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(54) Title: HYDROCARBON GAS PROCESSING

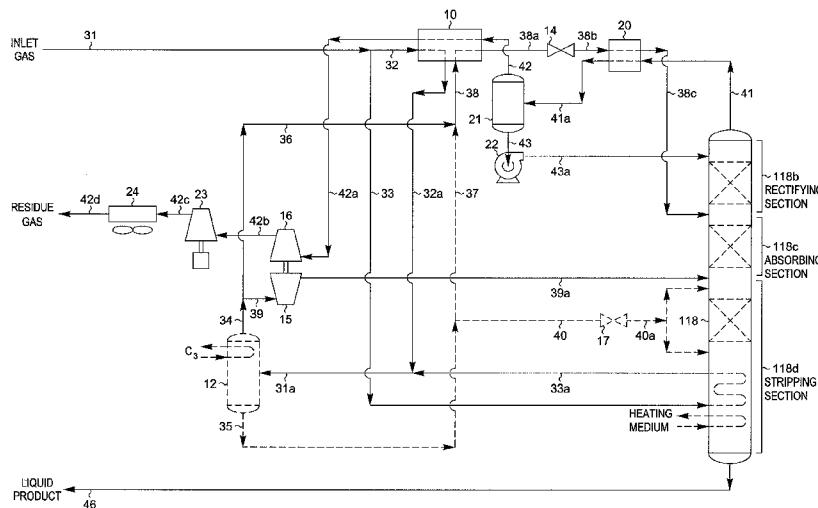


FIG. 9

(57) Abstract: A process and an apparatus are disclosed for a compact processing assembly to recover C₂ (or C₃) and heavier hydrocarbon components from a hydrocarbon gas stream. The gas stream is cooled and divided into first and second streams. The first stream is further cooled, expanded to lower pressure, heated, and its liquid fraction is supplied as a first top feed to an absorbing means. The second stream is expanded to lower pressure and supplied as a bottom feed to the absorbing means. A distillation vapor stream from the absorbing means is combined with the vapor fraction of the first stream, then cooled by the expanded first stream to form a condensed stream that is supplied as a second top feed to the absorbing means. A distillation liquid stream from the bottom of the absorbing means is heated in a heat and mass transfer means to strip out its volatile components.

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HYDROCARBON GAS PROCESSING

SPECIFICATION

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] Ethylene, ethane, 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.

[0002] The present invention is generally concerned with the recovery of ethylene, ethane, 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, 90.3% methane, 4.0% ethane and other C₂ components, 1.7% propane and other C₃ components, 0.3% iso-butane, 0.5% normal butane, and 0.8% pentanes plus, with the balance made up of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Sulfur containing gases are also sometimes present.

[0003] 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 ethane, ethylene, 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, for processes that can provide efficient recoveries with lower capital investment, and for processes that can be easily adapted or adjusted to vary the recovery of a specific component over a broad range. 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.

[0004] 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; 12/206,230; 12/689,616; 12/717,394; 12/750,862; 12/772,472; 12/781,259; 12/868,993; 12/869,007; 12/869,139; 12/979,563; 13/048,315; 13/051,682; 13/052,348; and 13/052,575 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).

[0005] 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 C₂+ 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 (demethanizer or deethanizer) column. In the column, the expansion cooled stream(s) is (are) distilled to separate residual methane, nitrogen, and other volatile gases as overhead vapor from the desired C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components as bottom liquid product, or 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.

[0006] If the feed gas is not totally condensed (typically it is not), the vapor remaining from the partial condensation can be split into two streams. One portion of the vapor is 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 pressure after expansion is essentially the same as the pressure at which the distillation column is operated. The combined vapor-liquid phases resulting from the expansion are supplied as feed to the column.

[0007] The remaining portion of the vapor is cooled to substantial condensation by heat exchange with other process streams, e.g., the cold fractionation tower overhead. Some or all of the high-pressure liquid may be combined with this vapor portion prior to cooling. The resulting cooled stream is then expanded through an appropriate expansion device, such as an expansion valve, to the pressure at which the demethanizer is operated. During expansion, a portion of the liquid will vaporize, resulting in cooling of the total stream. The flash expanded stream is then supplied as top feed to the demethanizer. Typically, the vapor portion of the flash expanded stream and the demethanizer overhead vapor combine in an upper separator section in the fractionation tower as residual methane product gas. Alternatively, the cooled and expanded stream may be supplied to a separator to provide vapor and liquid streams. The vapor is combined with the tower overhead and the liquid is supplied to the column as a top column feed.

[0008] In the ideal operation of such a separation process, the residue gas leaving the process will contain substantially all of the methane in the feed gas with essentially none of the heavier hydrocarbon components and the bottoms fraction

leaving the demethanizer will contain substantially all of the heavier hydrocarbon components with essentially no methane or more volatile components. In practice, however, this ideal situation is not obtained because the conventional demethanizer is operated largely as a stripping column. The methane product of the process, therefore, typically comprises vapors leaving the top fractionation stage of the column, together with vapors not subjected to any rectification step. Considerable losses of C₂, C₃, and C₄₊ components occur because the top liquid feed contains substantial quantities of these components and heavier hydrocarbon components, resulting in corresponding equilibrium quantities of C₂ components, C₃ components, C₄ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components in the vapors leaving the top fractionation stage of the demethanizer. The loss of these desirable components could be significantly reduced if the rising vapors could be brought into contact with a significant quantity of liquid (reflux) capable of absorbing the C₂ components, C₃ components, C₄ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components from the vapors.

[0009] In recent years, the preferred processes for hydrocarbon separation use an upper absorber section to provide additional rectification of the rising vapors. One method of generating a reflux stream for the upper rectification section is to use the flash expanded substantially condensed stream to cool and partially condense the column overhead vapor, with the heated flash expanded stream then directed to a mid-column feed point on the demethanizer. The liquid condensed from the column overhead vapor is separated and supplied as top feed to the demethanizer, while the uncondensed vapor is discharged as the residual methane product gas. The heated flash expanded stream is only partially vaporized, and so contains a substantial quantity of liquid that serves as supplemental reflux for the demethanizer, so that the

top reflux feed can then rectify the vapors leaving the lower section of the column.

U.S. Patent No. 4,854,955 is an example of a process of this type.

[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 C₂ recoveries in excess of 86% can be obtained. Similarly, in those instances where recovery of C₂ components is not desired, C₃ recoveries in excess of 99% 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 methane (or C₂ components) and lighter components from the C₂ components (or 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] FIGS. 1 and 2 are flow diagrams of prior art natural gas processing plants in accordance with United States Patent No. 4,854,955;

[0014] FIG. 3 is a flow diagram of a natural gas processing plant in accordance with the present invention; and

[0015] FIGS. 4 through 10 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 C₂+ components from natural gas using prior art according to U.S. Pat. No. 4,854,955. In this simulation of the process, inlet gas enters the plant at 110°F [43°C] and 915 psia [6,307 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 divided into two portions, streams 32 and 33. Stream 32 is cooled to -34°F [-37°C] in heat exchanger 10 by heat exchange with cool residue gas stream 42a, while stream 33 is cooled to -13°F [-25°C] in heat exchanger 11 by heat exchange with demethanizer reboiler liquids at 52°F [11°C] (stream 45) and side reboiler liquids at -49°F [-45°C] (stream 44). Streams 32a and 33a recombine to form stream 31a, which enters separator 12 at -28°F [-33°C] and

893 psia [6,155 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **35**).

[0020] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator **12** is divided into two streams, **36** and **39**. Stream **36**, containing about 27% of the total vapor, is combined with the separator liquid (stream **35**), and the combined stream **38** passes through heat exchanger **13** in heat exchange relation with cold residue gas stream **42** where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream **38a** at -135°F [-93°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **14** to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 396 psia [2,730 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower **18**. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 1, the expanded stream **38b** leaving expansion valve **14** reaches a temperature of -138°F [-94°C] before entering heat exchanger **20**. In heat exchanger **20**, the flash expanded stream is heated and partially vaporized as it provides cooling and partial condensation of column overhead stream **41**, with the heated stream **38c** at -139°F [-95°C] thereafter supplied to fractionation tower **18** at an upper mid-column feed point. (Note that the temperature of stream **38b/38c** drops slightly as it is heated, due to the pressure drop through heat exchanger **20** and the resulting vaporization of some of the liquid methane contained in the stream.)

[0021] The remaining 73% of the vapor from separator **12** (stream **39**) enters a work expansion machine **15** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **15** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **39a** to a temperature of approximately -95°F [-71°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 **16**) that can be used to re-compress the heated residue gas stream (stream **42b**), for example. The partially condensed expanded stream **39a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **18** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0022] The column overhead vapor (stream **41**) is withdrawn from the top of demethanizer **18** and cooled from -136°F [-93°C] to -138°F [-94°C] and partially condensed (stream **41a**) in heat exchanger **20** by heat exchange with the flash expanded substantially condensed stream **38b** as previously described. The operating pressure in reflux separator **21** (391 psia [2,696 kPa(a)]) is maintained slightly below the operating pressure of demethanizer **18**. This provides the driving force which causes overhead vapor stream **41** to flow through heat exchanger **20** and thence into the reflux separator **21** wherein the condensed liquid (stream **43**) is separated from the uncondensed vapor (stream **42**). The liquid stream **43** from reflux separator **21** is pumped by pump **22** to a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of demethanizer **18**, and stream **43a** is then supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to demethanizer **18**. This cold liquid reflux absorbs and condenses the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components in the vapors rising through the upper region of absorbing section **18a** of demethanizer **18**.

[0023] The demethanizer in tower **18** is a conventional distillation column containing a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. As is often the case in natural gas processing plants, the demethanizer tower consists of two sections: an upper absorbing (rectification) section **18a** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the vapor portion of expanded stream **39a** rising upward

and cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components; and a lower stripping (demethanizing) section **18b** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the liquids falling downward and the vapors rising upward. The demethanizing section **18b** also includes reboilers (such as the reboiler and the side reboiler described previously) which heat and vaporize 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 **46**) of methane and lighter components. The liquid product stream **46** exits the bottom of the tower at 77°F [25°C], based on a typical specification of a methane to ethane ratio of 0.010:1 on a mass basis in the bottom product.

