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12/717,394 4 March 2010 (04.03.2010) US(71) Applicants (for all designated States except US): **ORT-LOFF ENGINEERS, LTD.** [US/US]; 415 W. Wall, Suite 2000, Midland, TX 79701 (US). **S.M.E. PRODUCTS LP** [US/US]; 6715 Theall, Houston, TX 77066 (US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **JOHNKE, Andrew, F.** [US/US]; 907 W. Main St., Beresford, SD 57004 (US). **LEWIS, W., Larry** [US/US]; 5602 Court of Lions,Houston, TX 77069 (US). **WILKINSON, John, D.** [US/US]; 4113 Tanforan Avenue, Midland, TX 79707 (US). **LYNCH, Joe, T.** [US/US]; 5510 Ashwood Ct., Midland, TX 79707 (US). **HUDSON, Hank, M.** [US/US]; 2508 W. Sinclair Avenue, Midland, TX 79705 (US). **CUELLAR, Kyle, T.** [US/US]; 1611 Cottage Point Drive, Katy, TX 77494 (US).(74) Agents: **RUSO, Alicia, A.** et al.; Fitzpatrick, Cella, Harper & Scinto, 1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104-3800 (US).

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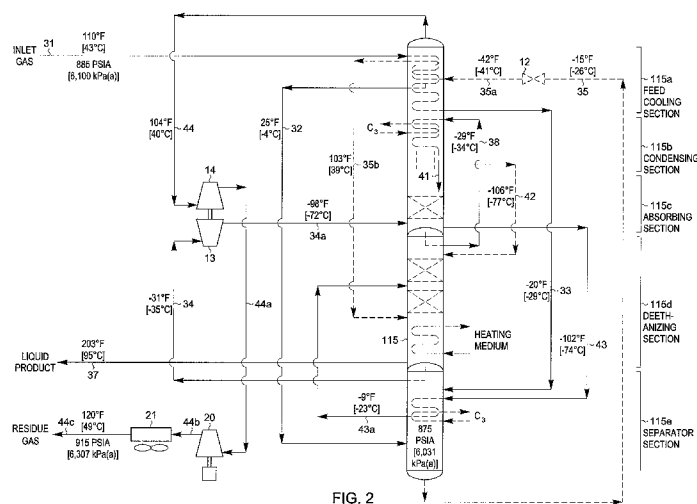


FIG. 2

(57) Abstract: A process and an apparatus are disclosed for the recovery of propane, propylene, and heavier hydrocarbon components from a hydrocarbon gas stream in a compact processing assembly. The gas stream is cooled, expanded to lower pressure, and supplied as the bottom feed to an absorbing means inside the processing assembly. A first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of the absorbing means and supplied as the top feed to a mass transfer means inside the processing assembly. A first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of the mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to at least partially condense it, forming a residual vapor stream and a condensed stream. The condensed stream is supplied as the top feed to the absorbing means. A second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of the absorbing means and directed into one or more heat exchange means inside the processing assembly to heat it while cooling the first distillation vapor stream. The heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any of the residual vapor stream and the combined stream is directed into the one or more heat exchange means inside the processing assembly to heat it while cooling the gas stream. A second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of the mass transfer means and directed into a heat and mass transfer means inside the processing assembly to heat it and strip out its volatile components. The quantities and temperatures of the feeds to the absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of the upper region of the absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the desired components are recovered in the stripped second distillation liquid stream.



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HYDROCARBON GAS PROCESSING

SPECIFICATION

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This invention relates to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas containing hydrocarbons. The applicants claim the benefits under Title 35, United States Code, Section 119(e) of prior U.S. Provisional Application Number 61/186,361 which was filed on June 11, 2009. The applicants also claim the benefits under Title 35, United States Code, Section 120 as a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application No. 12/717,394 which was filed on March 4, 2010, and as a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application No. 12/689,616 which was filed on

January 19, 2010, and as a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application No. 12/372,604 which was filed on February 17, 2009. Assignees S.M.E. Products LP and Ortloff Engineers, Ltd. were parties to a joint research agreement that was in effect before the invention of this application was made.

[0002] Propylene, propane, and/or heavier hydrocarbons can be recovered from a variety of gases, such as natural gas, refinery gas, and synthetic gas streams obtained from other hydrocarbon materials such as coal, crude oil, naphtha, oil shale, tar sands, and lignite. Natural gas usually has a major proportion of methane and ethane, i.e., methane and ethane together comprise at least 50 mole percent of the gas. The gas also contains relatively lesser amounts of heavier hydrocarbons such as propane, butanes, pentanes, and the like, as well as hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and other gases.

[0003] The present invention is generally concerned with the recovery of propylene, propane, and heavier hydrocarbons from such gas streams. A typical analysis of a gas stream to be processed in accordance with this invention would be, in approximate mole percent, 88.4% methane, 6.2% ethane and other C₂ components, 2.6% propane and other C₃ components, 0.3% iso-butane, 0.6% normal butane, and 0.8% pentanes plus, with the balance made up of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Sulfur containing gases are also sometimes present.

[0004] The historically cyclic fluctuations in the prices of both natural gas and its natural gas liquid (NGL) constituents have at times reduced the incremental value of propane, propylene, and heavier components as liquid products. This has resulted in a demand for processes that can provide more efficient recoveries of these products and for processes that can provide efficient recoveries with lower capital investment. Available processes for separating these materials include those based upon cooling

and refrigeration of gas, oil absorption, and refrigerated oil absorption. Additionally, cryogenic processes have become popular because of the availability of economical equipment that produces power while simultaneously expanding and extracting heat from the gas being processed. Depending upon the pressure of the gas source, the richness (ethane, ethylene, and heavier hydrocarbons content) of the gas, and the desired end products, each of these processes or a combination thereof may be employed.

[0005] The cryogenic expansion process is now generally preferred for natural gas liquids recovery because it provides maximum simplicity with ease of startup, operating flexibility, good efficiency, safety, and good reliability. U.S. Patent Nos. 3,292,380; 4,061,481; 4,140,504; 4,157,904; 4,171,964; 4,185,978; 4,251,249; 4,278,457; 4,519,824; 4,617,039; 4,687,499; 4,689,063; 4,690,702; 4,854,955; 4,869,740; 4,889,545; 5,275,005; 5,555,748; 5,566,554; 5,568,737; 5,771,712; 5,799,507; 5,881,569; 5,890,378; 5,983,664; 6,182,469; 6,578,379; 6,712,880; 6,915,662; 7,191,617; 7,219,513; reissue U.S. Patent No. 33,408; and co-pending application nos. 11/430,412; 11/839,693; 11/971,491; and 12/206,230 describe relevant processes (although the description of the present invention in some cases is based on different processing conditions than those described in the cited U.S. Patents).

[0006] In a typical cryogenic expansion recovery process, a feed gas stream under pressure is cooled by heat exchange with other streams of the process and/or external sources of refrigeration such as a propane compression-refrigeration system. As the gas is cooled, liquids may be condensed and collected in one or more separators as high-pressure liquids containing some of the desired C₃+ components. Depending on the richness of the gas and the amount of liquids formed, the

high-pressure liquids may be expanded to a lower pressure and fractionated. The vaporization occurring during expansion of the liquids results in further cooling of the stream. Under some conditions, pre-cooling the high pressure liquids prior to the expansion may be desirable in order to further lower the temperature resulting from the expansion. The expanded stream, comprising a mixture of liquid and vapor, is fractionated in a distillation (deethanizer) column. In the column, the expansion cooled stream(s) is (are) distilled to separate residual methane, C₂ components, nitrogen, and other volatile gases as overhead vapor from the desired C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components as bottom liquid product.

[0007] If the feed gas is not totally condensed (typically it is not), the vapor remaining from the partial condensation can be passed through a work expansion machine or engine, or an expansion valve, to a lower pressure at which additional liquids are condensed as a result of further cooling of the stream. The expanded stream then enters an absorbing section in the column and is contacted with cold liquids to absorb the C₃ components and heavier components from the vapor portion of the expanded stream. The liquids from the absorbing section are then directed to the deethanizing section of the column.

[0008] A distillation vapor stream is withdrawn from the upper region of the deethanizing section and is cooled by heat exchange relation with the overhead vapor stream from the absorbing section, condensing at least a portion of the distillation vapor stream. The condensed liquid is separated from the cooled distillation vapor stream to produce a cold liquid reflux stream that is directed to the upper region of the absorbing section, where the cold liquids can contact the vapor portion of the expanded stream as described earlier. The vapor portion (if any) of the cooled

distillation vapor stream and the overhead vapor from the absorbing section combine to form the residual methane and C₂ component product gas.

[0009] The separation that takes place in this process (producing a residue gas leaving the process which contains substantially all of the methane and C₂ components in the feed gas with essentially none of the C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, and a bottoms fraction leaving the deethanizer which contains substantially all of the C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components with essentially no methane, C₂ components or more volatile components) consumes energy for feed gas cooling, for reboiling the deethanizing section, for refluxing the absorbing section, and/or for re-compressing the residue gas.

[0010] The present invention employs a novel means of performing the various steps described above more efficiently and using fewer pieces of equipment. This is accomplished by combining what heretofore have been individual equipment items into a common housing, thereby reducing the plot space required for the processing plant and reducing the capital cost of the facility. Surprisingly, applicants have found that the more compact arrangement also significantly reduces the power consumption required to achieve a given recovery level, thereby increasing the process efficiency and reducing the operating cost of the facility. In addition, the more compact arrangement also eliminates much of the piping used to interconnect the individual equipment items in traditional plant designs, further reducing capital cost and also eliminating the associated flanged piping connections. Since piping flanges are a potential leak source for hydrocarbons (which are volatile organic compounds, VOCs, that contribute to greenhouse gases and may also be precursors to atmospheric ozone formation), eliminating these flanges reduces the potential for atmospheric emissions that can damage the environment.

[0011] In accordance with the present invention, it has been found that C₃ recoveries in excess of 99.6% can be obtained while providing essentially complete rejection of C₂ components to the residue gas stream. In addition, the present invention makes possible essentially 100% separation of C₂ components and lighter components from the C₃ components and heavier components at lower energy requirements compared to the prior art while maintaining the same recovery level. The present invention, although applicable at lower pressures and warmer temperatures, is particularly advantageous when processing feed gases in the range of 400 to 1500 psia [2,758 to 10,342 kPa(a)] or higher under conditions requiring NGL recovery column overhead temperatures of -50°F [-46°C] or colder.

[0012] For a better understanding of the present invention, reference is made to the following examples and drawings. Referring to the drawings:

[0013] FIG. 1 is a flow diagram of a prior art natural gas processing plant in accordance with United States Patent No. 5,799,507;

[0014] FIG. 2 is a flow diagram of a natural gas processing plant in accordance with the present invention; and

[0015] FIGS. 3 through 13 are flow diagrams illustrating alternative means of application of the present invention to a natural gas stream.

[0016] In the following explanation of the above figures, tables are provided summarizing flow rates calculated for representative process conditions. In the tables appearing herein, the values for flow rates (in moles per hour) have been rounded to the nearest whole number for convenience. The total stream rates shown in the tables include all non-hydrocarbon components and hence are generally larger than the sum of the stream flow rates for the hydrocarbon components. Temperatures indicated are approximate values rounded to the nearest degree. It should also be noted that the

process design calculations performed for the purpose of comparing the processes depicted in the figures are based on the assumption of no heat leak from (or to) the surroundings to (or from) the process. The quality of commercially available insulating materials makes this a very reasonable assumption and one that is typically made by those skilled in the art.

[0017] For convenience, process parameters are reported in both the traditional British units and in the units of the Système International d'Unités (SI). The molar flow rates given in the tables may be interpreted as either pound moles per hour or kilogram moles per hour. The energy consumptions reported as horsepower (HP) and/or thousand British Thermal Units per hour (MBTU/Hr) correspond to the stated molar flow rates in pound moles per hour. The energy consumptions reported as kilowatts (kW) correspond to the stated molar flow rates in kilogram moles per hour.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIOR ART

[0018] FIG. 1 is a process flow diagram showing the design of a processing plant to recover C₃+ components from natural gas using prior art according to U.S. Pat. No. 5,799,507. In this simulation of the process, inlet gas enters the plant at 110°F [43°C] and 885 psia [6,100 kPa(a)] as stream **31**. If the inlet gas contains a concentration of sulfur compounds which would prevent the product streams from meeting specifications, the sulfur compounds are removed by appropriate pretreatment of the feed gas (not illustrated). In addition, the feed stream is usually dehydrated to prevent hydrate (ice) formation under cryogenic conditions. Solid desiccant has typically been used for this purpose.

[0019] The feed stream **31** is cooled in heat exchanger **10** by heat exchange with cool residue gas (stream **44**), flash expanded separator liquids (stream **35a**), and distillation liquids at -105°F [-76°C] (stream **43**). The cooled stream **31a** enters separator **11** at -34°F [-36°C] and 875 psia [6,031 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **35**). The separator liquid (stream **35**) is expanded to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 375 psia [2,583 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower **15** by expansion valve **12**, cooling stream **35a** to -65°F [-54°C]. Stream **35a** enters heat exchanger **10** to supply cooling to the feed gas as described previously, heating stream **35b** to 105°F [41°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **15** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0020] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator **11** enters a work expansion machine **13** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **13** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the operating pressure of fractionation tower **15**, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **34a** to a temperature of approximately -100°F [-74°C]. The typical commercially available expanders are capable of recovering on the order of 80-85% of the work theoretically available in an ideal isentropic expansion. The work recovered is often used to drive a centrifugal compressor (such as item **14**) that can be used to re-compress the heated residue gas (stream **44a**), for example. The partially condensed expanded stream **34a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **15** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0021] The deethanizer in tower **15** is a conventional distillation column containing a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. The deethanizer tower consists of two sections: an upper absorbing (rectification) section **15a** that contains the trays and/or packing to

provide the necessary contact between the vapor portion of the expanded stream **34a** rising upward and cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the C₃ components and heavier components; and a lower stripping section **15b** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the liquids falling downward and the vapors rising upward. The deethanizing section **15b** also includes at least one reboiler (such as reboiler **16**) which heats and vaporizes a portion of the liquids flowing down the column to provide the stripping vapors which flow up the column to strip the liquid product, stream **37**, of methane, C₂ components, and lighter components. Stream **34a** enters deethanizer **15** at a mid-column feed position located in the lower region of absorbing section **15a** of deethanizer **15**. The liquid portion of expanded stream **34a** commingles with liquids falling downward from absorbing section **15a** and the combined liquid continues downward into stripping section **15b** of deethanizer **15**. The vapor portion of expanded stream **34a** rises upward through absorbing section **15a** and is contacted with cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the C₃ components and heavier components.

