food or industrial crops, pasture, timber, or wildlife.

Future use of industrial raw materials produced from the soil unquestionably will increase, not decrease. Soil and water conservation is the natural teammate for this development in progressive American agriculture. It increases yields, protects the land, conserves water, and reduces siltation of streams, ditches, harbors, and reservoirs.—H. H. Bennett, Soil Conservation Service.