[0024] Vapor stream **42** from reflux separator **21** is the cold residue gas stream. It passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger **13** where it is heated to -54°F [-48°C] (stream **42a**) and in heat exchanger **10** where it is heated to 98°F [37°C] (stream **42b**) as it provides cooling as previously described. The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages. The first stage is compressor **16** driven by expansion machine **15**. The second stage is compressor **23** driven by a supplemental power source which compresses the residue gas (stream **42d**) to sales line pressure. After cooling to 110°F [43°C] in discharge cooler **24**, residue gas stream **42e** 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).

[0025] 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	12,398	546	233	229	13,726
32	8,431	371	159	156	9,334
33	3,967	175	74	73	4,392
34	12,195	501	179	77	13,261
35	203	45	54	152	465
36	3,317	136	49	21	3,607
38	3,520	181	103	173	4,072
39	8,878	365	130	56	9,654
41	12,449	86	7	1	12,788
43	60	4	2	1	69
42	12,389	82	5	0	12,719
46	9	464	228	229	1,007

Recoveries*

Ethane	84.99%
Propane	97.74%
Butanes+	99.83%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	5,505 HP	[9,050 kW]
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* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0026] FIG. 2 is a process flow diagram showing one manner in which the design of the processing plant in FIG. 1 can be adapted to operate at a lower C₂ component recovery level. This is a common requirement when the relative values of natural gas and liquid hydrocarbons are variable, causing recovery of the C₂ components to be unprofitable at times. The process of FIG. 2 has been applied to the same feed gas composition and conditions as described previously for FIG. 1. However, in the simulation of the process of FIG. 2, the process operating conditions have been adjusted to reject nearly all of C₂ components to the residue gas rather than recovering them in the bottom liquid product from the fractionation tower.

[0027] In this simulation of the process, inlet gas enters the plant at 110°F [43°C] and 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)] as stream 31 and is cooled in heat exchanger 10 by heat exchange with cool residue gas stream 42a. Cooled stream 31a enters separator 12 at 15°F [-9°C] and 900 psia [6,203 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream 34) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream 35).

[0028] The vapor (stream 34) from separator 12 is divided into two streams, 36 and 39. Stream 36, containing about 28% of the total vapor, is combined with the

separator liquid (stream **35**), and the combined stream **38** passes through heat exchanger **13** in heat exchange relation with cold residue gas stream **42** where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream **38a** at -114°F [-81°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **14** to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 400 psia [2,758 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower **18**. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 2, the expanded stream **38b** leaving expansion valve **14** reaches a temperature of -137°F [-94°C] before entering heat exchanger **20**. In heat exchanger **20**, the flash expanded stream is heated and partially vaporized as it provides cooling and partial condensation of column overhead stream **41**, with the heated stream **38c** at -107°F [-77°C] thereafter supplied to fractionation tower **18** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0029] The remaining 72% of the vapor from separator **12** (stream **39**) enters a work expansion machine **15** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **15** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **39a** to a temperature of approximately -58°F [-50°C] before it is supplied as feed to fractionation tower **18** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0030] The column overhead vapor (stream **41**) is withdrawn from the top of deethanizer **18** and cooled from -102°F [-74°C] to -117°F [-83°C] and partially condensed (stream **41a**) in heat exchanger **20** by heat exchange with the flash expanded substantially condensed stream **38b** as previously described. The partially condensed stream **41a** enters reflux separator **21**, operating at 395 psia [2,723 kPa(a)], where the condensed liquid (stream **43**) is separated from the uncondensed vapor (stream **42**). The liquid stream **43** from reflux separator **21** is pumped by pump **22** to

a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of deethanizer **18**, and stream **43a** is then supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to deethanizer **18**.

[0031] The liquid product stream **46** exits the bottom of the tower at 223°F [106°C], based on a typical specification of an ethane to propane ratio of 0.050:1 on a molar basis in the bottom product. The cold residue gas (vapor stream **42** from reflux separator **21**) passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger **13** where it is heated to -25°F [-31°C] (stream **42a**) and in heat exchanger **10** where it is heated to 105°F [41°C] (stream **42b**) as it provides cooling as previously described. The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **16** driven by expansion machine **15** and compressor **23** driven by a supplemental power source. After stream **42d** is cooled to 110°F [43°C] in discharge cooler **24**, the residue gas product (stream **42e**) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)].

[0032] 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	12,398	546	233	229	13,726
34	12,332	532	215	128	13,523
35	66	14	18	101	203
36	3,502	151	61	36	3,841
38	3,568	165	79	137	4,044
39	8,830	381	154	92	9,682
41	13,441	1,033	7	0	14,877
43	1,043	498	6	0	1,624
42	12,398	535	1	0	13,253
46	0	11	232	229	473

Recoveries*

Propane 99.50%

Butanes+ 100.00%

Power

Residue Gas Compression 5,595 HP [9,198 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTIONExample 1

[0033] FIG. 3 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. 3 are the same as those in FIG. 1. Accordingly, the FIG. 3 process can be compared with that of the FIG. 1 process to illustrate the advantages of the present invention.

[0034] In the simulation of the FIG. 3 process, inlet gas enters the plant as stream **31** and is divided into two portions, streams **32** and **33**. The first portion, stream **32**, enters a heat exchange means in the upper region of feed cooling section **118a** inside processing assembly **118**. 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 **32** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and a distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** inside processing assembly **118** that has been heated in a heat exchange means in the lower region of feed cooling section **118a**. Stream **32** is cooled while further heating the distillation vapor stream, with stream **32a** leaving the heat exchange means at -29°F [-34°C].

[0035] The second portion, stream **33**, enters a heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d** inside processing assembly **118**. 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 stream **33** flowing through one pass of the heat and mass transfer means and a distillation liquid stream flowing downward from an absorbing means above the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d**, so that stream **33** is cooled while heating the distillation liquid stream, cooling stream **33a** to -10°F [-23°C] before it leaves the heat and mass transfer means. 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 **46** of methane and lighter components.

[0036] Streams **32a** and **33a** recombine to form stream **31a**, which enters separator section **118e** inside processing assembly **118** at -23°F [-31°C] and 900 psia [6,203 kPa(a)], whereupon the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **35**). Separator section **118e** has an internal head or other means to divide it from stripping section **118d**, so that the two sections inside processing assembly **118** can operate at different pressures.

[0037] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator section **118e** is divided into two streams, **36** and **39**. Stream **36**, containing about 29% of the total vapor, is combined with the separated liquid (stream **35**, via stream **37**), and the combined stream **38** enters a heat exchange means in the lower region of feed cooling section **118a** inside processing assembly **118**. 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 stream **38** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and the distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** inside processing assembly **118**, so that stream **38** is cooled to substantial condensation while heating the distillation vapor stream.

[0038] The resulting substantially condensed stream **38a** at -135°F [-93°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **14** to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 388 psia [2,675 kPa(a)]) of rectifying section **118b** and absorbing section **118c** (an absorbing means) inside processing assembly **118**. During expansion a portion of the stream may be vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 3, the expanded stream **38b** leaving expansion valve **14** reaches a temperature of -139°F [-95°C] before it is directed into a heat and mass transfer means inside rectifying section **118b**. 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 distillation vapor stream arising from absorbing section **118c** flowing upward through one pass of the heat and mass transfer means and the expanded stream **38b** flowing downward, so that the distillation vapor is cooled while heating the expanded stream. As the distillation vapor stream is cooled, a portion of it is condensed and falls downward while the remaining distillation 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 distillation vapor so that it also functions to provide mass transfer between the vapor and liquid phases, thereby

providing rectification of the distillation vapor. The condensed liquid is collected from the bottom of the heat and mass transfer means and directed to absorbing section **118c**.

[0039] The flash expanded stream **38b** is partially vaporized as it provides cooling and partial condensation of the distillation vapor stream, and exits the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** at -140°F [-96°C]. (Note that the temperature of stream **38b** drops slightly as it is heated, due to the pressure drop through the heat and mass transfer means and the resulting vaporization of some of the liquid methane contained in the stream.) The heated flash expanded stream is separated into its respective vapor and liquid phases, with the vapor phase combining with the vapor arising from absorbing section **118c** to form the distillation vapor stream that enters the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** as previously described. The liquid phase is directed to the upper region of absorbing section **118c** to join with the liquid condensed from the distillation vapor stream in rectifying section **118b**.

[0040] The remaining 71% of the vapor from separator section **118e** (stream **39**) enters a work expansion machine **15** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **15** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the operating pressure of absorbing section **118c**, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **39a** to a temperature of approximately -93°F [-70°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **39a** is thereafter supplied as feed to the lower region of absorbing section **118c** inside processing assembly **118** to be contacted by the liquids supplied to the upper region of absorbing section **118c**.

[0041] Absorbing section **118c** and stripping section **118d** each contain 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 **118c** and stripping section **118d** provide the necessary contact between the vapors rising upward and cold liquid falling downward. The liquid portion of the expanded stream **39a** commingles with liquids falling downward from absorbing section **118c** and the combined liquid continues downward into stripping section **118d**. The vapors arising from stripping section **118d** combine with the vapor portion of the expanded stream **39a** and rise upward through absorbing section **118c**, to be contacted with the cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb most of the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components from these vapors. The vapors arising from absorbing section **118c** combine with the vapor portion of the heated expanded stream **38b** and rise upward through rectifying section **118b**, to be cooled and rectified to remove most of the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components remaining in these vapors as previously described. The liquid portion of the heated expanded stream **38b** commingles with liquids falling downward from rectifying section **118b** and the combined liquid continues downward into absorbing section **118c**.

[0042] The distillation liquid flowing downward from the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d** inside processing assembly **118** has been stripped of methane and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream **46**) exits the lower region of stripping section **118d** and leaves processing assembly **118** at 73°F [23°C]. The distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** is warmed in feed cooling section **118a** as it provides cooling to streams **32** and **38** as previously described, and the resulting residue gas stream **42** leaves processing

assembly **118** at 99°F [37°C]. The residue gas stream is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **16** driven by expansion machine **15** and compressor **23** driven by a supplemental power source. After stream **42b** is cooled to 110°F [43°C] in discharge cooler **24**, the residue gas product (stream **42c**) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)].