[0022] A portion of the distillation vapor (stream **38**) is withdrawn from the upper region of stripping section **15b**. This stream is then cooled and partially condensed (stream **38a**) in exchanger **17** by heat exchange with cold deethanizer overhead stream **36** which exits the top of deethanizer **15** at -109°F [-79°C]. The cold deethanizer overhead stream is warmed to approximately -33°F [-66°C] (stream **36a**) as it cools stream **38** from -30°F [-35°C] to about -103°F [-75°C] (stream **38a**).

[0023] The operating pressure in reflux separator **18** is maintained slightly below the operating pressure of deethanizer **15**. This pressure difference provides the driving force that allows distillation vapor stream **38** to flow through heat exchanger **17** and thence into the reflux separator **18** wherein the condensed liquid (stream **40**) is

separated from the uncondensed vapor (stream **39**). The uncondensed vapor stream **39** combines with the warmed deethanizer overhead stream **36a** from exchanger **17** to form cool residue gas stream **44** at -37°F [-38°C].

[0024] The liquid stream **40** from reflux separator **18** is pumped by pump **19** to a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of deethanizer **15**. The resulting stream **40a** is then divided into two portions. The first portion (stream **41**) is supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to the upper region of absorbing section **15a** of deethanizer **15**. This cold liquid causes an absorption cooling effect to occur inside the absorbing (rectification) section **15a** of deethanizer **15**, wherein the saturation of the vapors rising upward through the tower by vaporization of liquid methane and ethane contained in stream **41** provides refrigeration to the section. Note that, as a result, both the vapor leaving the upper region (overhead stream **36**) and the liquids leaving the lower region (distillation liquid stream **43**) of absorbing section **15a** are colder than either of the feed streams (streams **41** and stream **34a**) to absorbing section **15a**. This absorption cooling effect allows the tower overhead (stream **36**) to provide the cooling needed in heat exchanger **17** to partially condense the distillation vapor stream (stream **38**) without operating stripping section **15b** at a pressure significantly higher than that of absorbing section **15a**. This absorption cooling effect also facilitates reflux stream **41** condensing and absorbing the C_3 components and heavier components in the distillation vapor flowing upward through absorbing section **15a**. The second portion (stream **42**) of pumped stream **40a** is supplied to the upper region of stripping section **15b** of deethanizer **15** where the cold liquid acts as reflux to absorb and condense the C_3 components and heavier components flowing upward from below so that distillation vapor stream **38** contains minimal quantities of these components.

[0025] A distillation liquid stream **43** from deethanizer **15** is withdrawn from the lower region of absorbing section **15a** and is routed to heat exchanger **10** where it is heated as it provides cooling of the incoming feed gas as described earlier.

Typically the flow of this liquid from the deethanizer is via thermosiphon circulation, but a pump could be used. The liquid stream is heated to -4°F [-20°C], partially vaporizing stream **43a** before it is returned as a mid-column feed to deethanizer **15**, in the middle region of stripping section **15b**.

[0026] In stripping section **15b** of deethanizer **15**, the feed streams are stripped of their methane and C₂ components. The resulting liquid product stream **37** exits the bottom of the tower at 201°F [94°C] based on a typical specification of an ethane to propane ratio of 0.048:1 on a molar basis in the bottom product. The cool residue gas (stream **44**) passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger **10** where it is heated to 98°F [37°C] (stream **44a**). The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages. The first stage is compressor **14** driven by expansion machine **13**. The second stage is compressor **20** driven by a supplemental power source which compresses the residue gas (stream **44c**) to sales line pressure. After cooling to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler **21**, residue gas stream **44d** flows to the sales gas pipeline at 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)], sufficient to meet line requirements (usually on the order of the inlet pressure).

[0027] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 1 is set forth in the following table:

Table I

(FIG. 1)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	19,419	1,355	565	387	21,961
34	18,742	1,149	360	98	20,573
35	677	206	205	289	1,388
36	18,400	1,242	3	0	19,869
38	2,759	1,758	15	0	4,602
39	1,019	86	0	0	1,116
40	1,740	1,672	15	0	3,486
41	1,044	1,003	9	0	2,092
42	696	669	6	0	1,394
43	1,388	911	365	98	2,796
44	19,419	1,328	3	0	20,985
37	0	27	562	387	976

Recoveries*

Propane	99.56%
Butanes+	100.00%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	9,868 HP	[16,223 kW]
Reflux Pump	19 HP	[31 kW]
Totals	9,887 HP	[16,254 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0028] FIG. 2 illustrates a flow diagram of a process in accordance with the present invention. The feed gas composition and conditions considered in the process presented in FIG. 2 are the same as those in FIG. 1. Accordingly, the FIG. 2 process can be compared with that of the FIG. 1 process to illustrate the advantages of the present invention.

[0029] In the simulation of the FIG. 2 process, inlet gas enters the plant as stream **31** and enters a heat exchange means in feed cooling section **115a** inside processing assembly **115**. This heat exchange means may be comprised of a fin and tube type heat exchanger, a plate type heat exchanger, a brazed aluminum type heat exchanger, or other type of heat transfer device, including multi-pass and/or multi-service heat exchangers. The heat exchange means is configured to provide heat exchange between stream **31** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and flash expanded separator liquids (stream **35a**) and a residue gas stream

from condensing section **115b** inside processing assembly **115**. Stream **31** is cooled while heating the flash expanded separator liquids and the residue gas stream. A first portion (stream **32**) of stream **31** is withdrawn from the heat exchange means after stream **31** has been partially cooled to 25°F [-4°C], while the remaining second portion (stream **33**) is further cooled so that it leaves the heat exchange means at -20°F [-29°C].

[0030] Separator section **115e** has an internal head or other means to divide it from deethanizing section **115d**, so that the two sections inside processing assembly **115** can operate at different pressures. The first portion (stream **32**) of stream **31** enters the lower region of separator section **115e** at 875 psia [6,031 kPa(a)] where any condensed liquid is separated from the vapor before the vapor is directed into a heat and mass transfer means inside separator section **115e**. This heat and mass transfer means may also be comprised of a fin and tube type heat exchanger, a plate type heat exchanger, a brazed aluminum type heat exchanger, or other type of heat transfer device, including multi-pass and/or multi-service heat exchangers. The heat and mass transfer means is configured to provide heat exchange between the vapor portion of stream **32** flowing upward through one pass of the heat and mass transfer means and distillation liquid stream **43** from absorbing section **115c** inside processing assembly **115** flowing downward, so that the vapor is cooled while heating the distillation liquid stream. As the vapor stream is cooled, a portion of it may be condensed and fall downward while the remaining vapor continues flowing upward through the heat and mass transfer means. The heat and mass transfer means provides continuous contact between the condensed liquid and the vapor so that it also functions to provide mass transfer between the vapor and liquid phases to provide partial rectification of the vapor.

[0031] The second portion (stream **33**) of stream **31** enters separator section **115e** inside processing assembly **115** above the heat and mass transfer means. Any condensed liquid is separated from the vapor and commingles with any liquid that is condensed from the vapor portion of stream **32** flowing up through the heat and mass transfer means. The vapor portion of stream **33** combines with the vapor leaving the heat and mass transfer means to form stream **34**, which exits separator section **115e** at -31°F [-35°C]. The liquid portions (if any) of streams **32** and **33** and any liquid condensed from the vapor portion of stream **32** in the heat and mass transfer means combine to form stream **35**, which exits separator section **115e** at -15°F [-26°C]. It is expanded to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 383 psia [2,639 kPa(a)]) of deethanizing section **115d** inside processing assembly **115** by expansion valve **12**, cooling stream **35a** to -42°F [-41°C]. Stream **35a** enters the heat exchange means in feed cooling section **115a** to supply cooling to the feed gas as described previously, heating stream **35b** to 103°F [39°C] before it is supplied to deethanizing section **115d** inside processing assembly **115** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0032] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator section **115e** enters a work expansion machine **13** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **13** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the operating pressure (approximately 380 psia [2,618 kPa(a)]) of absorbing section **115c**, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **34a** to a temperature of approximately -98°F [-72°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **34a** is thereafter supplied as feed to the lower region of absorbing section **115c** inside processing assembly **115**.

[0033] Absorbing section **115c** contains an absorbing means consisting of a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. The trays and/or packing in absorbing section **115c** provide the necessary contact between the vapors rising upward and cold liquid falling downward. The vapor portion of expanded stream **34a** rises upward through the absorbing means in absorbing section **115c** to be contacted with the cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb most of the C₃ components and heavier components from these vapors. The liquid portion of expanded stream **34a** commingles with liquids falling downward from the absorbing means in absorbing section **115c** to form distillation liquid stream **43**, which is withdrawn from the lower region of absorbing section **115c** at -102°F [-74°C]. The distillation liquid is heated to -9°F [-23°C] as it cools the vapor portion of stream **32** in separator section **115e** as described previously, with the heated distillation liquid stream **43a** thereafter supplied to deethanizing section **115d** inside processing assembly **115** at an upper mid-column feed point. Typically the flow of this liquid from absorbing section **115c** through the heat and mass transfer means in separator section **115e** to deethanizing section **115d** is via thermosiphon circulation, but a pump could be used.

[0034] Absorbing section **115c** has an internal head or other means to divide it from deethanizing section **115d**, so that the two sections inside processing assembly **115** can operate with the pressure of deethanizing section **115d** slightly higher than that of absorbing section **115c**. This pressure difference provides the driving force that allows a first distillation vapor stream (stream **38**) to be withdrawn from the upper region of deethanizing section **115d** and directed to the heat exchange means in condensing section **115b** inside processing assembly **115**. This heat exchange means may likewise be comprised of a fin and tube type heat exchanger, a plate type heat

exchanger, a brazed aluminum type heat exchanger, or other type of heat transfer device, including multi-pass and/or multi-service heat exchangers. The heat exchange means is configured to provide heat exchange between first distillation vapor stream **38** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and a second distillation vapor stream arising from absorbing section **115c** inside processing assembly **115**. The second distillation vapor stream is heated while it cools and at least partially condenses stream **38**, which thereafter exits the heat exchange means and is separated into its respective vapor and liquid phases. The vapor phase (if any) combines with the heated second distillation vapor stream exiting the heat exchange means to form the residue gas stream that provides cooling in feed cooling section **115a** as described previously. The liquid phase is divided into two portions, streams **41** and **42**.

[0035] The first portion (stream **41**) is supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to the upper region of absorbing section **115c** inside processing assembly **115** by gravity flow. This cold liquid causes an absorption cooling effect to occur inside absorbing (rectification) section **115a**, wherein the saturation of the vapors rising upward through the tower by vaporization of liquid methane and ethane contained in stream **41** provides refrigeration to the section. This absorption cooling effect allows the second distillation vapor stream to provide the cooling needed in the heat exchange means in condensing section **115b** to partially condense the first distillation vapor stream (stream **38**) without operating deethanizing section **115d** at a pressure significantly higher than that of absorbing section **115c**. This absorption cooling effect also facilitates reflux stream **41** condensing and absorbing the C₃ components and heavier components in the distillation vapor flowing upward through absorbing section **115c**. The second portion (stream **42**) of the liquid phase separated in condensing section **115b** is supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to the upper

region of deethanizing section **115d** inside processing assembly **115** by gravity flow, so that the cold liquid acts as reflux to absorb and condense the C₃ components and heavier components flowing upward from below so that distillation vapor stream **38** contains minimal quantities of these components.

[0036] Deethanizing section **115d** inside processing assembly **115** contains a mass transfer means consisting of a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. The trays and/or packing in deethanizing section **115d** provide the necessary contact between the vapors rising upward and cold liquid falling downward. Deethanizing section **115d** also includes a heat and mass transfer means beneath the mass transfer means. This heat and mass transfer means may also be comprised of a fin and tube type heat exchanger, a plate type heat exchanger, a brazed aluminum type heat exchanger, or other type of heat transfer device, including multi-pass and/or multi-service heat exchangers. The heat and mass transfer means is configured to provide heat exchange between a heating medium flowing through one pass of the heat and mass transfer means and a distillation liquid stream flowing downward from the mass transfer means in deethanizing section **115d**, so that the distillation liquid stream is heated. As the distillation liquid stream is heated, a portion of it is vaporized to form stripping vapors that rise upward as the remaining liquid continues flowing downward through the heat and mass transfer means. The heat and mass transfer means provides continuous contact between the stripping vapors and the distillation liquid stream so that it also functions to provide mass transfer between the vapor and liquid phases, stripping the liquid product stream **37** of methane, C₂ components, and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream **37**) exits the lower region of deethanizing section **115d** and leaves processing assembly **115** at 203°F [95°C].

[0037] The second distillation vapor stream arising from absorbing section **115c** is warmed in condensing section **115b** as it provides cooling to stream **38** as described previously. The warmed second distillation vapor stream combines with any vapor separated from the cooled first distillation vapor stream **38** as described previously. The resulting residue gas stream is heated in feed cooling section **115a** as it provides cooling to stream **31** as described previously, whereupon residue gas stream **44** leaves processing assembly **115** at 104°F [40°C]. The residue gas stream is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **14** driven by expansion machine **13** and compressor **20** driven by a supplemental power source. After cooling to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler **21**, residue gas stream **44c** flows to the sales gas pipeline at 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)], sufficient to meet line requirements (usually on the order of the inlet pressure).

