

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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THE HOME OF FOOD RESEARCH

"The onion strong, the parsnip sweet,
The twining bean, the ruddy beet;
Yea, all the garden brings to light
Speak it a landscape of delight."

The exterior view here shows Birds Eye Sniders main laboratories which were located on South Main Street in Albion. In 1942 the Snider Canning Company bought this, the former Cornell residence, converted it into a laboratory and built a greenhouse and pilot plant in back. In 1945, ten years after the Snider Company joined General Foods, the laboratories were enlarged and a second greenhouse was built. Within this addition could be found a larger pilot plant, a soils laboratory, two analytic laboratories, a low temperature storeroom and a test kitchen. A process room, science library and photographic dark room were also included in these facilities.

The purpose of all was to research and develop whole series of new products for Birds Eye - Snider. At the time Sniders also operated a canning company in Albion which was later run by Hunts. After Sniders left the area Birds Eye continued their operation of the laboratories until 1962. There were almost forty food technologists, chemists, horticulturists, bacteriologists, engineers and laboratory technicians who made up this research staff. Work at this facility came under the direction of Dr. Kenneth Dykstra and

Walter Enzie. Dr. Dykstra supervised all the laboratory work dealing with products and ways of making them while Mr. Enzie was responsible for improving the raw materials which went into the products. Incidentally, the first major commercial preservation of food in sanitary cans was in 1898 and the first successful attempt of freezing peas by Clarence Birdseye was in 1929. Nearly seventy percent of the work which was done at the laboratory was concerned with frozen foods. Research on developing frozen orange juice began in 1930 but Birds Eye's frozen orange juice concentrate was not introduced on the market until around twenty years later after thorough research had been completed in the product. This was how the bacteriological laboratory entered the picture. In any work dealing with the preservation of food constant checks must be made of its microscopic contents. In the Birds Eye test kitchen new formulas in food were tested under conditions similar to those prevailing in a home and evaluated from a consumer's point of view. Frequently other established products were checked and compared with the Birds Eye competitors.

The Birds Eye Lab continued a pilot plant which was an exact duplicate of a regular food processing plant but on a smaller scale. This allowed the food experts to test new products and get the "bugs" ironed out without tying up an actual production line. This also gave the engineers time to develop new production line equipment necessary for the new products. When a new product was finally ready for tasting a "cutting bee" was held where various food experts and technologists gathered to taste-test.

Aside from the operation of the laboratory in Albion, Birds Eye-Snider also maintained a 106 acre experimental farm on County House Road where horticultural research took place. Between this farm and the green houses new seed stock and new varieties, breeding new crops were developed. Nearly fifty percent of the time and labor was spent on plant breeding. About ninety percent of the produce purchased by Birds Eye-Snider was supplied by growers who first contracted to furnish their produce using seed evaluated and supplied by Birds Eye. Before any stocks were released, samples were grown in the experimental farm and examined for yield, plant vigor, trueness to type and incidence of impurities.

When Birds Eye decided in 1962 to relocate its laboratories elsewhere, several of their former employees decided to establish the Albion Laboratory. It was operated by William Falcon shown at the right in the lower picture. At the time this photo was taken, they were actually processing dried cabbage on a production line. Albion Lab had a contract for supplying many of the State's institutions with cole slaw. A number of Albion residents invested in this food processing venture but competition was keen and the Albion Lab closed in 1965. This building was later demolished for the Rite Aid store and parking lot.