[0043] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 3 is set forth in the following table:

Table III

(FIG. 3)

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	12,398	546	233	229	13,726
32	8,431	371	159	156	9,334
33	3,967	175	74	73	4,392
34	12,221	507	186	83	13,308
35	177	39	47	146	418
36	3,544	147	54	24	3,859
37	177	39	47	146	418
38	3,721	186	101	170	4,277
39	8,677	360	132	59	9,449
42	12,389	73	5	0	12,700
46	9	473	228	229	1,026

Recoveries*

Ethane	86.66%
Propane	98.01%
Butanes+	99.81%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	5,299 HP	[8,711 kW]
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* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0044] A comparison of Tables I and III shows that, compared to the prior art, the present invention improves ethane recovery from 84.99% to 86.66% and propane recovery from 97.74% to 98.01%, and maintains essentially the same butanes+ recovery (99.81% versus 99.83% for the prior art). Comparison of Tables I and III further 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 ethane recovered per unit of power), the present invention represents nearly a 6% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 1 process.

[0045] 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 **118a** and rectifying section **118b** inside processing assembly **118** eliminates the pressure drop imposed by the interconnecting piping found in conventional processing plants. The result is that the residue gas flowing to compressor **16** is at higher pressure for the present invention compared to the prior art, so that the residue

gas entering compressor **24** is at significantly higher pressure, thereby reducing the power required by the present invention to restore the residue gas to pipeline pressure.

[0046] Second, using the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d** to simultaneously heat the distillation liquid leaving the absorbing means in stripping section **118d** 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.

[0047] Third, using the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** to simultaneously cool the distillation vapor stream arising from absorbing section **118c** while condensing the heavier hydrocarbon components from the distillation vapor stream provides more efficient rectification than using reflux in a conventional distillation column. As a result, more of the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components can be removed from the distillation vapor stream using the refrigeration available in the expanded stream **38b** compared to the prior art of the FIG. 1 process.

[0048] 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 **118** of the present invention replaces eight separate equipment items in the prior art (heat exchangers **10**, **11**, **13**, and **20**, separator **12**, reflux separator **21**, reflux pump **22**, and fractionation tower **18** in FIG. 1) with a single equipment item (processing assembly **118** in FIG. 3). 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.

Example 2

[0049] In those cases where the C₂ component recovery level in the liquid product must be reduced (as in the FIG. 2 prior art process described previously, for instance), the present invention offers significant efficiency advantages over the prior art process depicted in FIG. 2. The operating conditions of the FIG. 3 process can be altered as illustrated in FIG. 4 to reduce the ethane content in the liquid product of the present invention to the same level as for the FIG. 2 prior art process. The feed gas composition and conditions considered in the process presented in FIG. 4 are the same as those in FIG. 2. Accordingly, the FIG. 4 process can be compared with that of the FIG. 2 process to further illustrate the advantages of the present invention.

[0050] In the simulation of the FIG. 4 process, inlet gas stream **31** enters a heat exchange means in the upper region of feed cooling section **118a** inside processing assembly **118**. The heat exchange means is configured to provide heat exchange between stream **31** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and a distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** inside processing

assembly **118** that has been heated in a heat exchange means in the lower region of feed cooling section **118a**. Stream **31** is cooled while further heating the distillation vapor stream, with stream **31a** leaving the heat exchange means and thereafter entering separator section **118e** inside processing assembly **118** at 15°F [-9°C] and 900 psia [6,203 kPa(a)], whereupon the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **35**).

[0051] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator section **118e** is divided into two streams, **36** and **39**. Stream **36**, containing about 28% of the total vapor, is combined with the separated liquid (stream **35**, via stream **37**), and the combined stream **38** enters a heat exchange means in the lower region of feed cooling section **118a** inside processing assembly **118**. The heat exchange means is configured to provide heat exchange between stream **38** flowing through one pass of the heat exchange means and the distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** inside processing assembly **118**, so that stream **38** is cooled to substantial condensation while heating the distillation vapor stream.

[0052] The resulting substantially condensed stream **38a** at -114°F [-81°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **14** to slightly above the operating pressure (approximately 393 psia [2,710 kPa(a)]) of rectifying section **118b** and absorbing section **118c** inside processing assembly **118**. During expansion a portion of the stream may be vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 4, the expanded stream **38b** leaving expansion valve **14** reaches a temperature of -138°F [-94°C] before it is directed into a heat and mass transfer means inside rectifying section **118b**. The heat and mass transfer means is configured to provide heat exchange between the distillation vapor stream arising from absorbing section **118c** flowing upward through one pass of the heat and mass

transfer means and the expanded stream **38b** flowing downward, so that the distillation vapor is cooled while heating the expanded stream. As the distillation vapor stream is cooled, a portion of it is condensed and falls downward while the remaining distillation 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 distillation vapor so that it also functions to provide mass transfer between the vapor and liquid phases, thereby providing rectification of the distillation vapor. The condensed liquid is collected from the bottom of the heat and mass transfer means and directed to absorbing section **118c**.

[0053] The flash expanded stream **38b** is partially vaporized as it provides cooling and partial condensation of the distillation vapor stream, then exits the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** at -104°F [-75°C] and is separated into its respective vapor and liquid phases. The vapor phase combines with the vapor arising from absorbing section **118c** to form the distillation vapor stream that enters the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** as previously described. The liquid phase is directed to the upper region of absorbing section **118c** to join with the liquid condensed from the distillation vapor stream in rectifying section **118b**.

[0054] The remaining 72% of the vapor from separator section **118e** (stream **39**) enters a work expansion machine **15** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **15** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the operating pressure of absorbing section **118c**, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **39a** to a temperature of approximately -60°F [-51°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **39a** is thereafter supplied as feed to the lower region of absorbing section **118c** inside

processing assembly **118** to be contacted by the liquids supplied to the upper region of absorbing section **118c**.

[0055] Absorbing section **118c** and stripping section **118d** each contain an absorbing means. Stripping section **118d** also includes a heat and mass transfer means beneath its absorbing means which 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 absorbing means, 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 **46** of methane, C₂ components, and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream **46**) exits the lower region of stripping section **118d** and leaves processing assembly **118** at 221°F [105°C].

[0056] The distillation vapor stream arising from rectifying section **118b** is warmed in feed cooling section **118a** as it provides cooling to streams **31** and **38** as previously described, and the resulting residue gas stream **42** leaves processing assembly **118** at 106°F [41°C]. The residue gas stream is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **16** driven by expansion machine **15** and compressor **23** driven by a supplemental power source. After stream **42b** is cooled to 110°F [43°C] in discharge cooler **24**, the residue gas product (stream **42c**) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 915 psia [6,307 kPa(a)].

[0057] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 4 is set forth in the following table:

Table IV

(FIG. 4)

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	12,398	546	233	229	13,726
34	12,332	532	215	128	13,523
35	66	14	18	101	203
36	3,515	152	61	36	3,854
37	66	14	18	101	203
38	3,581	166	79	137	4,057
39	8,817	380	154	92	9,669
42	12,398	535	1	0	13,253
46	0	11	232	229	473

Recoveries*

Propane 99.50%

Butanes+ 100.00%

Power

Residue Gas Compression 5,384 HP [8,851 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0058] A comparison of Tables II and IV shows that the present invention maintains essentially the same recoveries as the prior art. However, further comparison of Tables II and IV 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 nearly a 4% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 2 process.

[0059] The FIG. 4 embodiment of the present invention provides the same advantages related to the compact arrangement of processing assembly **118** as the FIG. 3 embodiment. The FIG. 4 embodiment of the present invention replaces seven separate equipment items in the prior art (heat exchangers **10**, **13**, and **20**, separator **12**, reflux separator **21**, reflux pump **22**, and fractionation tower **18** in FIG. 2) with a single equipment item (processing assembly **118** in FIG. 4). 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 this embodiment of the present invention over that of the prior art, while also reducing the potential for atmospheric releases that can damage the environment.

Other Embodiments

[0060] Some circumstances may favor eliminating feed cooling section **118a** from processing assembly **118**, and using one or more heat exchange means external to the processing assembly for feed cooling and reflux condensing, such as heat exchangers **10** and **20** shown in FIGS. 7 through 10. Such an arrangement allows processing assembly **118** to be smaller, which may reduce the overall plant cost and/or shorten the fabrication schedule in some cases. Note that in all cases

exchangers **10** and **20** are representative of either a multitude of individual heat exchangers or a single multi-pass heat exchanger, or any combination thereof. Each such heat exchanger 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. In some cases, it may be advantageous to combine the feed cooling and reflux condensing in a single multi-service heat exchanger. With heat exchanger **20** external to the processing assembly, reflux separator **21** and pump **22** will typically be needed to separate condensed liquid stream **43** and deliver at least a portion of it to an absorbing means in modified rectifying section **118c** as reflux.

[0061] Some circumstances may favor supplying liquid stream **35** directly to stripping section **118d** via stream **40** as shown in FIGS. 3 through 10. In such cases, an appropriate expansion device (such as expansion valve **17**) is used to expand the liquid to the operating pressure of stripping section **118d** and the resulting expanded liquid stream **40a** is supplied as feed to stripping section **118d** above the absorbing means, above the heat and mass transfer means, or to both such feed points (as shown by the dashed lines). Some circumstances may favor combining a portion of liquid stream **35** (stream **37**) with the vapor in stream **36** to form combined stream **38** and routing the remaining portion of liquid stream **35** to stripping section **118d** via streams **40/40a**. Some circumstances may favor combining the expanded liquid stream **40a** with expanded stream **39a** and thereafter supplying the combined stream to the lower region of absorbing section **118c** as a single feed.

[0062] Some circumstances may favor using the cooled second portion (stream **33a** in FIGS. 3, 5, 7, and 9) in lieu of the first portion (stream **36**) of vapor stream **34** to form stream **38** flowing to the heat exchange means in the lower region

of feed cooling section **118a**. In such cases, only the cooled first portion (stream **32a**) is supplied to separator section **118e** (FIGS. 3 and 7) or separator **12** (FIGS. 5 and 9), and all of the resulting vapor stream **34** is supplied to work expansion machine **15**.