[0038] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 2 is set forth in the following table:

Table II

(FIG. 2)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	19,419	1,355	565	387	21,961
32	4,855	339	141	97	5,490
33	14,564	1,016	424	290	16,471
34	18,870	1,135	348	104	20,683
35	549	220	217	283	1,278
38	2,398	1,544	13	0	4,015
41	1,018	868	8	0	1,924
42	737	628	5	0	1,394
43	1,112	723	353	104	2,320
44	19,419	1,328	3	0	20,984
37	0	27	562	387	977

Recoveries*

Propane 99.63%

Butanes+ 100.00%

Power

Residue Gas Compression 9,363 HP [15,393 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0039] A comparison of Tables I and II shows that the present invention maintains essentially the same recoveries as the prior art. However, further comparison of Tables I and II shows that the product yields were achieved using significantly less power than the prior art. In terms of the recovery efficiency (defined by the quantity of propane recovered per unit of power), the present invention represents more than a 5% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 1 process.

[0040] The improvement in recovery efficiency provided by the present invention over that of the prior art of the FIG. 1 process is primarily due to three factors. First, the compact arrangement of the heat exchange means in feed cooling section **115a** and condensing section **115b** in processing assembly **115** eliminates the pressure drop imposed by the interconnecting piping found in conventional processing plants. The result is that the residue gas flowing to compressor **14** is at higher pressure for the present invention compared to the prior art, so that the residue gas entering compressor **20** is at significantly higher pressure, thereby reducing the power required by the present invention to restore the residue gas to pipeline pressure.

[0041] Second, using the heat and mass transfer means in deethanizing section **115d** to simultaneously heat the distillation liquid leaving the mass transfer means in deethanizing section **115d** while allowing the resulting vapors to contact the liquid and strip its volatile components is more efficient than using a conventional distillation column with external reboilers. The volatile components are stripped out of the liquid continuously, reducing the concentration of the volatile components in the stripping vapors more quickly and thereby improving the stripping efficiency for the present invention.

[0042] Third, using the heat and mass transfer means in separator section **115e** to simultaneously cool the vapor portion of stream **32** while condensing the heavier hydrocarbon components from the vapor provides partial rectification of stream **34** before it is subsequently expanded and supplied as feed to absorbing section **115c**. As a result, less reflux flow (stream **41**) is required to rectify the expanded stream **34a** to remove the C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components from it, as seen by comparing the flow rate of stream **41** in Tables I and II.

[0043] The present invention offers two other advantages over the prior art in addition to the increase in processing efficiency. First, the compact arrangement of processing assembly **115** of the present invention replaces six separate equipment items in the prior art (heat exchangers **10** and **17**, separator **11**, reflux separator **18**, reflux pump **19**, and fractionation tower **15** in FIG. 1) with a single equipment item (processing assembly **115** in FIG. 2). This reduces the plot space requirements, eliminates the interconnecting piping, and eliminates the power consumed by the reflux pump, reducing the capital cost and operating cost of a process plant utilizing the present invention over that of the prior art. Second, elimination of the interconnecting piping means that a processing plant utilizing the present invention has far fewer flanged connections compared to the prior art, reducing the number of potential leak sources in the plant. Hydrocarbons are volatile organic compounds (VOCs), some of which are classified as greenhouse gases and some of which may be precursors to atmospheric ozone formation, which means the present invention reduces the potential for atmospheric releases that can damage the environment.

Other Embodiments

[0044] As described earlier for the embodiment of the present invention shown in FIG. 2, the first distillation vapor stream **38** is partially condensed and the resulting condensate used to absorb valuable C₃ components and heavier components from the vapors leaving the work expansion machine. However, the present invention is not limited to this embodiment. It may be advantageous, for instance, to treat only a portion of the outlet vapor from the work expansion machine in this manner, or to use only a portion of the condensate as an absorbent, in cases where other design considerations indicate portions of the expansion machine outlet or the condensate should bypass absorbing section **115c** of processing assembly **115**. Feed gas conditions, plant size, available equipment, or other factors may indicate that elimination of work expansion machine **13**, or replacement with an alternate expansion device (such as an expansion valve), is feasible, or that total (rather than partial) condensation of first distillation vapor stream **38** in condensing section **115b** inside processing assembly **115** is possible or is preferred. It should also be noted that, depending on the composition of the feed gas stream, it may be advantageous to use external refrigeration to provide partial cooling of first distillation vapor stream **38** in condensing section **115b**.

[0045] In some circumstances, it may be advantageous to use an external separator vessel to separate cooled first and second portions **32** and **33** or cooled feed stream **31a**, rather than including separator section **115e** in processing assembly **115**. As shown in FIG. 8, a heat and mass transfer means in separator **11** can be used to separate cooled first and second portions **32** and **33** into vapor stream **34** and liquid stream **35**. Likewise, as shown in FIGS. 9 through 13, separator **11** can be used to separate cooled feed stream **31a** into vapor stream **34** and liquid stream **35**.

[0046] The use and distribution of the liquid stream **35** from separator section **115e** or separator **11** and distillation liquid stream **43** from absorbing section **115c** for process heat exchange, the particular arrangement of heat exchangers for cooling feed gas (streams **31** and/or **32**) and first distillation vapor stream **38**, and the choice of process streams for specific heat exchange services must be evaluated for each particular application. For instance, FIGS. 4 through 6 and 10 through 12 depict using distillation liquid stream **43** to supply a portion of the cooling of first distillation vapor stream **38** in condensing section **115b** (FIGS. 4, 5, 10, and 11) or heat exchanger **10** (FIGS. 6 and 12). In such cases, a heat and mass transfer means may not be needed in separator section **115e** (FIGS. 4 through 6) or separator **11** (FIGS. 10 through 12). In the embodiments shown in FIGS. 4 and 10, a pump **22** is used to deliver distillation liquid stream **43** to the heat exchange means in condensing section **115b**. In the embodiments shown in FIGS. 5 and 11, condensing section **115b** is located below absorbing section **115c** in processing assembly **115** so that flow of distillation liquid stream **43** is via thermosiphon circulation. In the embodiments shown in FIGS. 6 and 12, a heat exchanger **10** external to processing assembly **115** is employed and feed cooling section **115a** is located below absorbing section **115c** in processing assembly **115** so that flow of distillation liquid stream **43** is via thermosiphon circulation. (The embodiments shown in FIGS. 5, 6, 11, and 12 use reflux pump **19** to supply reflux to locations above the point in processing assembly **115** where the liquid phase condensed from stream **38** is collected.) Some circumstances may favor using distillation liquid stream **43** to cool stream **32** in a heat exchanger external to processing assembly **115**, such as heat exchanger **10** depicted in FIGS. 3 and 9. Still other circumstances may favor no heating of distillation liquid stream **43** at all, and instead using distillation liquid stream **43** as the reflux to the

upper region of deethanizing section **115d** as shown in FIGS. 7 and 13. (For the embodiment shown in FIG. 13, pump **22** may be needed because gravity flow of stream **43** may not be possible.)

[0047] Depending on the quantity of heavier hydrocarbons in the feed gas and the feed gas pressure, the cooled first and second portions **32** and **33** entering separator section **115e** in FIG. 2 or separator **11** in FIG. 8 (or the cooled feed stream **31a** entering separator section **115e** in FIGS. 3 through 7 or separator **11** in FIGS. 9 through 13) may not contain any liquid (because it is above its dewpoint, or because it is above its cricondenbar). In such cases, there is no liquid in stream **35** (as shown by the dashed lines). In such circumstances, separator section **115e** in processing assembly **115** (FIGS. 2 through 7) or separator **11** (FIGS. 8 through 13) may not be required.

[0048] In accordance with the present invention, the use of external refrigeration to supplement the cooling available to the inlet gas and/or the first distillation vapor stream from the second distillation vapor stream and the distillation liquid stream may be employed, particularly in the case of a rich inlet gas. In such cases where additional inlet gas cooling is desired, a heat and mass transfer means may be included in separator section **115e** (or a collecting means in such cases when the cooled first and second portions **32** and **33** or the cooled feed stream **31a** contains no liquid) as shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 3 through 7, or a heat and mass transfer means may be included in separator **11** as shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 9 through 13. This heat and mass transfer means may be comprised of a fin and tube type heat exchanger, a plate type heat exchanger, a brazed aluminum type heat exchanger, or other type of heat transfer device, including multi-pass and/or multi-service heat exchangers. The heat and mass transfer means is configured to

provide heat exchange between a refrigerant stream (e.g., propane) flowing through one pass of the heat and mass transfer means and the vapor portion of stream **31a** flowing upward, so that the refrigerant further cools the vapor and condenses additional liquid, which falls downward to become part of the liquid removed in stream **35**. As shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 2 and 8, the heat and mass transfer means in separator section **115e** (FIG. 2) or separator **11** (FIG. 8) may include provisions for providing supplemental cooling with refrigerant. Alternatively, conventional gas chiller(s) could be used to cool stream **32**, stream **33**, and/or stream **31a** with refrigerant before streams **32** and **33** enter separator section **115e** (FIG. 2) or separator **11** (FIGS. 8) or stream **31a** enters separator section **115e** (FIGS. 3 through 7) or separator **11** (FIGS. 9 through 13). In cases where additional cooling of the first distillation vapor stream is desired, the heat exchange means in condensing section **115b** of processing assembly **115** (FIGS. 2 through 5, 7 through 11, and 13) or heat exchanger **10** (FIGS. 6 and 12) may include provisions for providing supplemental cooling with refrigerant as shown by the dashed lines.

[0049] Depending on the type of heat transfer devices selected for the heat exchange means in feed cooling section **115a** and condensing section **115b**, it may be possible to combine these heat exchange means in a single multi-pass and/or multi-service heat transfer device. In such cases, the multi-pass and/or multi-service heat transfer device will include appropriate means for distributing, segregating, and collecting stream **31**, stream **32**, stream **33**, first distillation vapor stream **38**, any vapor separated from the cooled stream **38**, and the second distillation vapor stream in order to accomplish the desired cooling and heating.

[0050] It will also be recognized that the relative amount of condensed liquid that is split between streams **41** and **42** in FIGS. 2 through 6 and 8 through 12 will

depend on several factors, including gas pressure, feed gas composition, and the quantity of horsepower available. The optimum split generally cannot be predicted without evaluating the particular circumstances for a specific application of the present invention. Some circumstances may favor feeding all of the condensed liquid to the upper region of absorbing section **115c** in stream **41** and none to the upper region of deethanizing section **115d** in stream **42**, as shown by the dashed lines for stream **42**. In such cases, the heated distillation liquid stream **43a** may be supplied to the upper region of deethanizing section **115d** to serve as reflux.

[0051] The present invention provides improved recovery of C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components per amount of utility consumption required to operate the process. An improvement in utility consumption required for operating the process may appear in the form of reduced power requirements for compression or re-compression, reduced power requirements for external refrigeration, reduced energy requirements for tower reboiling, or a combination thereof.

[0052] While there have been described what are believed to be preferred embodiments of the invention, those skilled in the art will recognize that other and further modifications may be made thereto, e.g. to adapt the invention to various conditions, types of feed, or other requirements without departing from the spirit of the present invention as defined by the following claims.

WE CLAIM:

1. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(3) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;

(4) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

(5) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(6) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(7) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5);

(8) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(9) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(10) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

2. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;

- (3) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure
whereby it is further cooled;
- (4) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a
bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (5) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower
pressure;
- (6) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the
lower region of said absorbing means and supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer
means housed in said processing assembly;
- (7) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the
upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a
part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly,
thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any
uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;
- (8) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as
a top feed to said absorbing means;
- (9) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the
upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means,
thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (7);
- (10) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined
with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;
- (11) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat
exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and
thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing
assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(12) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;

(13) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(14) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

3. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(3) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;

(4) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in a second heat exchange means, with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

(5) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (4), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(6) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(7) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5);

(8) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(9) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(10) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter

discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

4. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;

(3) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(4) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;

(5) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;

(6) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in a second heat exchange means, with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

(7) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (6), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(8) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(9) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (7);

(10) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(11) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(12) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;

(13) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter

discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(14) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

5. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;

(3) said first portion is further cooled in a first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;

(4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;

(5) said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion are combined to form a cooled gas stream;

(6) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(7) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;

(8) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said first heat and mass transfer means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

(9) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(10) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(11) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (9);

(12) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(13) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(14) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a second heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and

thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(15) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

6. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;

(3) said first portion is further cooled in a first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;

(4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;

(5) said further cooled second portion is directed to said separating means so that any liquids condensed as said first portion is further cooled and as said second portion is further cooled are combined to form at least one liquid stream, with the remainder of said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion forming a vapor stream;

- (6) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure
whereby it is further cooled;
- (7) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a
bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (8) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower
pressure;
- (9) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the
lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said first heat and mass transfer
means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated
first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer
means housed in said processing assembly;
- (10) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the
upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a
part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly,
thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any
uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;
- (11) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as
a top feed to said absorbing means;
- (12) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the
upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means,
thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (10);
- (13) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined
with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;
- (14) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat
exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and

(4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(15) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;

(16) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a second heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(17) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

7. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;

- (3) said first portion is further cooled in a second heat exchange means;
- (4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;
- (5) said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion are combined to form a cooled gas stream;
- (6) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (7) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (8) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;
- (9) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a third heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;
- (10) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;
- (11) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said third heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (9);

(12) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(13) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(14) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(15) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

8. A process for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;

- (3) said first portion is further cooled in a second heat exchange means;
- (4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;
- (5) said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion are combined to form a partially condensed gas stream;
- (6) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;
- (7) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (8) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (9) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;
- (10) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;
- (11) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a third heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(12) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(13) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said third heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (11);

(14) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(15) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(16) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;

(17) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(18) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

9. The process according to claim 3 wherein said second heat exchange means is housed in said processing assembly.

10. The process according to claim 4 wherein said second heat exchange means is housed in said processing assembly.

11. The process according to claim 2 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

12. The process according to claim 4, 8, or 10 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

13. The process according to claim 5 or 6 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

14. The process according to claim 3, 7, or 9 wherein

- (1) said heated first distillation liquid stream is supplied to said mass transfer means at an intermediate feed position;
- (2) said condensed stream is divided into at least first and second reflux streams;
- (3) said first reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said absorbing means; and
- (4) said second reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said mass transfer means.

