Longshoremen Await Answer

Just How Explosive Is Ammonium Nitrate?

By MARY E. JOHNSTON

Is ammonium nitrate explosive? Longshoremen are asking the question which arose with the flames and shocks of Texas City, until they get a definite answer from the United States government, they have notified shippers of the area, including Houston, they won't handle it.

J. Russell Wait, general manager of the Harris county navigation district, says Houston hasn't handled ammonium nitrate for a year, but the chemical's potential danger is not given as the reason. It is said the port hasn't the space to handle the fertilizer which is made with ammonium nitrate.

Not until the blasts at Texas City five weeks ago did workmen and the public become jumpier, or much aware of the chemical.

During the war ammonium nitrate was combined with TNT to form a deadly explosive known as "ammatol." Ordnance depots all over the country, which in war-time handled the explosive, have been leased or sold through the war assets administration to private firms. These firms are using the synthetic product primarily for fertilizer, and this fertilizer, in large part, is being shipped to Europe to revitalize that continent's soil.

Officials of the San Jacinto ordnance depot here say the closest one to Houston is at McGregor, near Waco.

Chile once supplied most of the nitrate used in the product, since that South American nation has a natural supply. But chemists in this country learned to derive it synthetically.

Last Monday in Savannah, Ga., the International Longshoremen's association resolved they would not handle ammonium nitrate until they got a satisfactory answer from the government.

"As it is," said F. A. Yeager, president of the I. L. A. in the district which starts at Wilmington, N. C., and extends to Brownsville, Texas, "the cargo is handled in unmarked sacks, just like it was sacks of flour."

At the ordnance depot here, however, it is handled with the same precaution taken with other explosives, a Houston longshoreman said. Chemists claim the ammonium nitrate fertilizer is not explosive unless mixed with foreign substances, which, it is assumed, was the case in Texas City.

If government investigators discover the fertilizer should be handled with care, identifying and warning marks will be put on containers. Longshoremen handling it will be paid double pay.

Following the longshoremen's action, Galveston wharves sought and obtained a railroad embargo on shipments of ammonium nitrate. This embargo has since been extended to include all Texas ports and New Orleans.

Since the Texas City explosions, two ships have come into the port of Houston carrying ammonium nitrate, one carrying 800 tons of fertilizer, neither was allowed to unload.

Safety regulations will have to be set up to govern the chemical which brought death and destruction to a Texas city compared by nearly all who saw it to the awful destruction which fell on a Japanese city as the first atomic bomb vaunted its power.

And like the atomic bomb, some are comparing ammonium nitrate turned out in America's growing chemical plants, in its destructive and its constructive forces, it brought death and tragedy to some Texas town, it has brought food to hungry peoples by revitalizing the soil which grows their substance.

LOADING NITRATE IN CHILE—Although quantities of the nitrate base of ammonium nitrate are derived synthetically in this country, much is still imported from Chile. The above pictures, showing the loading of Chilean nitrate at the port of Tocopilla, were made by J. T. McLoughlin of La Porte, who was second mate on the S. S. O. Henry, which recently took a cargo of nitrate from Chile to Savannah, Ga. Top: Dumping crushed nitrate on the vessel's hatch boards; bottom: a barge carrying from 40 to 50 tons of nitrate pulls alongside the O. Henry.