

# The building of a Greater Packing plant

Progressive, innovative and fiercely independent, Nebraska's Greater Omaha Packing's new beef plant is a model for meatpacking and a symbol of the company's startling success

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By DAN MURPHY, editor

he growling of diesel trucks, a grimy, industrial veneer, and the constant congestion of workers and animals and machinery—all-too-familiar attributes of modern meatpacking.

Green grass, glass-walled offices and the clean, quiet efficiency of a superbly engineered facility.

That's a lot less commonplace.

But Greater Omaha Packing Co. is not your ordinary packing plant.

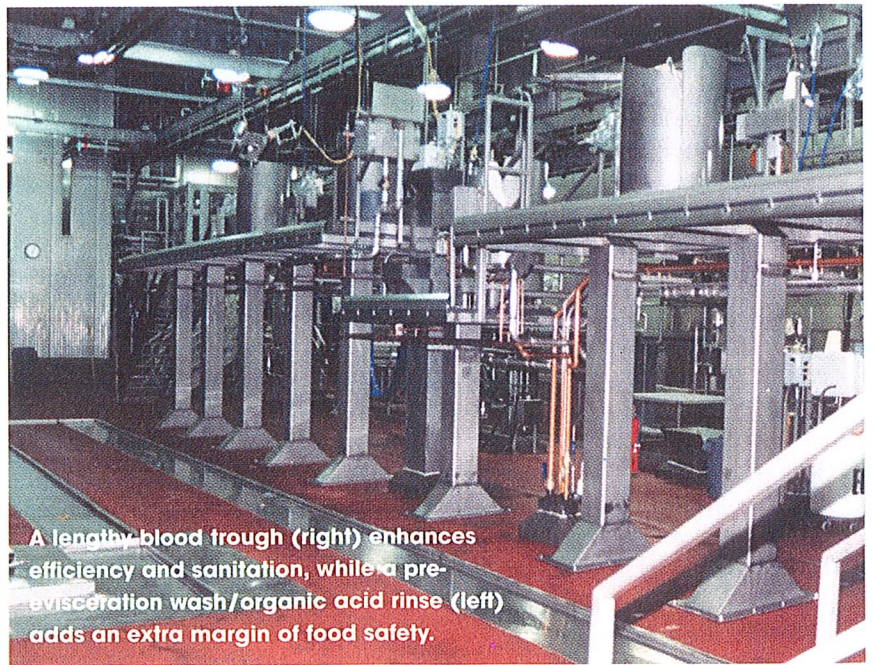
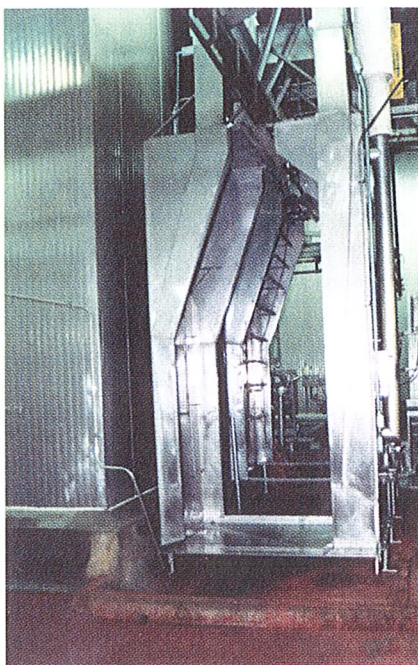
"We're dedicated to achieving the highest quality," declares Henry Davis, Greater Omaha Packing's president. "We wanted that goal to be evident throughout the whole operation—the plant, the offices, the products and our people—especially the people. They're the key to this company."

But equally important is the facility in which those people work. As part of the firm's quality-first orientation, a fresh beef plant engineered from the ground up became integral to the overall program.

A slaughter facility built in 1920 still stands less than a mile from GOP's new plant. Eventually, it will be used for further processing operations.

However, that plant is light years away from the new fresh beef facility in terms of engineering. More than three years were invested in developing a blueprint and researching the safety, efficiency and technological improvements incorporated into this stellar example of what meatpacking can—and should—be in the 21st century.

