

House of Raeford

It's a lot more than turkeys

by Lee Harris Potter

Most Hoke County residents are aware that the House of Raeford is one of the state's largest turkey processing plants.

However, many may not know that the Raeford plant is only a part of a larger poultry business owned by the Johnson family, which has helped North Carolina lead the nation in turkey production.

In addition to the House of Raeford plant, the Johnsons own turkey and chicken hatcheries, breeder farms, a turkey breeding research facility in Garland, two grain elevators, and a rendering plant called Eastern Byproducts in Rose Hill.

Turkey processing has become extremely efficient.

Parts considered inedible by humans are ground up and put back into the turkey feed or sold to Purina.

Even the feathers are cooked and squeezed for their oil which is sold to cosmetic manufacturers because it dissolves at low heat and is therefore a good lipstick base.

Of the 30 million turkeys grown in North Carolina annually, 10 million are sent out of state for processing.

House of Raeford processes 40% of the remaining turkeys, and its competitors, Swift & Co. in Wallace, Carolina Turkeys in Mt. Olive, and Cuddy Foods in Monroe take care of the rest.

Marvin Johnson, president and owner of House of Raeford, got into the turkey business when his mother successfully raised a few birds on their farm in Duplin County. Like many American farm families, they bought their first incubator from Sears Roebuck Co.

Johnson's father, Nash Johnson, and brother, Bizzell Johnson, gradually switched from tobacco and strawberry farming to raising turkeys.

"House of Raeford started out as an old freezer-locker in about 1958," said Marvin Johnson. "Then it was made into a turkey plant and leased to Priebe & Sons from Chicago. They went broke in 1961."

In 1962 the Johnsons, together with the Stones from Lumberton, the Murrays from Mt. Olive, and the Evans from Laurinburg, bought the turkey plant from bankruptcy court.

The plant has grown from 250 employees to over 900.

By 1978 the Johnsons had bought out their three partners, and last year Marvin Johnson bought his brother's interest.

Ed Manning has been with the

company since 1962 and managed the plant with Leonard Froehm, who retired in 1974.

When the plant first opened only 5,000 to 6,000 turkeys could be processed a day because the freezers would only hold 30,000 pounds.

"By 1974 we were processing 2.5 million pounds a week. Now we're up to 4 million pounds a week," Manning said.

North Carolina is now leading the country in turkey production with Minnesota and California close behind. Within our state Duplin County has the biggest turkey population, but Sampson and Wayne counties are two other big producers in eastern North Carolina.

Before 1960 South Carolina produced more turkeys than North Carolina. During the 1950's farmers would grow from 2,000 to 5,000 turkeys for one time of year, the holidays, Manning said.

When farmers like the Johnsons began year-round production with more efficient feeding, breeding and farm management techniques, the small-time turkey producers were squeezed out of the market.

Many of the turkeys processed at the Raeford plant are grown on the Johnson breeding farms, but the company also employs contract growers to whom they supply the poults (baby turkeys) and the feed.

Geneticists at the Johnson turkey breeding research facility have developed a new breed of turkey which is, not surprisingly, called the "Johnson Great White Turkey." The company expects to develop a substantial market for this bird among the commercial poultry growers.

The House of Raeford was the first company on the East Coast to market fresh chill-packed turkeys in addition to frozen birds, thereby allowing small retailers to compete with chain food stores.

"Right now at holidays you rarely find someone in retailing business who wouldn't lose money on frozen poultry," said Manning.

House of Raeford is noted for diversifying turkey products. Besides regular whole turkeys, the plant produces turkey ham, bologna, hot dogs, sausage, nuggets, ground turkey, and even turkey cube steak.

Brenda Branch, food service deli sales manager, said customers are buying more turkey now because it is available in so many forms and is more nutritious and less expensive than other meats.

"In the last five years, House of Raeford really has been recognized as a big brand name in the industry," she said.

The food-service market, which includes hospitals, schools and nursing homes, is larger than the retail market for cooked turkey products. Retail buyers for large food chains also tend to be less dependable customers because they will switch to another product for a small amount of money.

House of Raeford is one of the few turkey plants in America approved by the Common Market sanitation inspectors to export processed meat to Europe.

Common Market inspection of American factories is more rigorous than its inspection of European factories because of protectionists attitudes, Manning said.

Even so, the House of Raeford has maintained a strong German franchise for the past 20 years which has purchased as much as 15 million pounds of processed turkey a year.

But European sales have declined recently due to the fluctuation of the dollar on the international money market.

House of Raeford was recently rated by *Turkey World* magazine the ninth largest turkey plant in the country with 145 million liveweight pounds of turkey processed compared to the largest turkey plant, Louis Rich Foods in California with 335 million liveweight pounds.

Workers at House of Raeford only kill turkeys on one shift although they process and pack the birds on two shifts. The entire operation is confined to a single plant, and so the magazine statistic compares House of Raeford favorably to large companies with several plants working three shifts.

The company was also recognized by *Consumer Reports* in 1981 and 1982 as producing the number one raw turkey breast in the country.

In spite of careful scheduling, the holiday months are very hectic at the turkey plant. But during January and February the pace slows down to three- and four-day weeks, Mrs. Branch said.

The slow months pose no problems for the 42 salaried employees, but it is a difficult time for the plant workers who are paid hourly, and many of them must draw unemployment.

The company is trying to raise the hourly pay because it is not much above the minimum wage, Mrs. Branch said.

Although the House of Raeford is an expanding business, the publicity from the North Carolina Turkey Festival certainly didn't hurt.

The festival generated some new turkey customers, Mrs. Branch said.



Plant worker Onedia Pebia cleans gizzards to prepare them for packaging.



From the Raeford storage plant shown here in this 1962 photograph, the Johnson family has built one of the largest turkey industries in the country. House

of Raeford now employs about 900 workers and is ranked in the top 10 in production in the nation.



House of Raeford owner, Marvin Johnson, (left), jokes with an employee during his rounds of the plant last week.



Whole turkeys are processed for holiday dining.



Production manager, Ed Manning, chats with Roscoe McCollum, who heads up the packing and cutting department.