

# Tomato canning history in Dubois County

BY CASEY UEDELHOR

Staff Writer ■ [freporter@psci.net](mailto:freporter@psci.net)

Indiana is most famous for what five things? A Hoosier's answer might include the Indy 500, bedrock, the boyhood home of President Abraham Lincoln, pharmaceutical innovation, and tomatoes.

Tomatoes!?! Local residents might balk at the answer. *Don't you mean corn?*

While the Hoosier state certainly boasts its share of corn and soybean production, Indiana processes more tomatoes than any state in the nation besides California.

Second in the nation for tomato processing — that's pretty impressive — and while these days most tomatoes are grown and processed in the northern region, southern Indiana certainly contributed to the state's lasting tomato legacy. Plenty of Dubois County residents remember the part their families played in the growing, picking, cleaning and canning of Indiana tomatoes. This article aims to document that history.

## THANK THE RAIL-SPLITTER

Some might say Indiana's tomato story begins in the midst of the American Civil War, specifically on May 15, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln established an independent Department of Agriculture (USDA), separating agricultural concerns from the Department of the Interior. He envisioned a nation of self-sufficient, educated citizens and particularly aimed to bring agricultural and mechanical education to rural Americans.

Beginning with agricultural advancement, Lincoln sought to obliterate antiquated societal modes which separated 'the laborer' and 'the educated.'

"Population must increase rapidly," said Lincoln, "more rapidly than in former times — and ere long the most valuable of all arts will be the art of deriving a comfortable subsistence from the smallest area of soil. No community whose every member possesses this art can ever be the victim of oppression in any of its forms."

Later that year, July 2, 1862, President Lincoln augmented the formation of the USDA by signing the Morrill Act, granting states federally controlled land. Through sale of the

granted land, states acquired funding used to establish and endow land-grant colleges. Indiana accepted provisions of the act on March 6, 1865. Purdue University, designated 1869 and opened 1874, is a result.

In 1914, the US adopted the already successful European practice of agricultural extension. The USDA and land-grant colleges formed extension partnerships, and today

Purdue Extension offices are present in all Indiana counties. Through extension services, rural communities are educated on scientific and technological agricultural advancement, which may include homemaking, health, marketing and business education.

Extension offices worked quickly to make rural farming and homemaking more efficient. (The progressive efforts not only had long-lasting cultural effects, they were immediately necessary to relieve suffering during the Great Depression.) Farm co-op formation was a large part of early extension outreach. Through the co-op system, rural farmers pooled resources and crop, enabling them to compete in advanced and urban markets, thereby gleaming higher profits.

Among others, tomato canning co-ops formed in Dubois County as early as 1925. It is reasonable to infer that tomatoes were

brought through the extension to the southern area of the state as a viable cash crop because the fruit is hardy and easy to grow in the sandy, glacially deposited soil of the north.

Also in 1914, the newly formed Cooperative Extension Service of the USDA united the efforts of rural "tomato growers clubs" and "corn growers clubs" by creating the national 4-H system. The fact is important to this story, because in 1935, 4-H clubs in Dubois County began to involve youngsters in the tomato canning process. 4-H involvement led to an article called, "Canning Crops," in the 1935

Purdue Extension Narrative Report for Dubois County, compiled by then County Agent Nicholson. This county agent is almost solely responsible for the preservation of Dubois County's early agricultural history. In fact, without his thorough documentation, this article might not be possible.

## LOCAL SPECIFICS

Nicholson's 1935 report shows eight canneries in the county, including these five fully incorporated co-ops:

- Morning Star 4-H Club Co-op Canning Co., Inc., new in 1935, rested along Santine Road just off Celestine Road, Hwy 164. Some Morning Star labels read, "4-H Club Brand."
- Patoka Springs Co-operative Marketing Association's labels read, "Chief Patoka." The plant likely rested along Jasper's Truman Road and was also new in 1935.
- Break O'day Co-operative Canning Co., Jasper, (locally referred to as the Hochgesang cannery) rested along Hwy 162 just outside of town and close to what is now Dubois County LP Gas, Inc. The folks at LP estimate that the Break O'day building was torn down and replaced in the mid 1980s.
- The Daniel Boone Co-op Canning Co. Inc. sat on the east side of North Portersville Road just before it turns into Main Street. According to Purdue Extension Educator of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Ken Eck, the building stood until 2016, when it was demolished. The cannery labels read, "Dee-Bee Brand." A letter from Mr. Wm. Baker of the Daniel Boone company states that in 1943, 235 employees were on the cannery's payroll for the season. Those employees packed 38,000 cases.
- Shamrock Canning Co., Inc., labeled their tomatoes as "Ireland Brand." The plant, a two-story barn, is still in tact and is now part of Neuhoff & Wagner Builders Supply, 5937 W 150N, Ireland.

C. A. Nicholson's 1935 report also lists three partial cooperatives:

- Blessinger Milling & Packing Corporation operated where Big O' Tires, 642 3rd Ave., Jasper, is today. Blessinger labels reading

"Du Boy Brand" and showing a picture of a happy fellow holding an enormous red specimen were designed by Mary Heichelbech, a family member. Other produce like beans and corn were canned at the Blessinger plant and labeled as "Dubois County Cannery" product. The cannery

opened in 1925 on the property of Leo Blessinger.

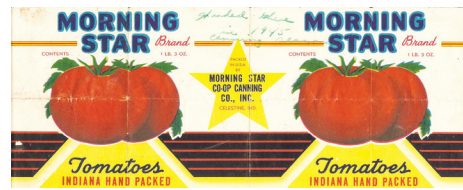
• Bretzville Co-op Canning Co. packaged their tomatoes as "Twin Beauty Brand." The cannery was located on the spot where Bretzville Tire and Accessories rests today, 3991 E Hwy 64, St Anthony.

• A second cannery in St. Anthony is commonly referred to as "the St. Anthony Cannery," and is listed as such in C. A. Nicholson's 1935 report. Though several residents of St. Anthony were consulted, the look and printing of the St. Anthony labels is now unremembered. Neither an original label nor a photocopy could be found at time of press. (Anyone with a photograph, copy or original label from the St. Anthony cannery, may contact this publication for future printing.) It is known that the cannery opened in 1925 and that Fr. Clemens was instrumental in its organization. The site of the cannery well (now covered in concrete) may be located in the parking lot between American Legion Post 493 and the St. Anthony Post Office, 4531 S Cross Street.

Research for this article uncovered one other cannery, not listed in C. A. Nicholson's report:

• John Kempf & Son Canning Co. labels showcase the rolling hills of the southern Indiana countryside. The labels read "Patoka Valley Brand." The venture began in 1908 as the Dubois Canning Company. The building, complete with a full covered porch, rested at what is now 5416 Main Street, the location of the present-day Mathies Cafe. Kempf changed the name of the business upon becoming general manager. The date of the name change is unknown. According to the Dubois Centennial Souvenir History Book, around 1930, the cannery was defunct. The building was sold to Indiana Cabinet Company and used as a warehouse. Later, the building was demolished.

Find nine historic tomato labels from eight of the Dubois County canneries scattered throughout this feature.



(Continued on page 3)