15. The process according to claim 4, 8, or 10 wherein

- (1) said heated first distillation liquid stream is supplied to said mass transfer means at an intermediate feed position;
- (2) said condensed stream is divided into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said first reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said absorbing means; and

(4) said second reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said mass transfer means.

16. The process according to claim 5 or 6 wherein

(1) said heated first distillation liquid stream is supplied to said mass transfer means at an intermediate feed position;

(2) said condensed stream is divided into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said first reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said absorbing means; and

(4) said second reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said mass transfer means.

17. The process according to claim 12 wherein

(1) said heated first distillation liquid stream is supplied to said mass transfer means at an intermediate feed position;

(2) said condensed stream is divided into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said first reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said absorbing means; and

(4) said second reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said mass transfer means.

18. The process according to claim 13 wherein

(1) said heated first distillation liquid stream is supplied to said mass transfer means at an intermediate feed position;

(2) said condensed stream is divided into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said first reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said absorbing means; and

(4) said second reflux stream is supplied as said top feed to said mass transfer means.

19. The process according to claim 1, 3, 7, or 9 wherein

(1) a collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;

(2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(3) said cooled gas stream is supplied to said collecting means and directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be further cooled by said external refrigeration medium; and

(4) said further cooled gas stream is expanded to said lower pressure and thereafter supplied as said bottom feed to said absorbing means.

20. The process according to claim 14 wherein

(1) a collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;

(2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(3) said cooled gas stream is supplied to said collecting means and directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be further cooled by said external refrigeration medium; and

(4) said further cooled gas stream is expanded to said lower pressure and thereafter supplied as said bottom feed to said absorbing means.

21. The process according to claim 2, 4, 8, 10, or 11 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

22. The process according to claim 12 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

23. The process according to claim 15 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

24. The process according to claim 17 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

25. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to cool said gas stream;

(2) expansion means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said cooled gas stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(3) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said expansion means to receive said expanded cooled gas stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(4) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(5) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(6) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(7) second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(8) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(9) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(10) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (7);

(11) combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(12) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(13) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(14) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(15) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

26. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to cool said gas stream sufficiently to partially condense it;

(2) separating means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially condensed gas stream and separate it into a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;

(3) first expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said vapor stream and expand it to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(4) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled vapor stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(5) second expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure;

(6) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(7) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(8) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(9) second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(10) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(11) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(12) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (9);

(13) combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(14) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(15) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second expansion means to receive said expanded at least one liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), said first heat exchange means being further connected to said mass transfer means to supply said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(16) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(17) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(18) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

27. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to cool said gas stream;

(2) expansion means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said cooled gas stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(3) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said expansion means to receive said expanded cooled gas stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(4) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(5) second heat exchange means connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it;

(6) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(7) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(8) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (5), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(9) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(10) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(11) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (8);

(12) combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(13) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(14) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(15) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(16) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature

of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

28. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

- (1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to cool said gas stream sufficiently to partially condense it;
- (2) separating means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially condensed gas stream and separate it into a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;
- (3) first expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said vapor stream and expand it to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (4) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled vapor stream as a bottom feed thereto;
- (5) second expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure;
- (6) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;
- (7) second heat exchange means connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it;

(8) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(9) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(10) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (7), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(11) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(12) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(13) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (10);

(14) combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(15) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(16) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second expansion means to receive said expanded at least one liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), said first heat exchange means being further connected to said mass transfer means to supply said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(17) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(18) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(19) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

29. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a

volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

- (1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to partially cool said gas stream;
- (2) dividing means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially cooled gas stream and divide it into first and second portions;
- (3) first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means and connected to said dividing means to receive said first portion and further cool it, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;
- (4) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said dividing means to receive said second portion and further cool it;
- (5) first combining means connected to said first heat and mass transfer means and said first heat exchange means to receive said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion and form a cooled gas stream;
- (6) expansion means connected to said first combining means to receive said cooled gas stream and expand it to lower pressure;
- (7) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said expansion means to receive said expanded cooled gas stream as a bottom feed thereto;
- (8) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(9) said first heat and mass transfer means being further connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3);

(10) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first heat and mass transfer means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(11) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(12) second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(13) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(14) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(15) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (12);

(16) second combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(17) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(18) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(19) second heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(20) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

30. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to partially cool said gas stream;

(2) dividing means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially cooled gas stream and divide it into first and second portions;

(3) first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means and connected to said dividing means to receive said first portion and further cool it, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;

(4) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said dividing means to receive said second portion and further cool it;

(5) said separating means being further connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said further cooled second portion so that any liquids condensed as said first portion is further cooled and as said second portion is further cooled are combined to form at least one liquid stream, with the remainder of said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion forming a vapor stream;

(6) first expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said vapor stream and expand it to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(7) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled vapor stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(8) second expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure;

(9) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(10) said first heat and mass transfer means being further connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3);

(11) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first heat and mass transfer means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(12) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(13) second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(14) said absorbing means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(15) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(16) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation

vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (13);

(17) combining means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(18) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(19) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second expansion means to receive said expanded at least one liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), said first heat exchange means being further connected to said mass transfer means to supply said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(20) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(21) second heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(22) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

31. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to partially cool said gas stream;

(2) dividing means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially cooled gas stream and divide it into first and second portions;

(3) second heat exchange means connected to said dividing means to receive said first portion and further cool it;

(4) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said dividing means to receive said second portion and further cool it;

(5) first combining means connected to said second heat exchange means and said first heat exchange means to receive said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion and form a cooled gas stream;

(6) expansion means connected to said first combining means to receive said cooled gas stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(7) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said expansion means to receive said expanded cooled gas stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(8) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(9) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3);

(10) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(11) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(12) third heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(13) said absorbing means being further connected to said third heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(14) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(15) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (12);

(16) second combining means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(17) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(18) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(19) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(20) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

32. An apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly to partially cool said gas stream;

(2) dividing means connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said partially cooled gas stream and divide it into first and second portions;

(3) second heat exchange means connected to said dividing means to receive said first portion and further cool it;

(4) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said dividing means to receive said second portion and further cool it;

(5) first combining means connected to said second heat exchange means and said first heat exchange means to receive said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion and form a partially condensed gas stream;

(6) separating means connected to said first combining means to receive said partially condensed gas stream and separate it into a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;

(7) first expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said vapor stream and expand it to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(8) absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled vapor stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(9) second expansion means connected to said separating means to receive said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure;

(10) first liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a first distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said absorbing means;

(11) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said first liquid collecting means to receive said first distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3);

(12) mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream as a top feed thereto;

(13) first vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a first distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said mass transfer means;

(14) third heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said first vapor collecting means to receive said first distillation vapor stream and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(15) said absorbing means being further connected to said third heat exchange means to receive at least a portion of said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(16) second vapor collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said absorbing means to receive a second distillation vapor stream from the upper region of said absorbing means;

(17) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said second vapor collecting means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (14);

(18) second combining means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and any said residual vapor stream and form a combined vapor stream;

(19) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second combining means to receive said combined vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(20) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second expansion means to receive said expanded at least one liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), said first heat exchange means being further connected to said mass transfer means to supply said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(21) second liquid collecting means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said mass transfer means to receive a second distillation liquid stream from the lower region of said mass transfer means;

(22) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said second liquid collecting means to receive said second distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile

components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(23) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

33. The apparatus according to claim 27 wherein said second heat exchange means is housed in said processing assembly.

34. The apparatus according to claim 28 wherein said second heat exchange means is housed in said processing assembly.

35. The apparatus according to claim 26 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

36. The apparatus according to claim 28 or 34 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

37. The apparatus according to claim 29 or 30 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

38. The apparatus according to claim 32 wherein said separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

39. The apparatus according to claim 27 or 33 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) a dividing means is connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

40. The apparatus according to claim 31 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) an additional dividing means is connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

41. The apparatus according to claim 28 or 34 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) a dividing means is connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

42. The apparatus according to claim 29 or 30 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said first heat and mass transfer means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) an additional dividing means is connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

43. The apparatus according to claim 32 or 38 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) an additional dividing means is connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

44. The apparatus according to claim 36 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) a dividing means is connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

45. The apparatus according to claim 37 wherein

(1) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said first heat and mass means to receive said heated first distillation liquid stream at an intermediate feed position;

(2) an additional dividing means is connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said condensed stream and divide it into at least first and second reflux streams;

(3) said absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said first reflux stream as said top feed thereto; and

(4) said mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional dividing means to receive said second reflux stream as said top feed thereto.

46. The apparatus according to claim 25, 27, or 33 wherein

(1) a collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;

(2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(3) said collecting means is connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said cooled gas stream and direct it to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be further cooled by said external refrigeration medium; and

(4) said expansion means is adapted to be connected to said collecting means to receive said further cooled gas stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said expansion means being further connected to said absorbing means to supply said expanded further cooled gas stream as said bottom feed thereto.

47. The apparatus according to claim 31 or 40 wherein

- (1) a collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;
- (3) said collecting means is connected to said first combining means to receive said cooled gas stream and direct it to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be further cooled by said external refrigeration medium; and
- (4) said expansion means is adapted to be connected to said collecting means to receive said further cooled gas stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said expansion means being further connected to said absorbing means to supply said expanded further cooled gas stream as said bottom feed thereto.

48. The apparatus according to claim 39 wherein

- (1) a collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;
- (3) said collecting means is connected to said first heat exchange means to receive said cooled gas stream and direct it to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be further cooled by said external refrigeration medium; and
- (4) said expansion means is adapted to be connected to said collecting means to receive said further cooled gas stream and expand it to said lower

pressure, said expansion means being further connected to said absorbing means to supply said expanded further cooled gas stream as said bottom feed thereto.

49. The apparatus according to claim 26, 28, 32, 34, 35, or 38 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

50. The apparatus according to claim 36 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

51. The apparatus according to claim 41 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

52. The apparatus according to claim 43 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

53. The apparatus according to claim 44 wherein

(1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said separating means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;

(2) said vapor stream is directed to said additional heat and mass transfer means to be cooled by said external refrigeration medium to form additional condensate; and