[0063] In some circumstances, it may be advantageous to use an external separator vessel to separate cooled feed stream **31a**, rather than including separator section **118e** in processing assembly **118**. As shown in FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10, separator **12** can be used to separate cooled feed stream **31a** into vapor stream **34** and liquid stream **35**.

[0064] Depending on the quantity of heavier hydrocarbons in the feed gas and the feed gas pressure, the cooled feed stream **31a** entering separator section **118e** in FIGS. 3, 4, 7, and 8 or separator **12** in FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10 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 streams **35** and **37** (as shown by the dashed lines), so only the vapor from separator section **118e** in stream **36** (FIGS. 3, 4, 7, and 8) or the vapor from separator **12** in stream **36** (FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10) flows to stream **38** to become the expanded substantially condensed stream **38b** supplied to the heat and mass transfer means (FIGS. 3 through 6) or expanded substantially condensed stream **38c** supplied to the absorbing means (FIGS. 7 through 10) in rectifying section **118b**. In such circumstances, separator section **118e** in processing assembly **118** (FIGS. 3, 4, 7, and 8) or separator **12** (FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10) may not be required.

[0065] Feed gas conditions, plant size, available equipment, or other factors may indicate that elimination of work expansion machine **15**, or replacement with an alternate expansion device (such as an expansion valve), is feasible. Although individual stream expansion is depicted in particular expansion devices, alternative expansion means may be employed where appropriate. For example, conditions may

warrant work expansion of the substantially condensed portion of the feed stream (stream **38a**).

[0066] In accordance with the present invention, the use of external refrigeration to supplement the cooling available to the inlet gas from the distillation vapor and liquid streams may be employed, particularly in the case of a rich inlet gas. In such cases, a heat and mass transfer means may be included in separator section **118e** (or a gas collecting means in such cases when the cooled feed stream **31a** contains no liquid) as shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 3, 4, 7, and 8, or a heat and mass transfer means may be included in separator **12** as shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10. 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**. Alternatively, conventional gas chiller(s) could be used to cool stream **32a**, stream **33a**, and/or stream **31a** with refrigerant before stream **31a** enters separator section **118e** (FIGS. 3, 4, 7, and 8) or separator **12** (FIGS. 5, 6, 9, and 10).

[0067] Depending on the temperature and richness of the feed gas and the amount of C₂ components to be recovered in liquid product stream **46**, there may not be sufficient heating available from stream **33** to cause the liquid leaving stripping section **118d** to meet the product specifications. In such cases, the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d** may include provisions for providing

supplemental heating with heating medium as shown by the dashed lines in FIGS. 3, 5, 7, and 9. Alternatively, another heat and mass transfer means can be included in the lower region of stripping section **118d** for providing supplemental heating, or stream **33** can be heated with heating medium before it is supplied to the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d**.

[0068] Depending on the type of heat transfer devices selected for the heat exchange means in the upper and lower regions of feed cooling section **118a** in FIGS. 3 through 6, 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 **32**, stream **38**, and the distillation vapor stream in order to accomplish the desired cooling and heating. Likewise, the type of heat and mass transfer device selected for the heat and mass transfer means in rectifying section **118b** in FIGS. 3 through 6 may allow combining it with the heat exchange means in the lower region of feed cooling section **118a** (and possibly with the heat exchange means in the upper region of feed cooling section **118a** as well) in a single multi-pass and/or multi-service heat and mass transfer device. In such cases, the multi-pass and/or multi-service heat and mass transfer device will include appropriate means for distributing, segregating, and collecting stream **38**, stream **38b**, and the distillation vapor stream (and optionally stream **32**) in order to accomplish the desired cooling and heating.

[0069] Some circumstances may favor not providing an absorbing means in the upper region of stripping section **118d**. In such cases, a distillation liquid stream is collected from the lower region of absorbing section **118c** and directed to the heat and mass transfer means in stripping section **118d**.

[0070] A less preferred option for the FIGS. 3, 5, 7, and 9 embodiments of the present invention is providing a separator vessel for cooled first portion **32a** and a separator vessel for cooled second portion **33a**, combining the vapor streams separated therein to form vapor stream **34**, and combining the liquid streams separated therein to form liquid stream **35**. Another less preferred option for the present invention is cooling stream **37** in a separate heat exchange means inside feed cooling section **118a** in FIGS. 3 through 6 or a separate pass in heat exchanger **10** in FIGS. 7 through 10 (rather than combining stream **37** with stream **36** to form combined stream **38**), expanding the cooled stream in a separate expansion device, and supplying the expanded stream either to the heat and mass transfer means (FIGS. 3 through 6) or the absorbing means (FIGS. 7 through 10) in rectifying section **118b** or to the upper region of absorbing section **118c**.

[0071] It will be recognized that the relative amount of feed found in each branch of the split vapor feed will depend on several factors, including gas pressure, feed gas composition, the amount of heat which can economically be extracted from the feed, and the quantity of horsepower available. More feed above absorbing section **118c** may increase recovery while decreasing power recovered from the expander and thereby increasing the recompression horsepower requirements. Increasing feed below absorbing section **118c** reduces the horsepower consumption but may also reduce product recovery.

[0072] The present invention provides improved recovery of C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or 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 supplemental heating, reduced energy requirements for tower reboiling, or a combination thereof.

[0073] 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein
 - (1) said gas stream is divided into first and second portions;
 - (2) said first portion is cooled;
 - (3) said second portion is cooled;
 - (4) said cooled first portion is combined with said cooled second portion to form a cooled gas stream;
 - (5) said cooled gas stream is divided into first and second streams;
 - (6) said first stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
 - (7) said expanded cooled first stream is heated;
 - (8) said heated expanded first stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;
 - (9) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;
 - (10) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said first absorbing means and cooled in one or more heat exchange

means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (7);

(11) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(12) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(13) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (2) and (6), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(14) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped 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 first absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is divided into first and second portions;

(2) said first portion is cooled;

(3) said second portion is cooled;

(4) said cooled first portion is combined with said cooled

second portion to form a partially condensed gas stream;

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

(6) said vapor stream is divided into first and second streams;

(7) said first stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(8) said expanded cooled first stream is heated;

(9) said heated expanded first stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(10) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;

(11) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said first absorbing means and cooled in one or more heat exchange means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (8);

(12) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a second separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(13) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(14) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (2) and (7), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(15) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction;

(16) at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a feed to said processing assembly below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

(17) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said first absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

- (1) said gas stream is divided into first and second portions;
- (2) said first portion is cooled;
- (3) said second portion is cooled;
- (4) said cooled first portion is combined with said cooled second portion to form a partially condensed gas stream;
- (5) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a first separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;
- (6) said vapor stream is divided into first and second streams;
- (7) said first stream is combined with at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream to form a combined stream;
- (8) said combined stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (9) said expanded cooled combined stream is heated;
- (10) said heated expanded combined stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;
- (11) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;

(12) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said first absorbing means and cooled in one or more heat exchange means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (9);

(13) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a second separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(14) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(15) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (2) and (8), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(16) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing means and heated in a heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction;

(17) any remaining portion of said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a feed to said processing assembly below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

(18) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said first absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

- (1) said gas stream is cooled;
- (2) said cooled gas stream is divided into first and second streams;
- (3) said first stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (4) said expanded cooled first stream is heated;
- (5) said heated expanded first stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;
- (6) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;
- (7) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said absorbing means and cooled in a one or more heat exchange means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (4);

(8) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(9) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(10) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (3), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(11) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing 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 distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

(12) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said first absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

- (1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it;
- (2) said partially condensed gas stream is supplied to a first separating means and is separated therein to provide a vapor stream and at least one liquid stream;
- (3) said vapor stream is divided into first and second streams;
- (4) said first stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;
- (5) said expanded cooled first stream is heated;
- (6) said heated expanded first stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;
- (7) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;
- (8) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said first absorbing means and cooled in one or more heat exchange means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (5);
- (9) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a second separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;
- (10) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(11) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (4), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(12) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing 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 distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction;

(13) at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a feed to said processing assembly below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

(14) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said first absorbing means are effective to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components wherein

(1) said gas stream is cooled sufficiently to partially condense it;

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

(3) said vapor stream is divided into first and second streams;

(4) said first stream is combined with at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream to form a combined stream;

(5) said combined stream is cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to lower pressure whereby it is further cooled;

(6) said expanded cooled combined stream is heated;

(7) said heated expanded combined stream is supplied as a feed between first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(8) said second stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a bottom feed to said second absorbing means;

(9) a first distillation vapor stream is collected from an upper region of said first absorbing means and cooled in one or more heat exchange means sufficiently to condense at least a part of it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the heating of step (6);

(10) said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream is supplied to a second separating means and is separated therein, thereby forming a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(11) said condensed stream is supplied as a top feed to said first absorbing means;

(12) said second distillation vapor stream is heated in said one or more heat exchange means, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of steps (1) and (5), and thereafter discharging said heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

(13) a distillation liquid stream is collected from a lower region of said second absorbing 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 distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction;

(14) any remaining portion of said at least one liquid stream is expanded to said lower pressure and is supplied as a feed to said processing assembly below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

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

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

8. The process according to claim 3 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

9. The process according to claim 5 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

10. The process according to claim 6 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

11. The process according to claim 1 wherein

- (1) a gas collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said gas 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 gas 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 divided into said first and second streams.

12. The process according to claim 4 wherein

- (1) a gas collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said gas 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 gas 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 divided into said first and second streams.