But that description might 28 ►



A lengthy blood trough (right) enhances efficiency and sanitation, while a pre-visceration wash/organic acid rinse (left) adds an extra margin of food safety.

**GREATER OMAHA PACKING CO.**

To design the new plant, GOP looked at technology throughout the industry—even dairy plants.

◀ 26 sound a little bit too grandiose to the principals.

“Actually, this is all pretty simple,” says Angelo Fili, executive vice president in charge of operations and a veteran of Omaha-area packing plants. “You procure special cattle. You recruit special people. And you end up with special product. That’s the way we do business.”

In fact, ever since its founding in 1920, Greater Omaha Packing has made its business focus on meeting customer needs. In designing its new plant, GOP management investigated technology throughout the meat industry, and even looked at dairy plants and bakery operations—anything that could make the new plant safer and more efficient.

“All along, we’ve invested in this company with the idea of producing higher quality product,” Davis says. “With our new plant, we wanted to incorporate the best possible design, engineering and technology we could find.”

GOP’s new plant capitalizes on high-tech engineering efficiencies and its proximity to one of the country’s premier locations for beef packing.

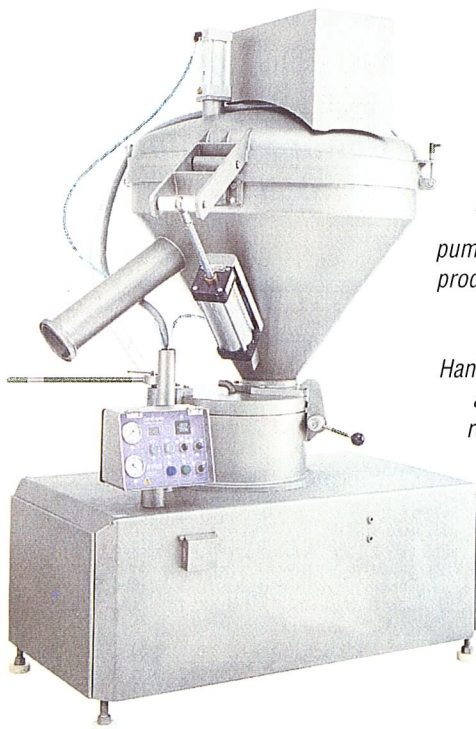
Consider: GOP can tap into a stable, experienced work force because meat-packing has long been an industrial staple in the area (despite a propensity for state and local development agencies to seek out high-tech industries to locate in the region).

Additionally, the plant has access to top-quality, Nebraska-grown cattle, which many swear are among the best in the world. Davis simply notes that raw materials are an integral part of the firm’s total quality focus.

“The agricultural resource base around here is part of why we felt the investment in new plant was warranted.”

GOP’s lenders seem to agree. Not only is GOP one of the few remaining independent beef companies still in operation—no small feat by itself—but the

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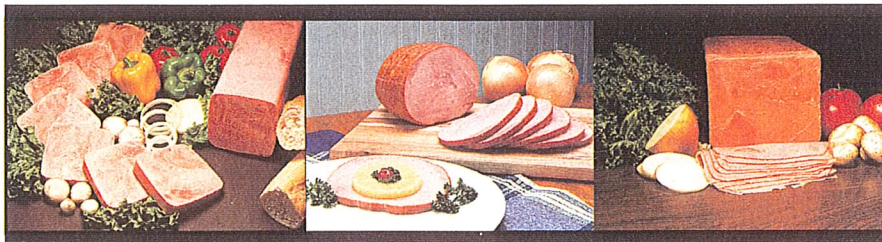


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**(From left) Henry Davis, president; Kathleen Krantz, technical resources director; and Angelo Fili, executive VP, head GOP’s management team.**

## The benefits of good employee relations

Most companies try in some way to encourage worker loyalty. Greater Omaha Packing helps its people secure the greatest bond of all: U.S. citizenship.

One of the unique employee benefits the company has initiated is a program to help employees earn U.S. citizenship.