(3) said condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

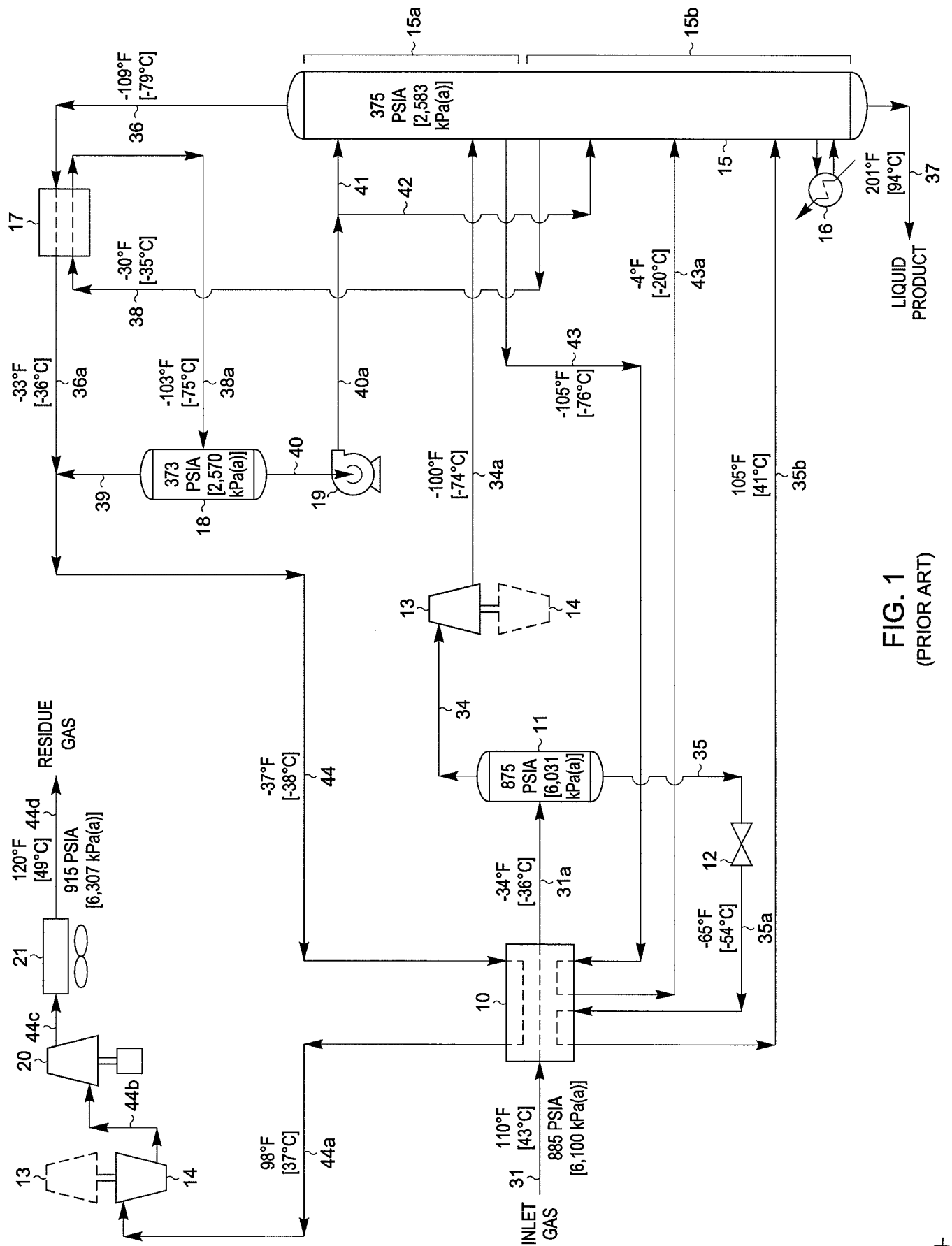


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

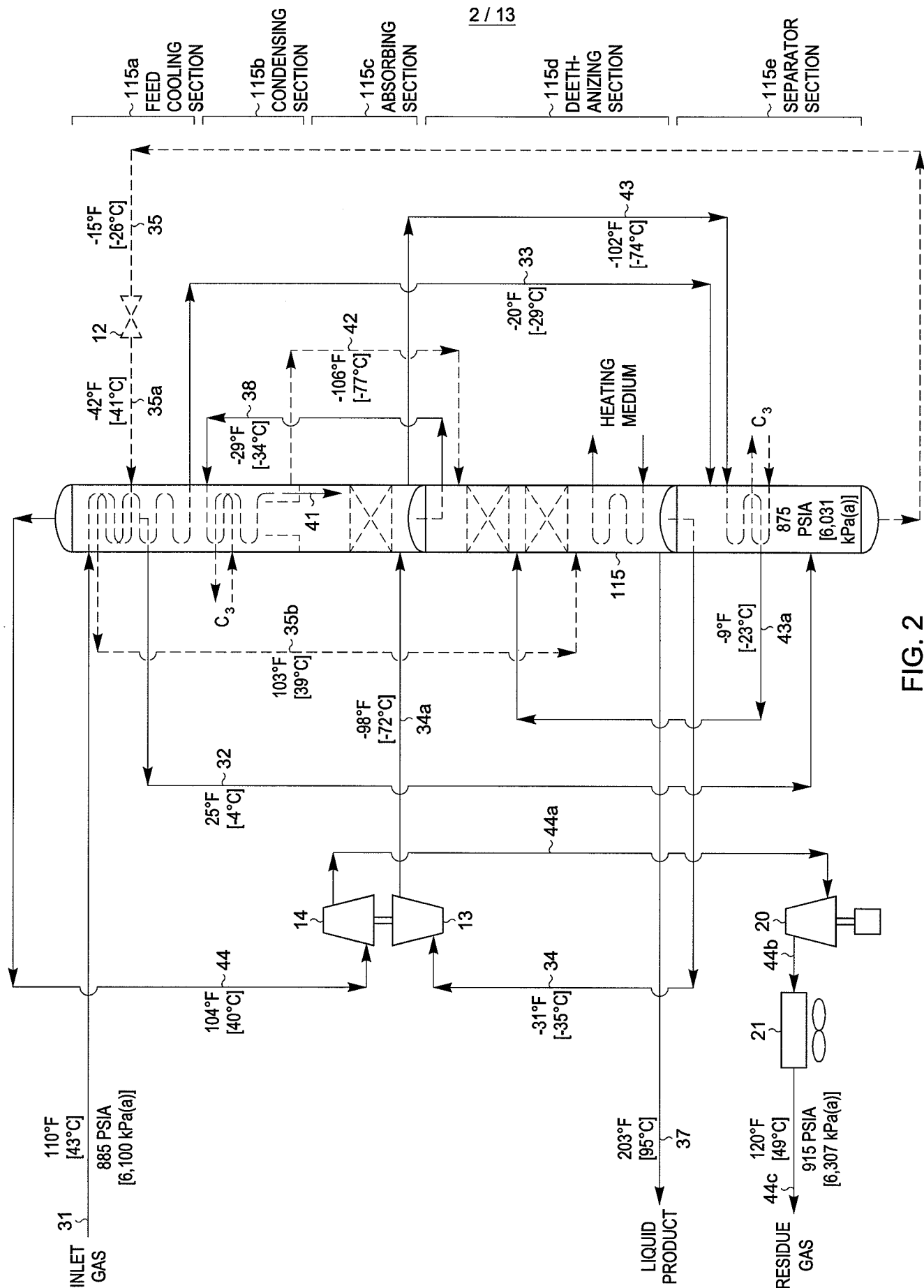


FIG. 2