13. The process according to claim 2, 3, 7, or 8 wherein

- (1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said first 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 additional condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

14. The process according to claim 5, 6, 9, or 10 wherein

- (1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said first 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 additional condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

15. The process according to claim 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, or 11 wherein

- (1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means;
- (2) said additional absorbing means is configured to provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream from said second absorbing means with said stripped more volatile components from said heat and mass transfer means, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said third distillation vapor stream is supplied to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said partially stripped distillation liquid stream is supplied to said heat and mass transfer means to be heated, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

16. The process according to claim 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, or 12 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means;

(2) said additional absorbing means is configured to provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream from said second absorbing means with said stripped more volatile components from said heat and mass transfer means, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said third distillation vapor stream is supplied to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said partially stripped distillation liquid stream is supplied to said heat and mass transfer means to be heated, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

17. The process according to claim 13 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means;

(2) said additional absorbing means is configured to provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream from said second absorbing means

with said stripped more volatile components from said heat and mass transfer means, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said third distillation vapor stream is supplied to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said partially stripped distillation liquid stream is supplied to said heat and mass transfer means to be heated, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

18. The process according to claim 14 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means;

(2) said additional absorbing means is configured to provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream from said second absorbing means with said stripped more volatile components from said heat and mass transfer means, thereby producing a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said third distillation vapor stream is supplied to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said partially stripped distillation liquid stream is supplied to said heat and mass transfer means to be heated, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

19. The process according to claim 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, or 11 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating

medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

20. The process according to claim 13 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

21. The process according to claim 15 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

22. The process according to claim 17 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

23. 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first dividing means to divide said gas stream into first and second portions;

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

(3) heat and mass transfer means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said first dividing means to receive said second portion and cool it;

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

(5) second dividing means connected to said first combining means to receive said cooled gas stream and divide it into first and second streams;

(6) second heat exchange means connected to said second dividing means to receive said first stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;

(7) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed first stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(8) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled first stream and heat it;

(9) first and second absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded first stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(10) second expansion means connected to said second dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

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

(12) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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 (8);

(13) separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(14) said first absorbing means being further connected to said separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(15) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said separating means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (6);

(16) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and further heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (2), and thereafter discharging said further heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

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

(18) said heat and mass transfer means being further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and

heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped 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 first absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first absorbing means at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction are recovered.

24. 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first dividing means to divide said gas stream into first and second portions;

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

(3) heat and mass transfer means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said first dividing means to receive said second portion and cool it;

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

(5) first 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;

(6) second dividing means connected to said first separating means to receive said vapor stream and divide it into first and second streams;

(7) second heat exchange means connected to said second dividing means to receive said first stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;

(8) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed first stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(9) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled first stream and heat it;

(10) first and second absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded first stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(11) second expansion means connected to said second dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(12) third expansion means connected to said first separating means to receive at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said third expansion means being further connected to said

processing assembly to supply said expanded liquid stream as a feed thereto below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means;

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

(14) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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 (9);

(15) second separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(16) said first absorbing means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

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

(18) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and further heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (2), and thereafter discharging said further heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

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

(20) said heat and mass transfer means being further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction; and

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

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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first dividing means to divide said gas stream into first and second portions;

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

(3) heat and mass transfer means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said first dividing means to receive said second portion and cool it;

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

(5) first 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;

(6) second dividing means connected to said first separating means to receive said vapor stream and divide it into first and second streams;

(7) second combining means connected to said second dividing means and said first separating means to receive said first stream and at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream and form a combined stream;

(8) second heat exchange means connected to said second combining means to receive said combined stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;

(9) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed combined stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(10) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled combined stream and heat it;

(11) first and second absorbing means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded combined stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(12) second expansion means connected to said second dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

(13) third expansion means connected to said first separating means to receive any remaining portion of said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said third expansion means being further connected to said processing assembly to supply said expanded liquid stream as a feed thereto below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means;

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

(15) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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 (10);

(16) second separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(17) said first absorbing means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

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

(19) said first heat exchange means being further connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said heated second distillation vapor stream and further heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (2), and thereafter discharging said further heated second distillation vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction;

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

(21) said heat and mass transfer means being further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (3) while simultaneously stripping the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped 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 first absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

(1) first heat exchange means to cool said gas stream;

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

(3) second heat exchange means connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;

(4) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed first stream and expand it to lower pressure;

(5) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled first stream and heat it;

(6) first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded first stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(7) second expansion means connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

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

(9) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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);

(10) separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(11) said first absorbing means being further connected to said separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

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

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

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

(15) heat and mass transfer means housed in said processing assembly and connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby to simultaneously strip the more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream, and thereafter discharging said heated and stripped 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 first absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

- (1) first heat exchange means to cool said gas stream sufficiently to partially condense it;
- (2) first 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) dividing means connected to said first separating means to receive said vapor stream and divide it into first and second streams;
- (4) second heat exchange means connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;
- (5) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed first stream and expand it to lower pressure;
- (6) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled first stream and heat it;
- (7) first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded first stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;

(8) second expansion means connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

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

(10) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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 (6);

(11) second separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(12) said first absorbing means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(13) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (4);

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

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

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

(17) third expansion means connected to said first separating means to receive at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said third expansion means being further connected to said processing assembly to supply said expanded liquid stream as a feed thereto below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

(18) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams to said first absorbing means to maintain the temperature of said upper region of said first 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 C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components comprising

- (1) first heat exchange means to cool said gas stream sufficiently to partially condense it;
- (2) first 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) dividing means connected to said first separating means to receive said vapor stream and divide it into first and second streams;
- (4) first combining means connected to said dividing means and said first separating means to receive said first stream and at least a portion of said at least one liquid stream and form a combined stream;
- (5) second heat exchange means connected to said first combining means to receive said combined stream and cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it;
- (6) first expansion means connected to said second heat exchange means to receive said substantially condensed combined stream and expand it to lower pressure;
- (7) third heat exchange means connected to said first expansion means to receive said expanded cooled combined stream and heat it;
- (8) first and second absorbing means housed in a processing assembly and connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said heated expanded combined stream as a feed thereto between said first and second absorbing means, said first absorbing means being located above said second absorbing means;
- (9) second expansion means connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said second

expansion means being further connected to said second absorbing means to supply said expanded second stream as a bottom feed thereto;

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

(11) said third heat exchange means being further connected to said 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);

(12) second separating means connected to said third heat exchange means to receive said at least partially condensed first distillation vapor stream and separate it into a condensed stream and a second distillation vapor stream;

(13) said first absorbing means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said condensed stream as a top feed thereto;

(14) said second heat exchange means being further connected to said second separating means to receive said second distillation vapor stream and heat it, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling of step (5);

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

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

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

(18) third expansion means connected to said first separating means to receive any remaining portion of said at least one liquid stream and expand it to said lower pressure, said third expansion means being further connected to said processing assembly to supply said expanded liquid stream as a feed thereto below said second absorbing means and above said heat and mass transfer means; and

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

29. The apparatus according to claim 24 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

30. The apparatus according to claim 25 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

31. The apparatus according to claim 27 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

32. The apparatus according to claim 28 wherein said first separating means is housed in said processing assembly.

33. The apparatus according to claim 23 wherein

- (1) a gas collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said gas collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;
- (3) said gas 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 first dividing means is adapted to be connected to said gas collecting means to receive said further cooled gas stream and divide it into said first and second streams.

34. The apparatus according to claim 26 wherein

- (1) a gas collecting means is housed in said processing assembly;
- (2) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said gas collecting means, said additional heat and mass transfer means including one or more passes for an external refrigeration medium;
- (3) said gas 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 dividing means is adapted to be connected to said gas collecting means to receive said further cooled gas stream and divide it into said first and second streams.

35. The apparatus according to claim 24, 25, 29, or 30 wherein

- (1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said first 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 additional condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

36. The apparatus according to claim 27, 28, 31, or 32 wherein

- (1) an additional heat and mass transfer means is included inside said first 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 additional condensate becomes a part of said at least one liquid stream separated therein.

37. The apparatus according to claim 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, or 33 wherein

- (1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means and connected to said heat and mass transfer means to receive said stripped more volatile components;
- (2) said additional absorbing means is further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and provide

contacting of said distillation liquid stream with said stripped more volatile components, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said second absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream and supply it to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said heat and mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said partially stripped distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

38. The apparatus according to claim 26, 27, 28, 31, 32, or 34 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means and connected to said heat and mass transfer means to receive said stripped more volatile components;

(2) said additional absorbing means is further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream with said stripped more volatile components, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said second absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream and supply it to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said heat and mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said partially stripped distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

39. The apparatus according to claim 35 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means and connected to said heat and mass transfer means to receive said stripped more volatile components;

(2) said additional absorbing means is further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream with said stripped more volatile components, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said second absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream and supply it to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said heat and mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said partially stripped distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

40. The apparatus according to claim 36 wherein

(1) an additional absorbing means is included inside said processing assembly above said heat and mass transfer means and connected to said heat and mass transfer means to receive said stripped more volatile components;

(2) said additional absorbing means is further connected to said liquid collecting means to receive said distillation liquid stream and provide contacting of said distillation liquid stream with said stripped more volatile components, thereby forming a third distillation vapor stream and a partially stripped distillation liquid stream;

(3) said second absorbing means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream and supply it to said lower region of said second absorbing means; and

(4) said heat and mass transfer means is adapted to be connected to said additional absorbing means to receive said partially stripped distillation liquid stream and heat it, thereby further stripping it to form said heated and stripped distillation liquid stream that is discharged from said processing assembly as said relatively less volatile fraction.

41. The apparatus according to claim 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, or 33 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

42. The apparatus according to claim 35 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

43. The apparatus according to claim 37 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

44. The apparatus according to claim 39 wherein said heat and mass transfer means includes one or more passes for an external heating medium to supplement the heating supplied by said second portion for said stripping of said more volatile components from said distillation liquid stream.