But that's a task that's far tougher than most Americans born here realize.

"The program takes nearly a year by the time all the paperwork is completed and the employee studies for the citizenship test—which isn't easy," says Kathleen Krantz, technical resource director. "It's a real commitment on their part."

Krantz says 30 employees took the citizenship oath last year, and officials of the local Immigration and Naturalization Service office agreed to conduct the ceremony in the plant's cafeteria in March before some 200 people. The new citizens received a \$50 gift certificate, a paid day off and a plaque from the president.

"It was unprecedented for the INS to come out here," Krantz says, "especially in the wake of the bad press they received for Operation Vanguard. I think seeing how much becoming citizens meant to the families of our people helped define the way the INS wants to be perceived."

Currently, 45 workers are enrolled in GOP's citizenship program; more than 100 have attained citizenship since the program started several years ago.

It's all part of the benefits and programs the company uses to build loyalty and reward the dedication their mostly veteran work force delivers. Even the company's mission statement says, "We will have an unyielding focus on the health, safety and betterment of our employees and families."

For "betterment," look no further than the this promotion: For the holidays, GOP is raffling off a minivan, a pickup truck and a new car. All workers who log perfect attendance for three months are eligible.

"It really helps make sure people show up for work," Krantz says, "And sometimes just showing up is half the battle."

firm's plant is a showcase of how engineering and technology are paired with the compatibility of burgers and fries.

"This is one of the first plants in the industry fully designed with HACCP in mind," Fili says. "Ventilation, water supply—everything is set up to facilitate our critical controls throughout operations."

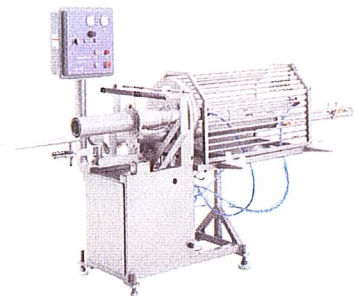
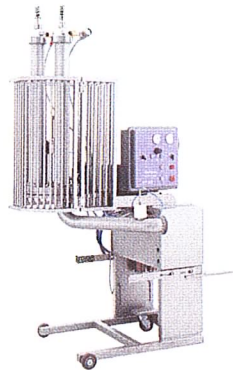
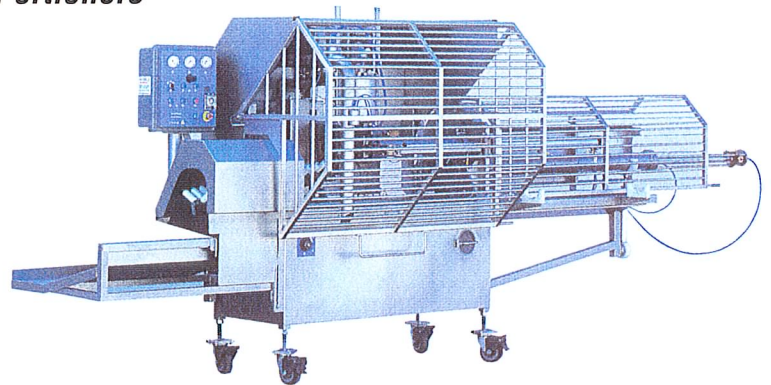
For example, the glass-enclosed plant

manager's office not only offers a bird's-eye view high above the plant floor but maintains an eagle eye on all operations via a customized computer system that monitors virtually every moving part in the plant—pumps, belts, motors—nearly all of it programmable on a variable-speed basis to maximize efficiency.

"The system was custom- 30 ►

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The filtered air supply on the kill floor is separate from the fab room to reduce contamination.

“29 designed to give us flexibility across the entire plant,” Fili says.

Down on the floor, an amazing sensation strikes the first-time visitor: It’s clean, it’s quiet (relatively speaking) and—shockingly—there is open space. In fact, large sections of the kill floor and the fab room are empty.

By design.

“We deliberately configured the layout

of this plant to allow us to accommodate additional equipment in the future,” Fili says. “Down the road, new systems and new technology will become available for food safety, and we want to be ready.”