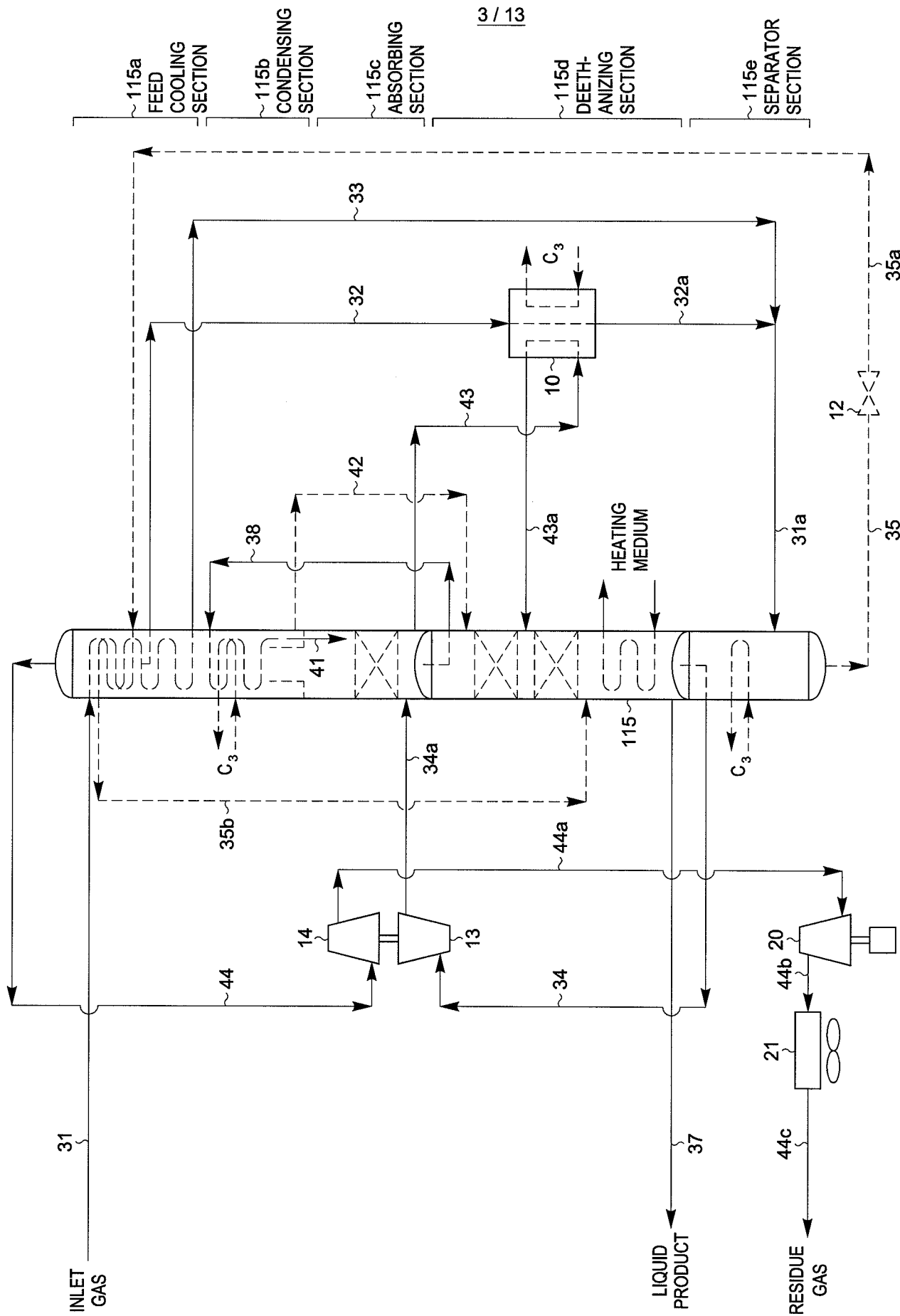


FIG. 3

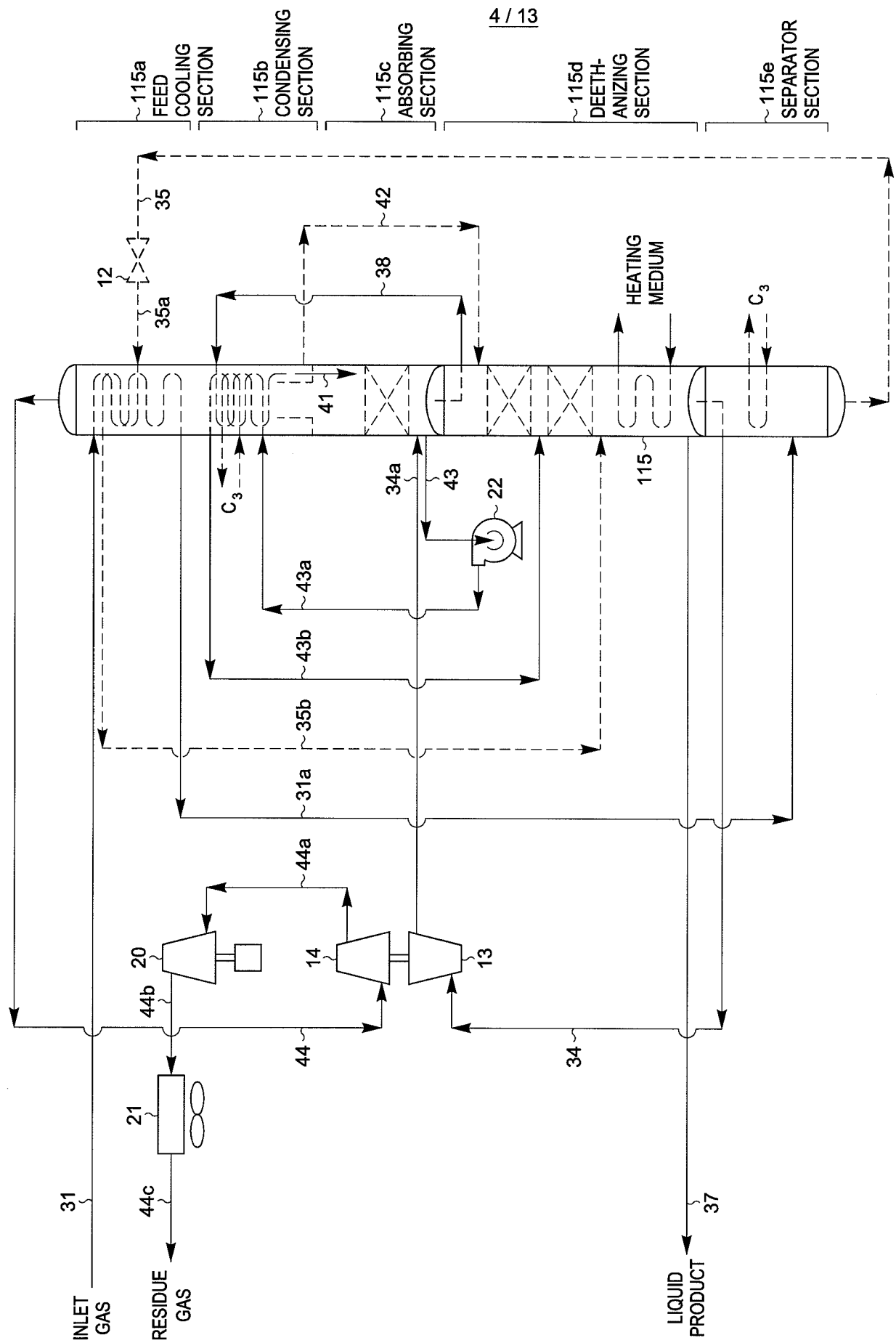


FIG. 4

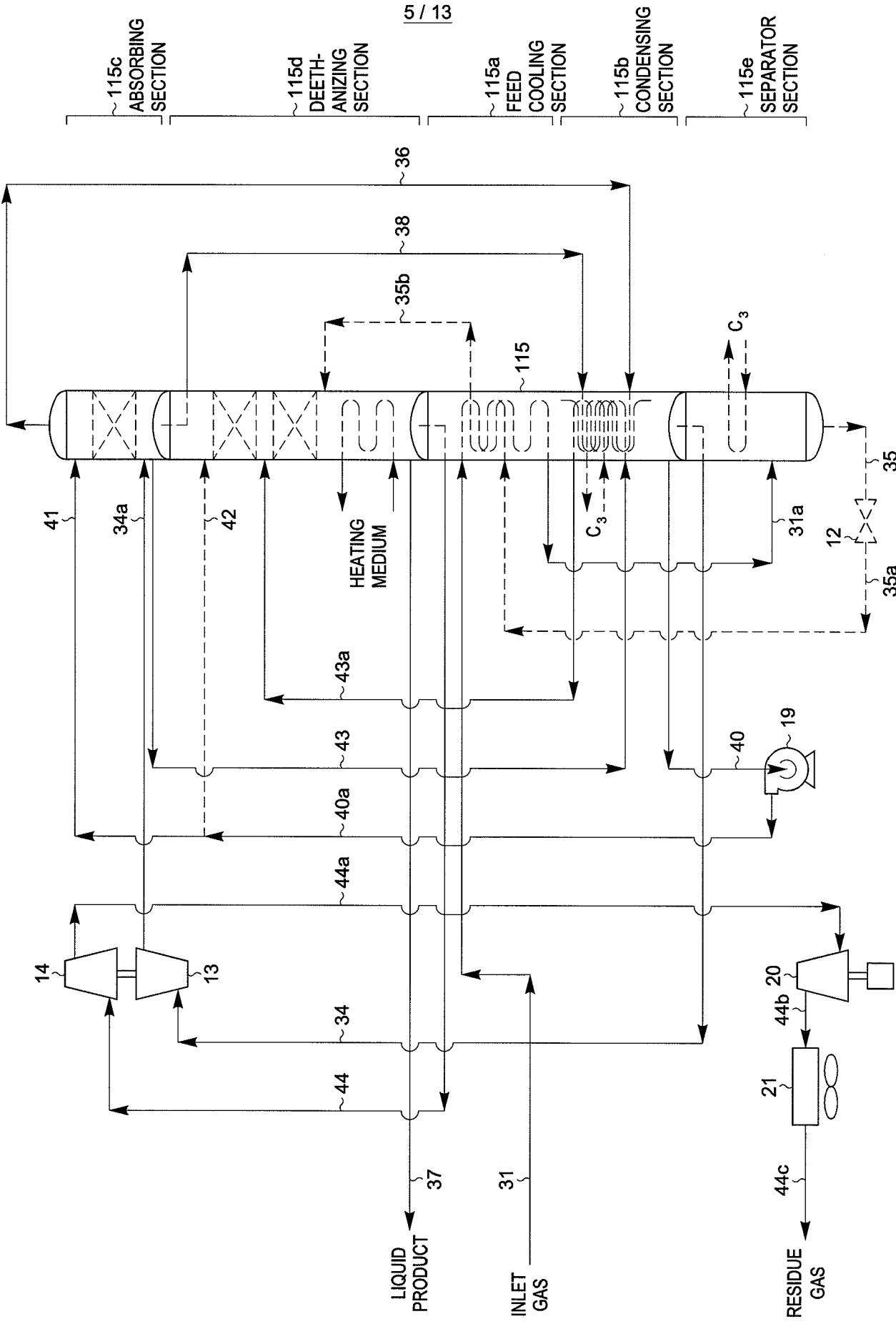


FIG. 5

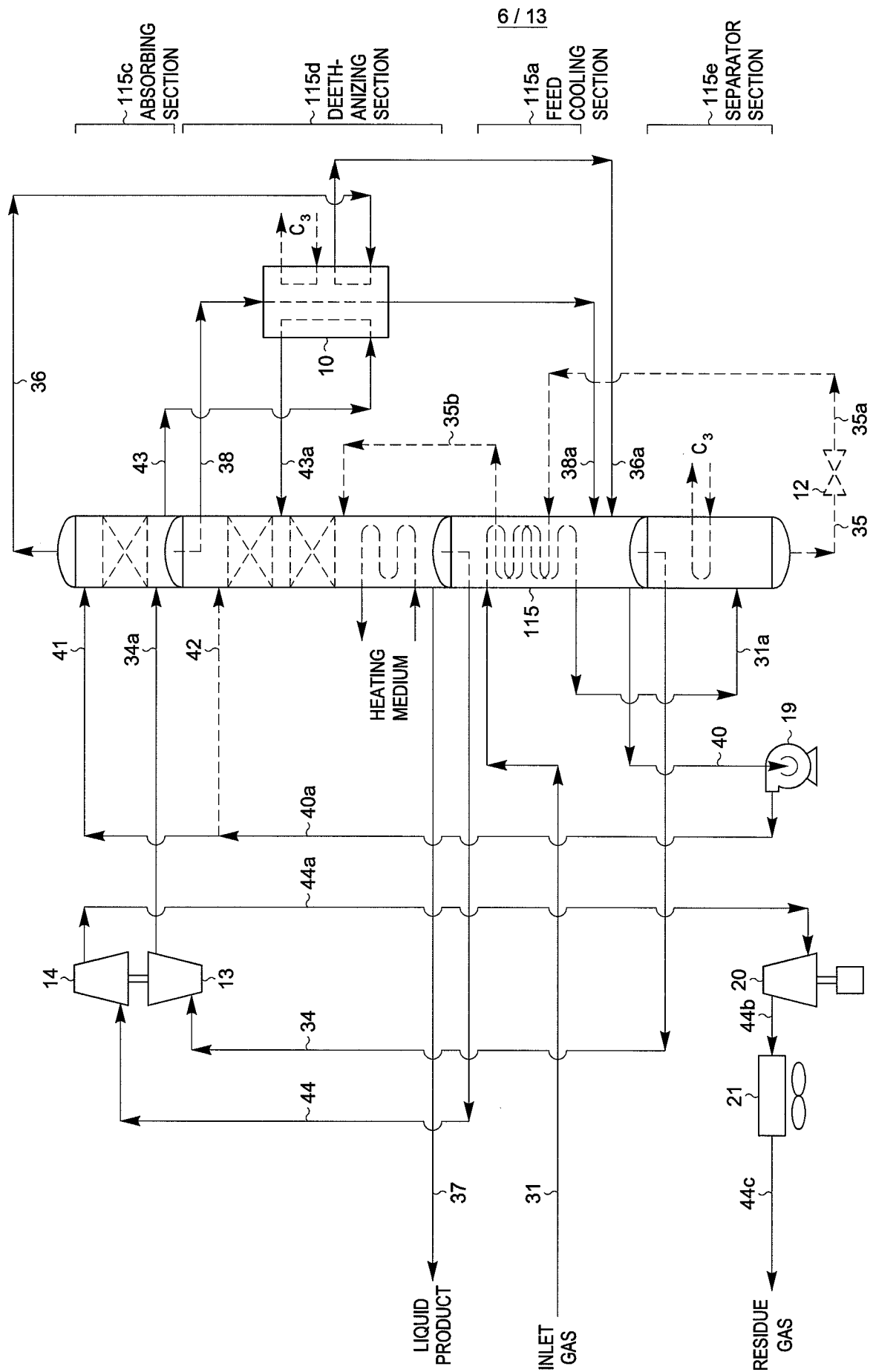


FIG. 6

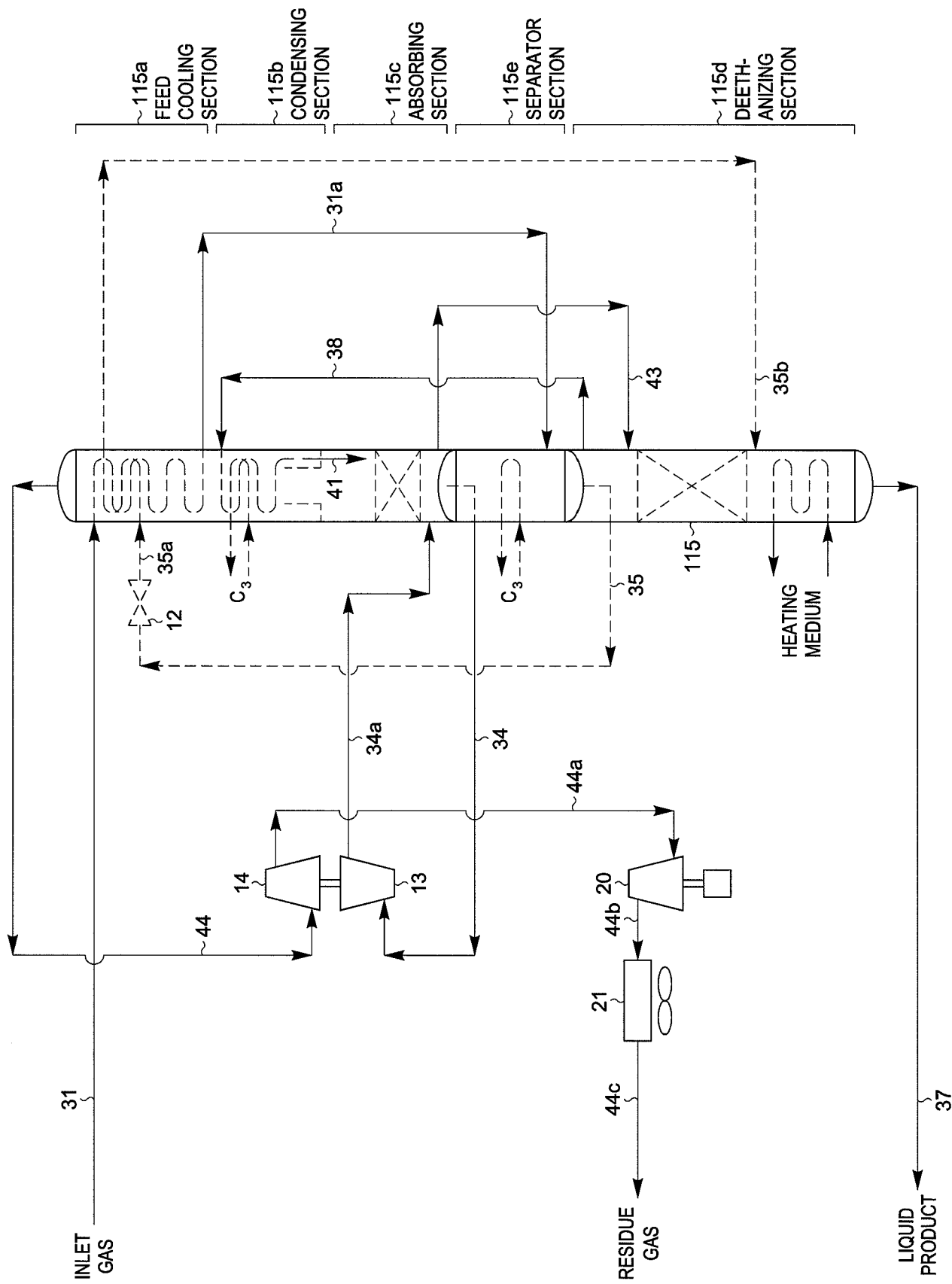


FIG. 7