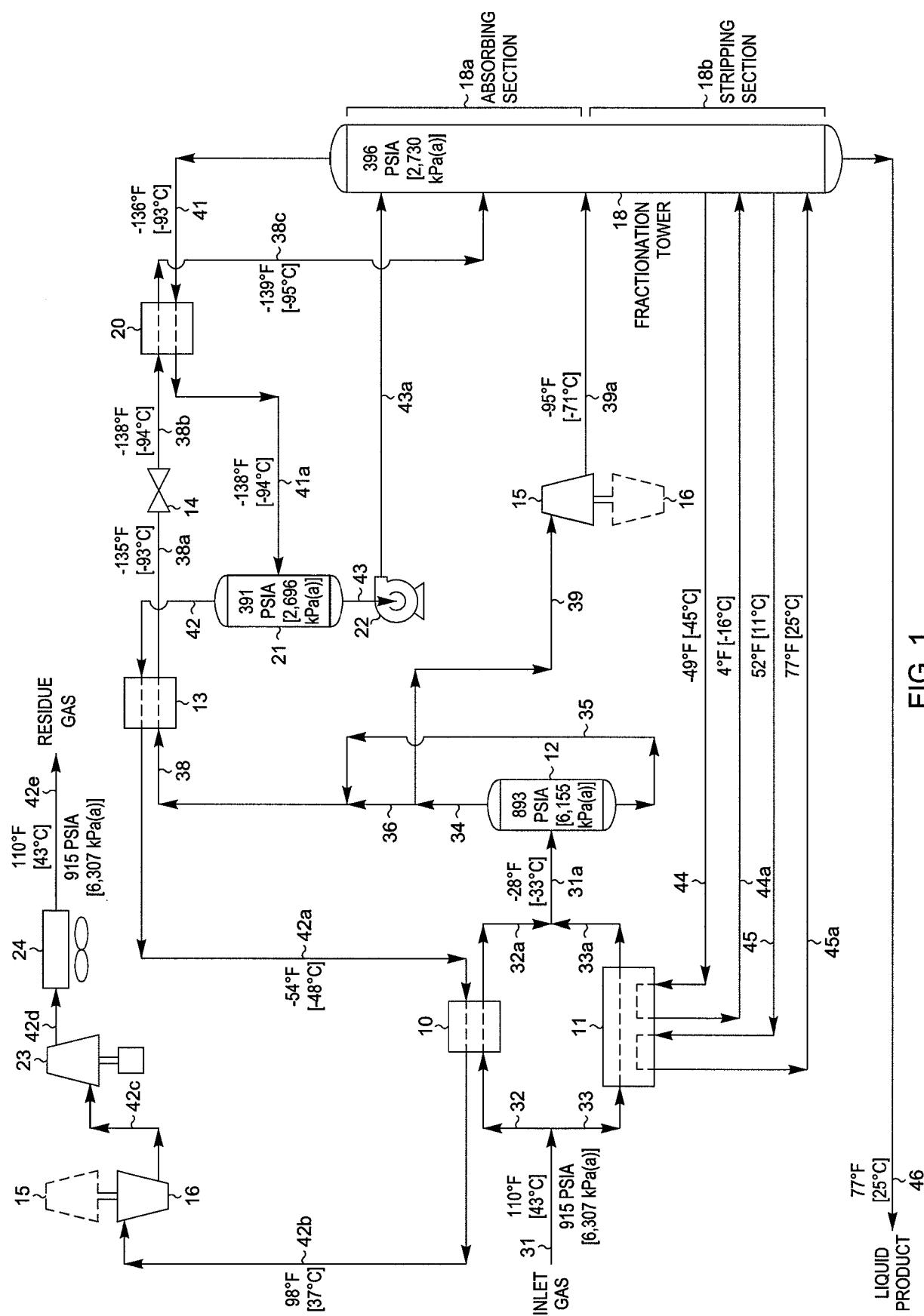


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

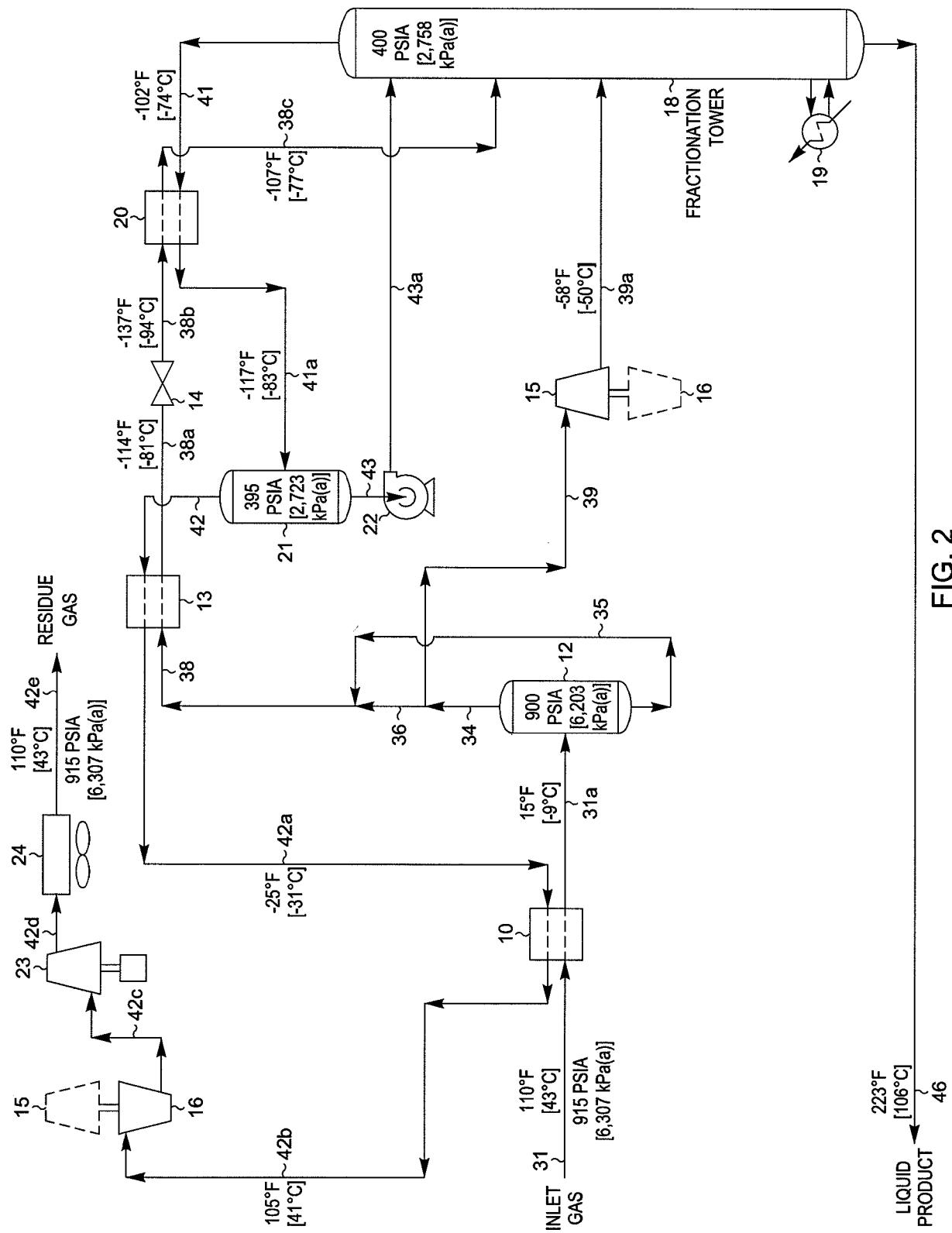


FIG. 2
(PRIOR ART)