Odds are they will be, based on the design efficiencies, food-safety systems and high-tech interventions already engineered into GOP’s new plant.

For example, the filtered air supply feeding the kill floor is separate from the ventilation system on the fab floor.

The reason? Research has shown that such separation reduces the distribution of airborne pathogens.

“It also keeps the ambient air in both work areas much cleaner,” Fili adds.

But GOP’s commitment to the best, most functional plant design extends beyond “cutting edge.”

“The goal really isn’t ‘state of the art,’” he says. “We want to change the art.”

Such a fundamental shift in focus requires something in addition to the vision and commitment the company most certainly displays. That extra something is capital.

Easier said than acquired, especially for the industry’s smaller companies.

Or is it?

“Not only do we want to be able to produce the highest quality product,” Davis says, “but we want to step up to the plate on food safety as well. To do that, however, takes capital to invest in new technology. So far, we’ve been able to raise the money we need.”

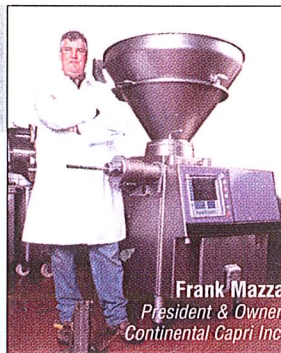
He won’t elaborate on the sources of such funding, but one key may be spending the money as shrewdly as it’s acquired.

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**MISSION STATEMENT**

Greater Omaha will produce the finest beef products in a manner that is uncompromising in food safety.

We will respect our customers and suppliers by treating them fairly and honoring every commitment that we make.

We will provide a proper work environment for everyone at Greater Omaha and have an unyielding focus on the health, safety and betterment of our employees and their families.

The firm’s mission statement is upfront about its commitment to quality products and quality people.

One of the systems they have incorporated is a hot-water carcass wash," Davis says. "We felt that a high-pressure, 180-degree, hot-water rinse, coupled with lactic acid mist, is a very effective system."

Actually, GOP uses lactic acid sprays immediately after the hide is removed and again following the hot-water rinse before the carcass enters the hotbox. Each carcass is also individually treated with steam vacs.

On the kill floor, the plant is designed with a 500-foot blood trough, which not only minimizes splashing and potential overflow situations but facilitates better and more complete blood recovery.

Hide removal is also unique. Trained workers at a pre-removal station make specific cuts that help release the hide with less tension and potential "flopping

**“**  
**We deliberately configured [with open space] this plant to allow us to accommodate additional equipment as new food-safety technology becomes available in the future.**  
**—Angelo Fili, executive VP**  
**“**

around" and plastic is wrapped around the tail area to minimize the chance of fecal contamination.

Ergonomics are incorporated where possible. On the main boning line, for instance, a mid-level take-away belt was installed to ensure that workers aren't lifting above shoulder level.

"Wherever we can, we try to fit the job to our people," Fili says, "and we try to fit the people to the job they

want to do. That's one way to keep people on board." (See sidebar, "A beneficial relationship," for more on employee benefits, page 29.)

As dynamic as GOP's operations in its new plant, the firm sets the standard with customer and supplier relations, as well.

"We're selective about who we do business with," Davis admits. "We've had inquiries from some of the 'boutique

beef' programs now springing up. They sometimes assume a small plant like ours would be happy to take their business—but that's not always the way it works."

Davis says he has turned down some deals and insists on caution even when the customer could be a good fit.

"We have a group of truckers we use whenever possible," he says. "From experience, we know they'll get the load there on time and in good shape. We just try not to take chances where it might not fit our quality image."

It might just be easier to concede that Greater Omaha Packing is a new and different breed of meatpacker altogether.

"We don't call this a slaughterhouse anymore," Fili explains. "We call it a 'food processing facility.' Some might say it's just semantics, but to us, there is a big difference."

"We do take a different approach to this business," Davis adds. "That's part of who we are, and it's an even bigger part of why we're still around." MMT



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