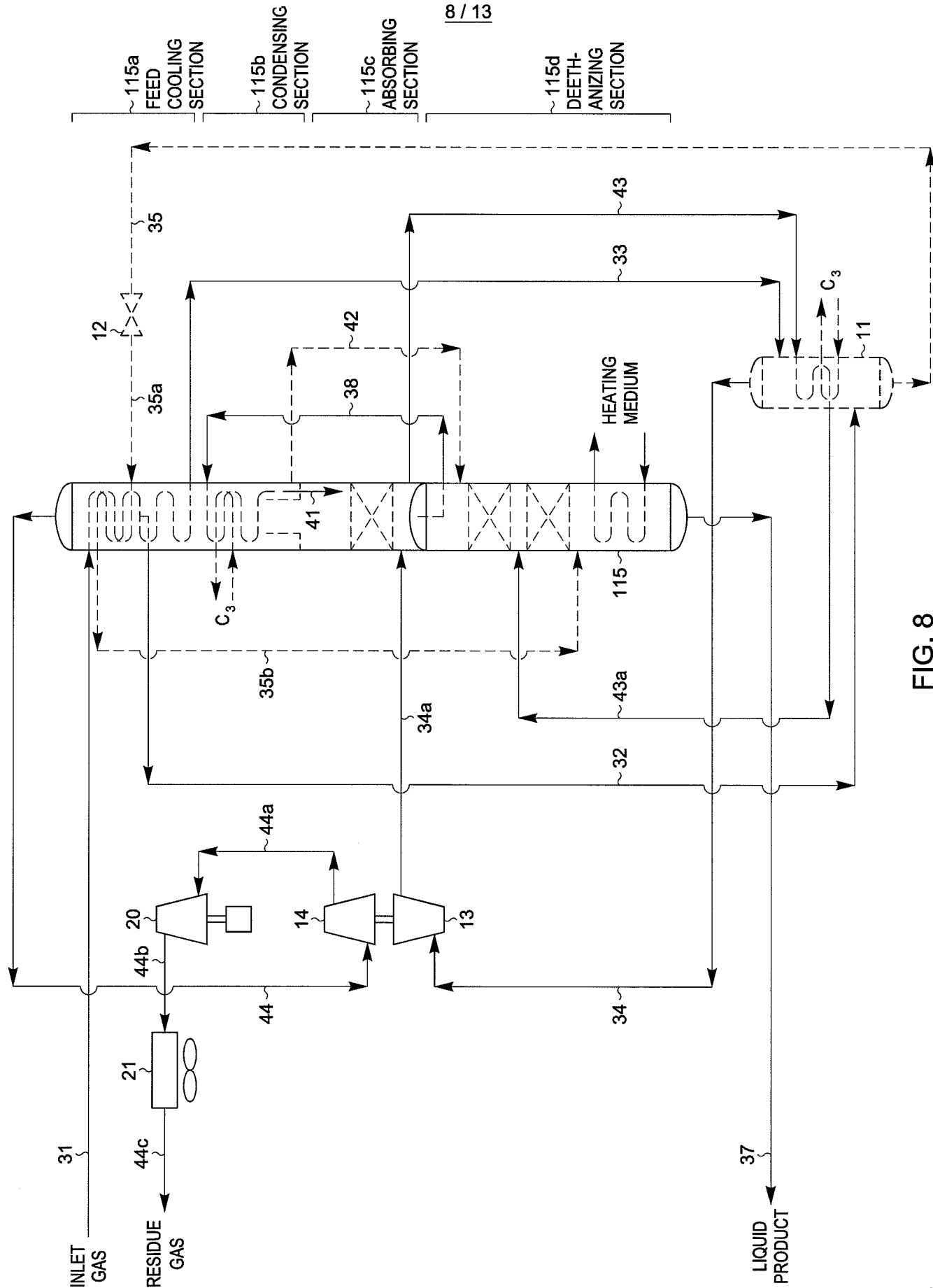


FIG. 8

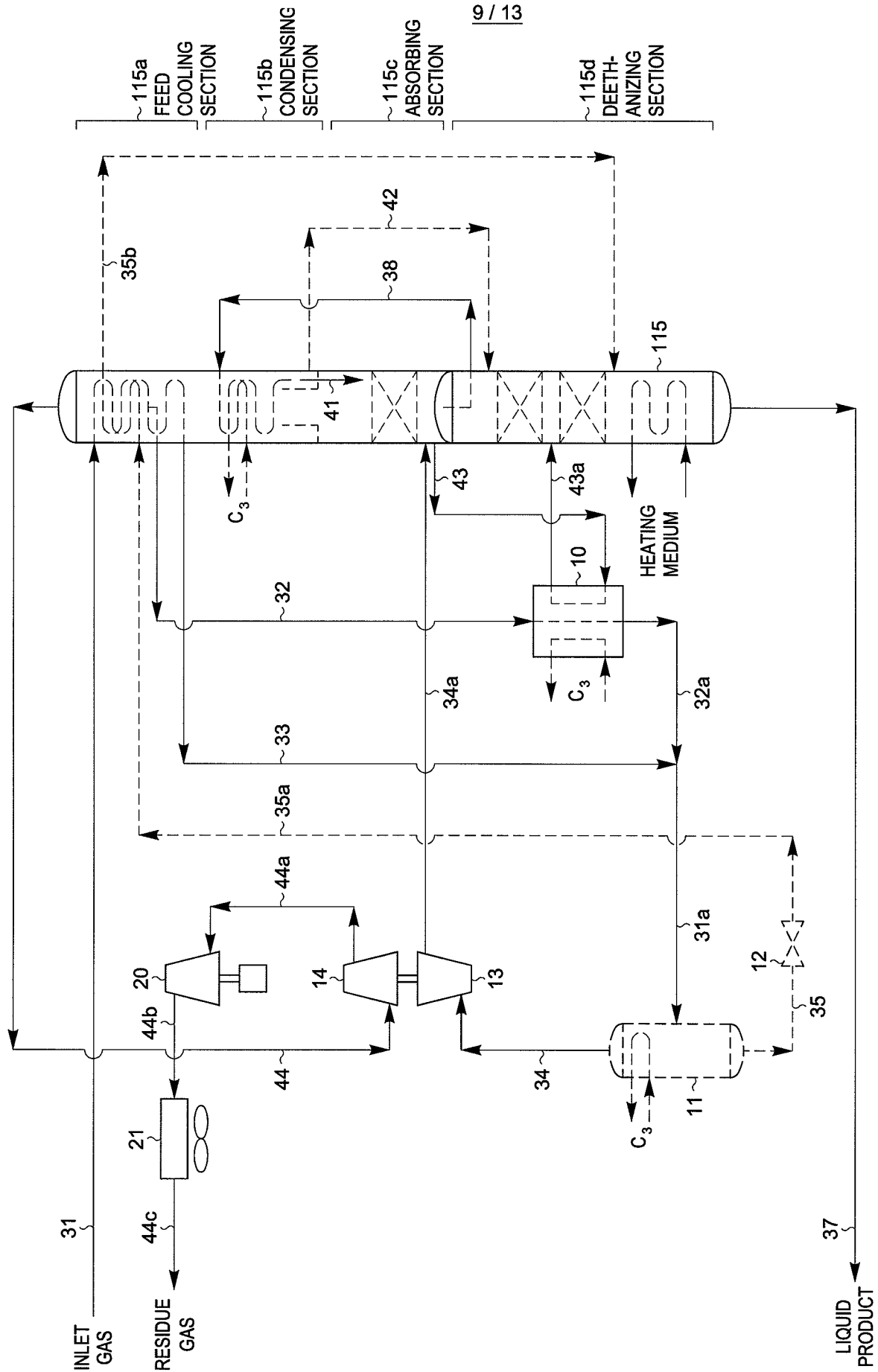


FIG. 9

+

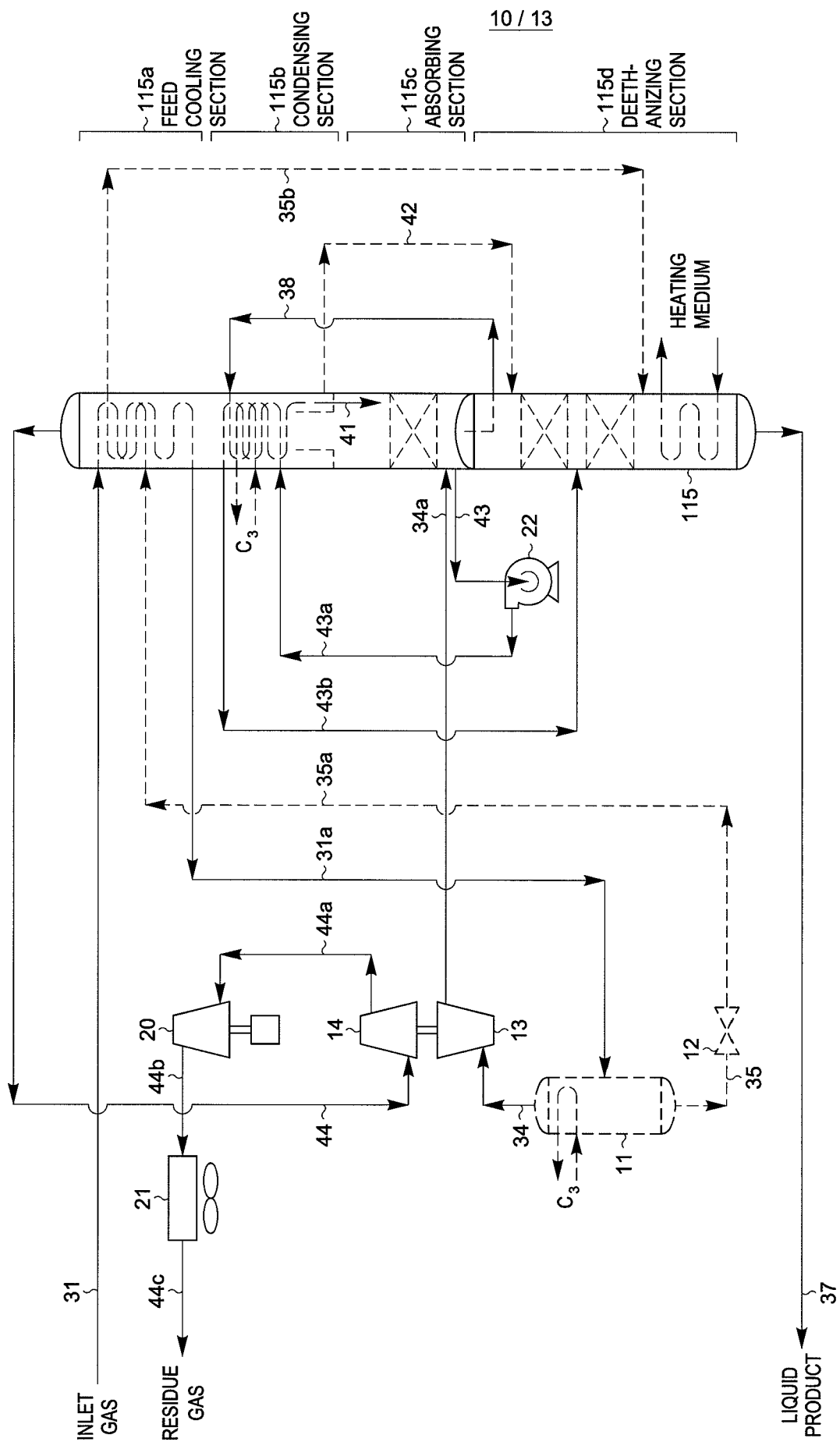


FIG. 10

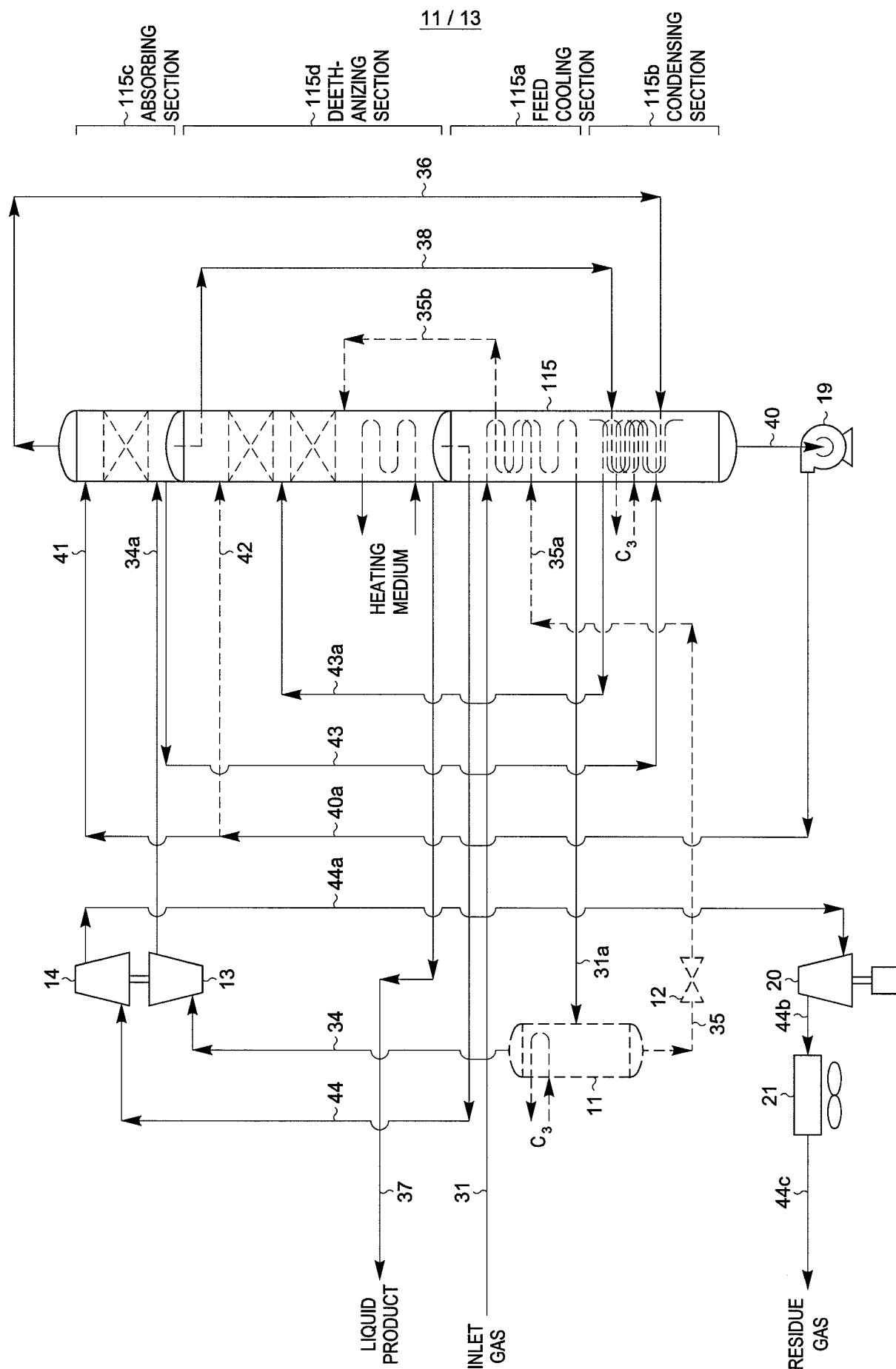
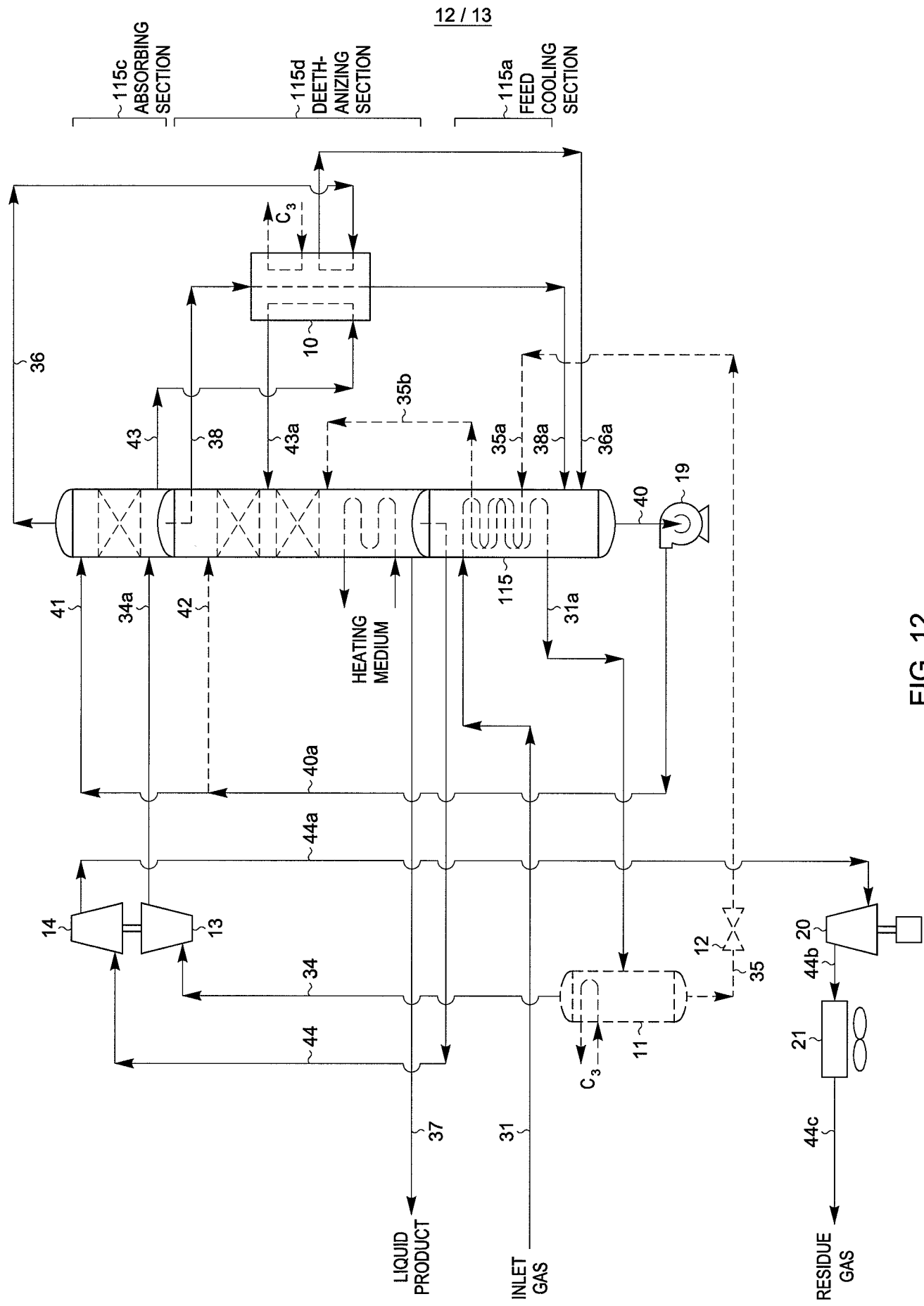