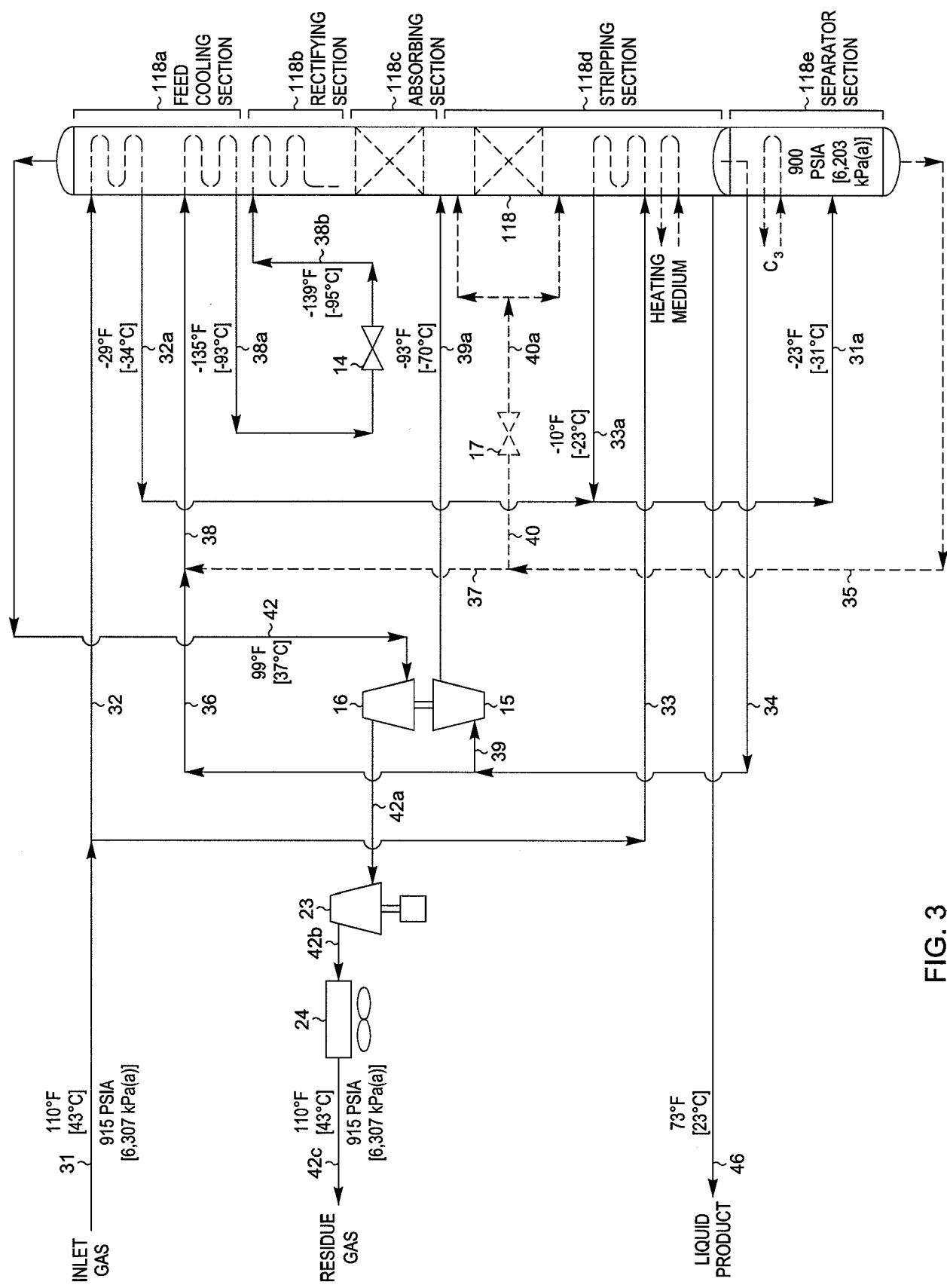


FIG. 3

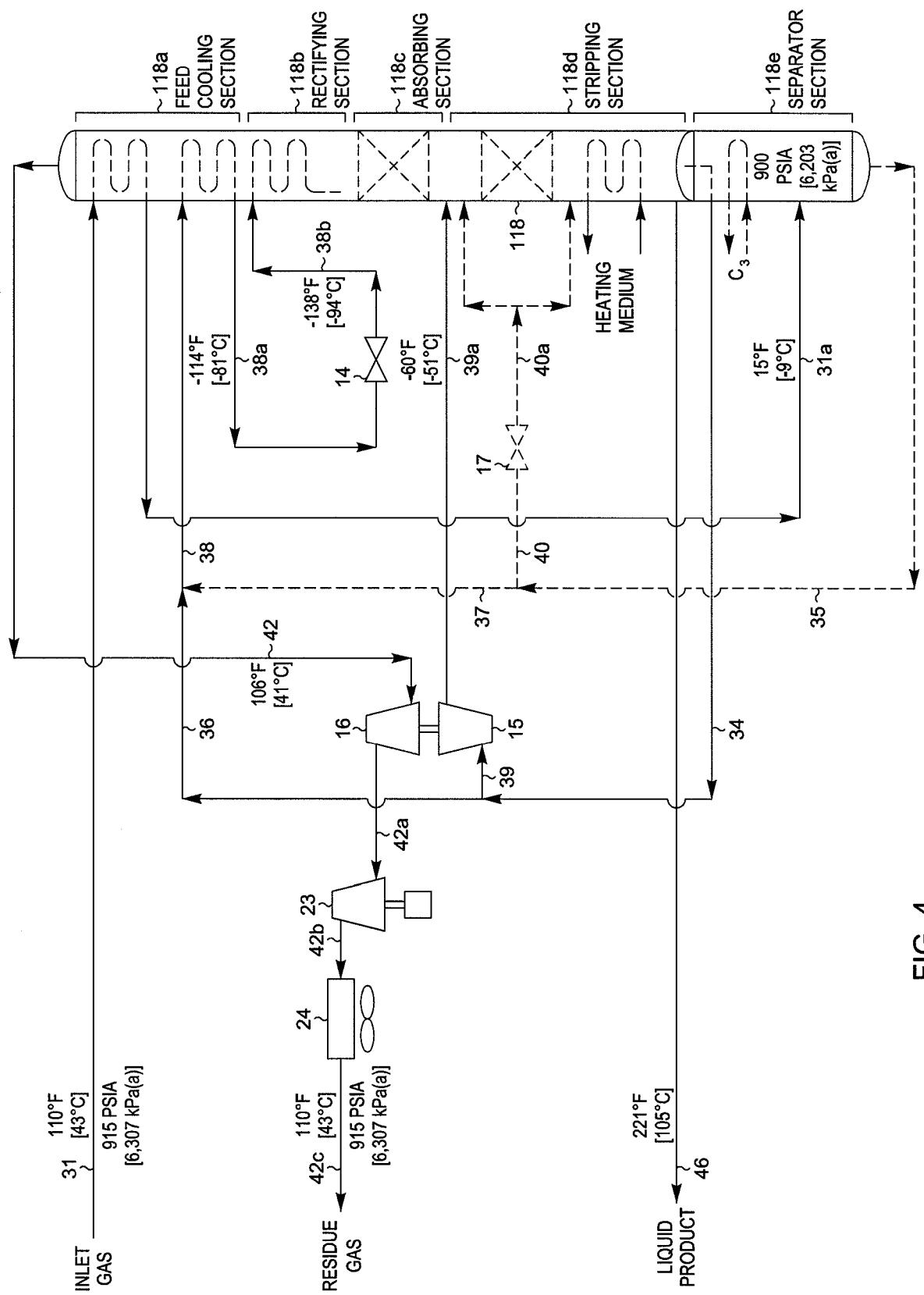


FIG. 4

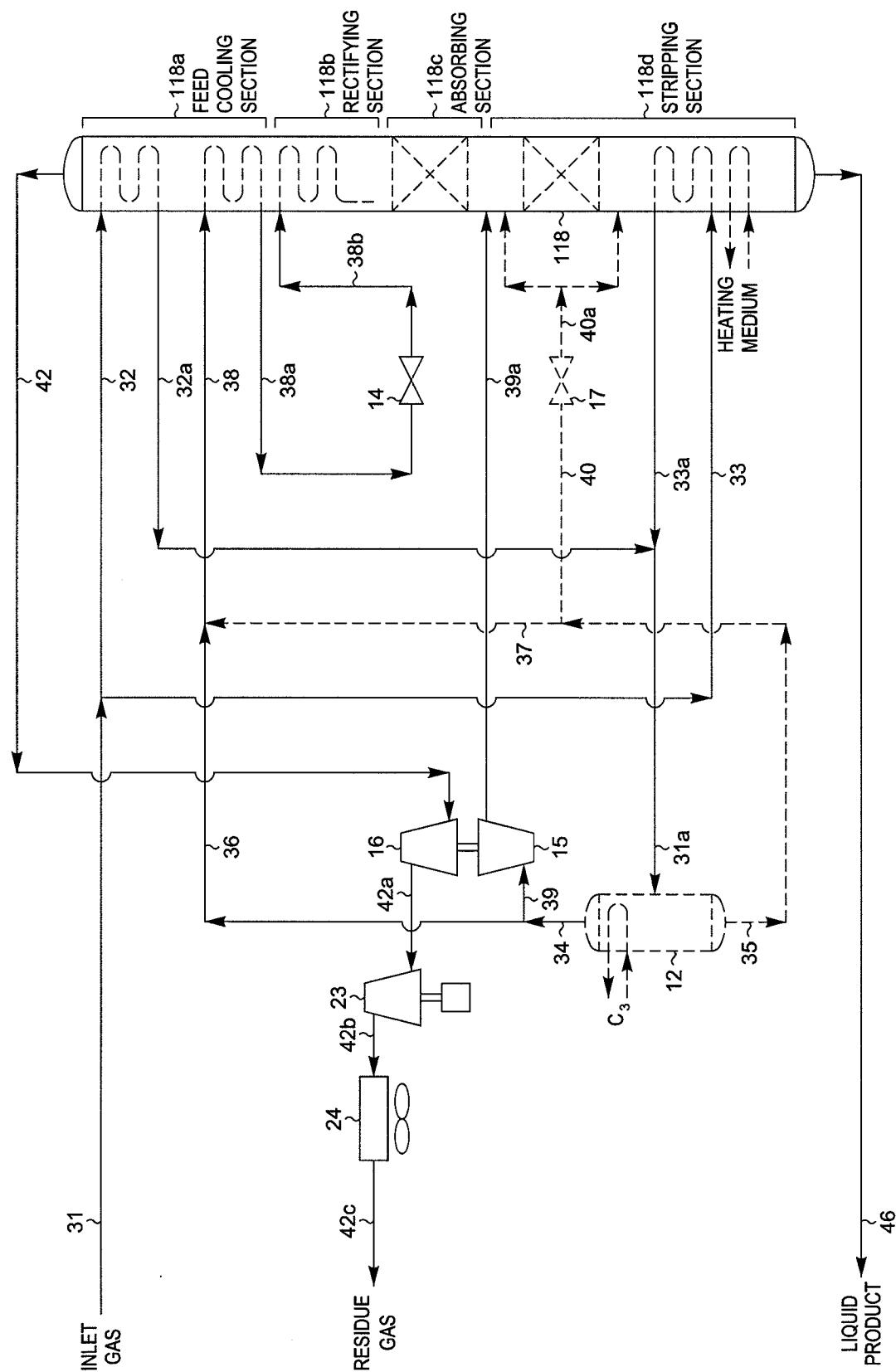