FIG. 11



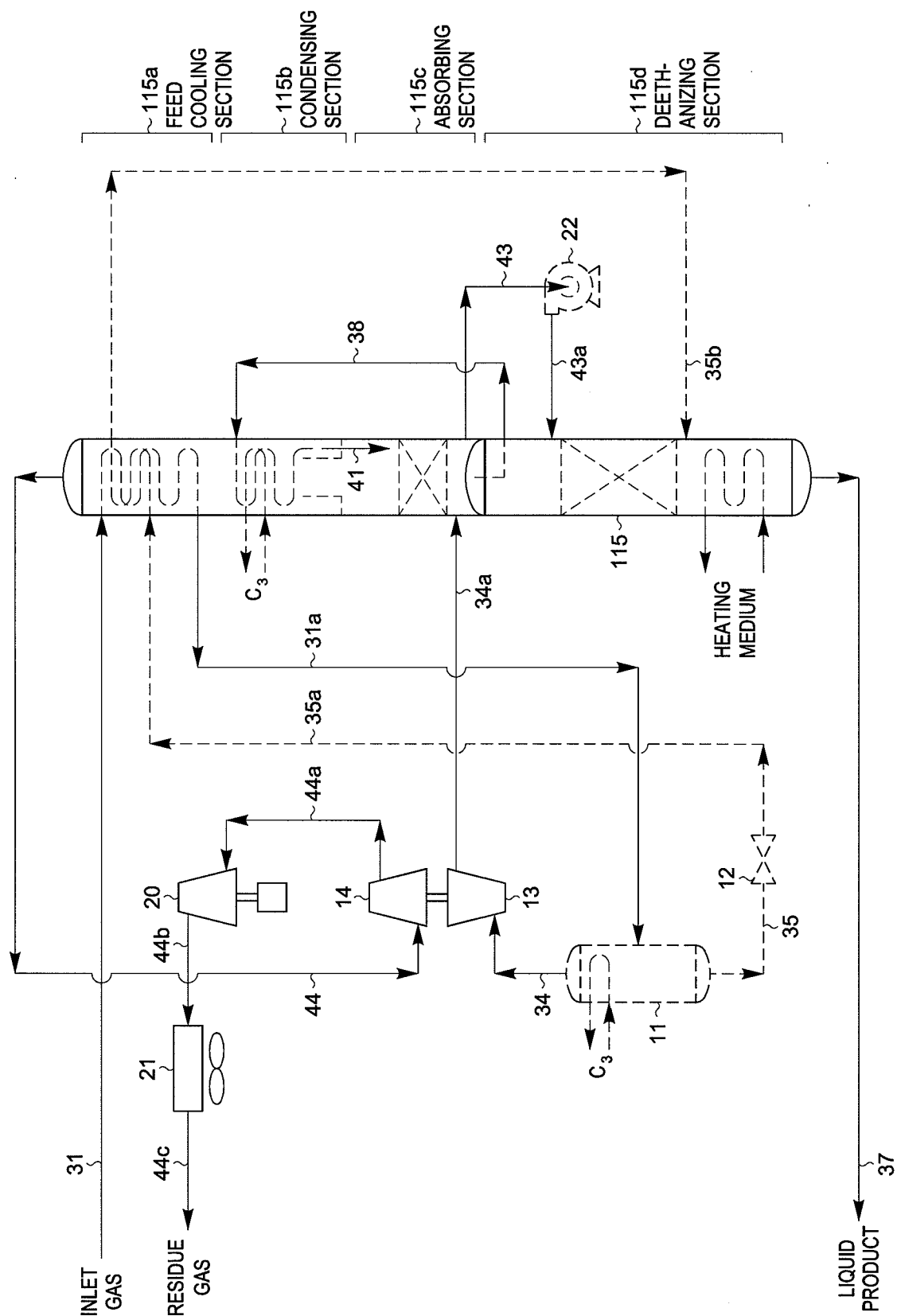


FIG. 13

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 10/29331

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(8) - F25J 3/00 (2010.01)

USPC - 62/620; 62/619; 62/625

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC(8): F25J 3/00 (2010.01)

USPC: 62/620; 62/619; 62/625

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

IPC(8): F25J 3/00 (2010.01)

USPC: 62/620; 62/619; 62/625

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

PubWEST: PGPB, USPT, EPAB, JPAB, GoogleScholar, Dialog

hydrocarbon recovery, gas separation, heavy carbon, methane, butane, propane, distillation, vapor stream

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 2009/0100862 A1 (WILKINSON et al.) 23 April 2009 (23.04.2009) Abstract, Fig. 3, para[0041], para[0042], para[0045], para[0046], para[0049], para[0050], para[0076], para[0079]	1, 19/1, 25, 46/25

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.


* Special categories of cited documents:

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

21 June 2010 (21.06.2010)

Date of mailing of the international search report

02 JUL 2010

Name and mailing address of the ISA/US

Mail Stop PCT, Attn: ISA/US, Commissioner for Patents
P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450

Facsimile No. 571-273-3201

Authorized officer:

Lee W. Young

PCT Helpdesk: 571-272-4300

PCT OSP: 571-272-7774

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 10/29331

Box No. II Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This international search report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

2. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:

3. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box No. III Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 3 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

This application contains the following inventions or groups of inventions which are not so linked as to form a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1. In order for all inventions to be examined, the appropriate additional examination fees must be paid.

Group I: claims 1, 19/1; 25; 46/25 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

- (1) said gas stream is cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;
- (2) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (3) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (4) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

Continued in Box IV

1. ☐ As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. ☐ As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying additional fees, this Authority did not invite payment of additional fees.
3. ☒ As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:
Claims 1, 19/1, 25, 46/25
4. ☐ No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:

Remark on Protest

- ☐ The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest and, where applicable, the payment of a protest fee.
- ☐ The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest but the applicable protest fee was not paid within the time limit specified in the invitation.
- ☒ No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

Box No. IV Text of the abstract (Continuation of item 5 of the first sheet)

-----Continued from Box III-----

(5) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(6) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(7) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5);

(8) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(9) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step

(1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing

assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(10) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

Group II: claims 2, 11, 21/2, 21/11, 26, 35, 49/26, 49/35 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;

(2) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;

(3) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(4) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;

(5) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;

(6) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;

(7) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;

(8) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;

(9) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (7);

(10) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;

(11) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step

(1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(12) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;

(13) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(14) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

-----Continued in C (Continuation)-----

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 10/29331

C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
	<p>-----Continued from Box IV-----</p> <p>Group III: claim 3, 9, 14/3, 14/9, 15/4, 15/10, 19/3, 19/9, 20/3, 20/9, 23/4, 23/10, 27, 33, 39/27, 39/33, 46/27, 46/33, 48/27, 48/33 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein</p> <p>(1) said gas stream is cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;</p> <p>(2) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;</p> <p>(3) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;</p> <p>(4) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in a second heat exchange means, with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;</p> <p>(5) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (4), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;</p> <p>(6) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;</p> <p>(7) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5);</p> <p>(8) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;</p> <p>(9) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;</p> <p>(10) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and</p> <p>(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.</p> <p>Group IV: claims 4, 10, 12/4, 12/10, 15/4, 15/10, 17/4, 17/10, 21/4, 22/4, 22/10, 23/4, 23/10, 24/4, 24/10, 28, 34, 36/28, 36/34, 41/28, 41/34, 44/28, 44/34, 49/28, 49/34, 50/28, 50/34, 51/28, 51/34, 53/28 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein</p> <p>(1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;</p> <p>(2) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;</p> <p>(3) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;</p> <p>(4) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;</p> <p>(5) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;</p> <p>(6) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in a second heat exchange means, with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;</p> <p>(7) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (6), and thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;</p> <p>(8) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;</p> <p>(9) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (7);</p> <p>-----Continued on next page-----</p>	

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(10) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;
(11) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;
(12) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;
(13) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and
(14) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

Group V: claim 5, 7, 8, 12/8, 13/5, 14/7, 15/8, 16/5, 17/8, 18/5, 19/7, 20/7, 21/8, 22/8, 23/8, 24/8, 29, 31, 32, 38, 37/29, 37/30, 40, 42/29, 42/31, 43/32, 43/38, 45/29, 47/31, 47/40, 49/32, 49/38, 52/32, 52/38, 53/28, 53/34 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;
(2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;
(3) said first portion is further cooled in a second heat exchange means;
(4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;
(5) said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion are combined to form a partially condensed gas stream;
(6) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;
(7) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
(8) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
(9) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;
(10) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;
(11) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a third heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;
(12) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;
(13) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said third heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (11);
(14) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;
(15) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;
(16) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;
(17) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and
(18) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

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Group VI: claims 6, 13/6, 16/6, 18/6, 30, 37/30, 45/30 directed to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

- (1) said gas stream is partially cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly;
- (2) said partially cooled gas stream is divided into first and second portions;
- (3) said first portion is further cooled in a first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;
- (4) said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means;
- (5) said further cooled second portion is directed to said separating means so that any liquids condensed as said first portion is further cooled and as said second portion is further cooled are combined to form at least one liquid stream, with the remainder of said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion forming a vapor stream;
- (6) said vapor stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (7) said expanded cooled vapor stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly;
- (8) said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure;
- (9) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said first heat and mass transfer means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly;
- (10) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled;
- (11) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means;
- (12) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (10);
- (13) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream;
- (14) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction;
- (15) said expanded at least one liquid stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter supplying said heated expanded at least one liquid stream as a bottom feed to said mass transfer means;
- (16) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a second heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and
- (17) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

The inventions listed as Groups I-IV do not relate to a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1 because under PCT Rule 13.2 they lack the same or corresponding technical features for the following reasons:

Groups I and III, do not include the partial cooling of the gas stream of groups II, IV, V and VI.

Groups I and III, V and VI do not include the expansion of the liquid stream of groups II and IV.

Groups I-II, V and VI do not include the heating of the distillation liquid stream of groups III and IV.

Groups I-IV do not include the cooling of the first portion and condensing, the separating of the condensate nor the heating of the distillation liquid stream with a previous stream of groups V and VI.

Groups I-IV and VI do not include the combining of cooled gas streams of group V.

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The following common features of groups I-VI are taught by US 2009/0100862 A1 to Wilkinson et al. published 23 April 2009 (hereinafter Wilkinson).

Wilkinson teaches a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas stream containing methane, C2 components, C3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction and a relatively less volatile fraction containing a major portion of said C3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein (fig. 3; para [0041]; abstract)

(1) said gas stream is cooled in a first heat exchange means housed in a processing assembly (fig. 3; heat exchanger 10; para [0042]);

(2) said cooled gas stream is expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled (fig. 3; para [0043]);

(3) said expanded cooled gas stream is supplied as a bottom feed to an absorbing means housed in said processing assembly (fig. 3; absorber section 20a);

(4) a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly (para [0046]; 'The liquid portion of the expanded stream commingles with liquids falling downward from the absorbing section 20a and the combined liquid continues downward into the stripping section 20b of demethanizer 20');

(5) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said mass transfer means and cooled sufficiently to condense at least a part of it in a second heat exchange means housed in said processing assembly, thereby forming a condensed stream and a residual vapor stream containing any uncondensed vapor remaining after said first distillation vapor stream is cooled (fig. 3; stream 42 to exchanger 22 to separator 23);

(6) at least a portion of said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said absorbing means (fig. 3; stream 44a);

(7) a second distillation vapor stream is collected from the upper region of said absorbing means and heated in said second heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5) (stream 38 to exchanger 22);

(8) said heated second distillation vapor stream is combined with any said residual vapor stream to form a combined vapor stream (stream 43 mixed with stream 38a);

(9) said combined vapor stream is heated in said first heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (1), and thereafter discharging said heated combined vapor stream from said processing assembly as said volatile residue gas fraction (stream 45 to exchangers 15, 13 and 10);

(10) a second distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said mass transfer means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said second distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped second distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction (fig. 3; stream 40 and 40a); and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered (abstract).

The common feature of groups II, IV, V and IV of partially cooling the gas stream is taught by Wilkinson (Fig. 3; vapor stream 36)

The common feature of groups II, IV of expanding the liquid stream is taught by Wilkinson (Para [0043]; 'The separator liquid (stream 37) is expanded to the tower operating pressure by expansion valve 19)

The common feature of groups III and IV of heating the liquid distillation stream is taught Wilkinson (Para [0046]; 'which heat and vaporize a portion of the liquids flowing down the column').

Wilkinson also teaches the common feature of groups V and VI of

-said first portion is further cooled in a first heat and mass transfer means housed in a separating means, thereby to simultaneously condense the less volatile components from said first portion;

-said second portion is further cooled in said first heat exchange means (Fig. 3; streams 32, 36 and 35 where stream 35 is cooled in exchangers 13 and 15);

-said further cooled second portion is directed to said separating means so that any liquids condensed as said first portion is further cooled and as said second portion is further cooled are combined to form at least one liquid stream, with the remainder of said further cooled first portion and said further cooled second portion forming a vapor stream (Stream 35b; para [0044]); and

- a first distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of said absorbing means and heated in said first heat and mass transfer means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3), with said heated first distillation liquid stream thereafter supplied as a top feed to a mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly (Fig. 3; stream 39); therefore the common features are not an improvement over the prior art.

None of these technical features are common to the other groups, nor do they correspond to a special technical feature in the other groups. Therefore, unity of invention is lacking.