FIG. 5

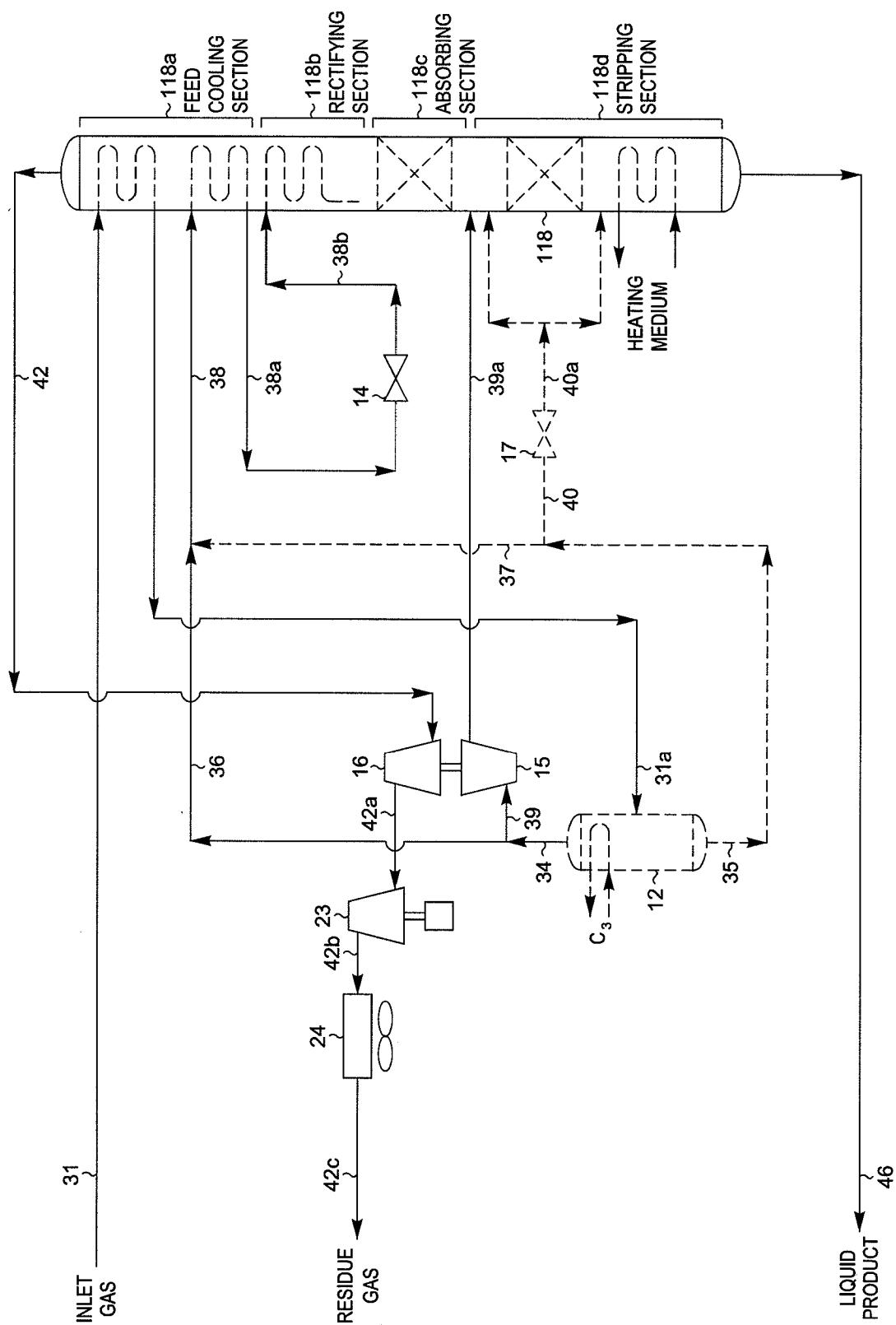
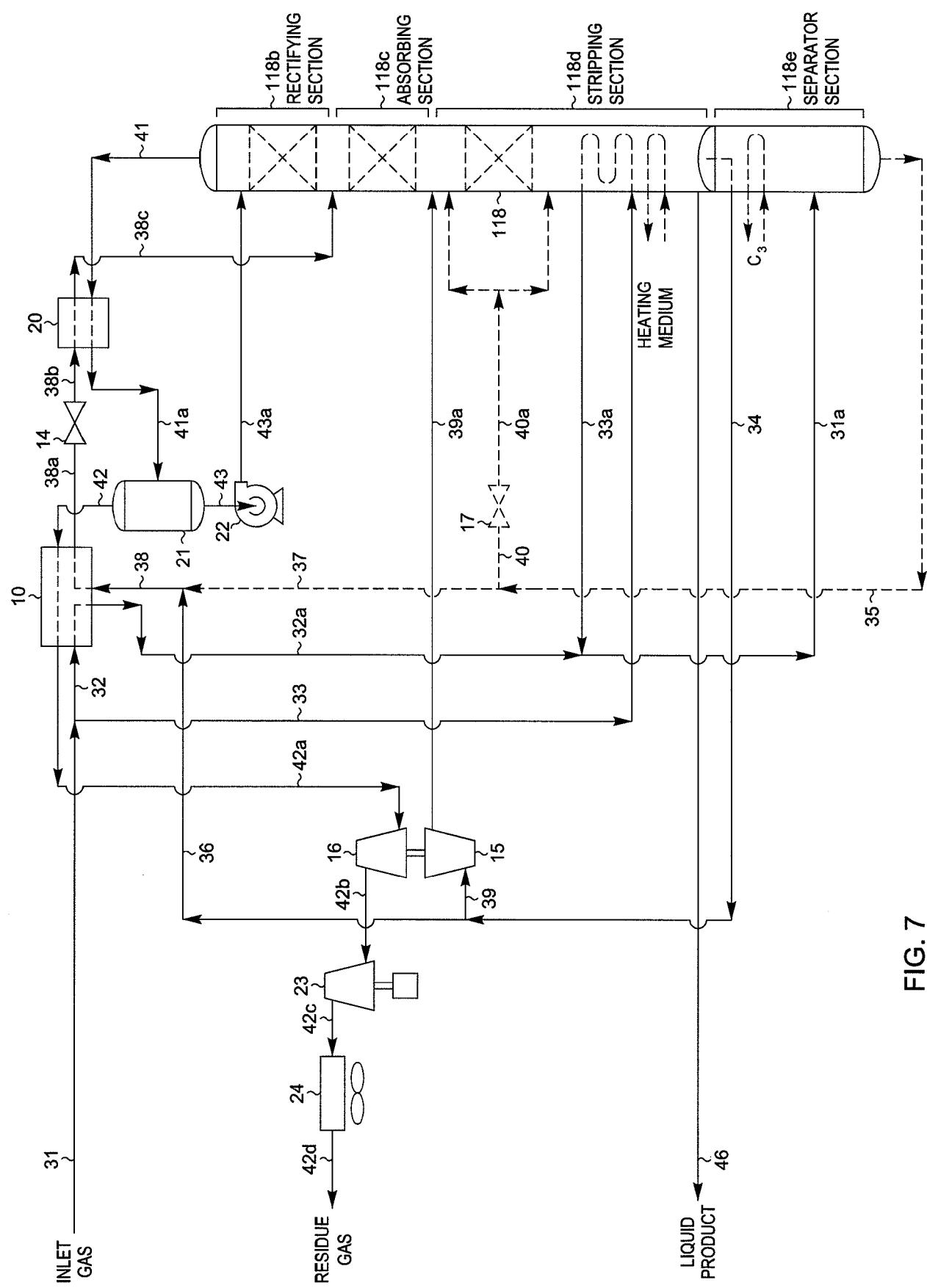


FIG. 6



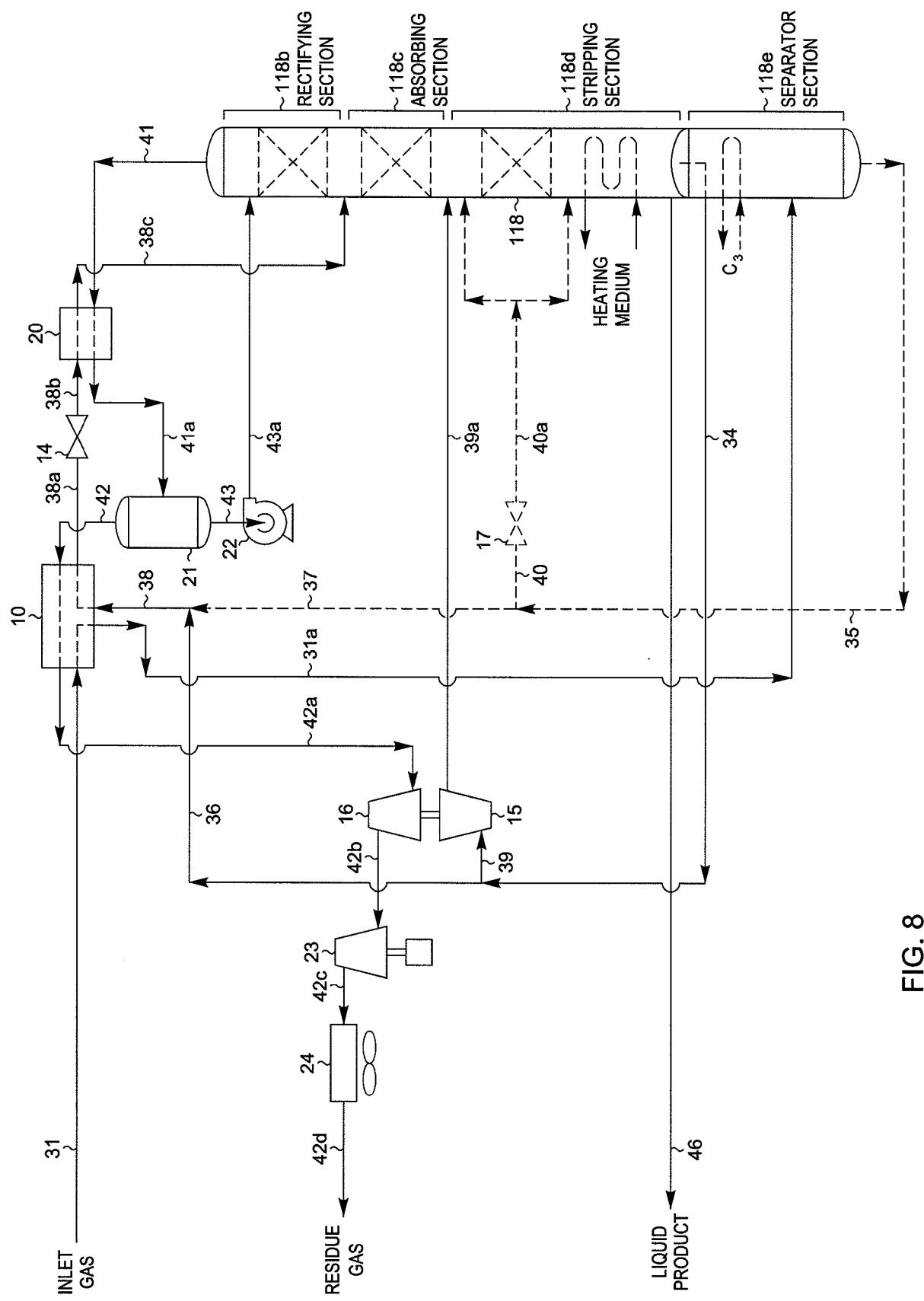


FIG. 8

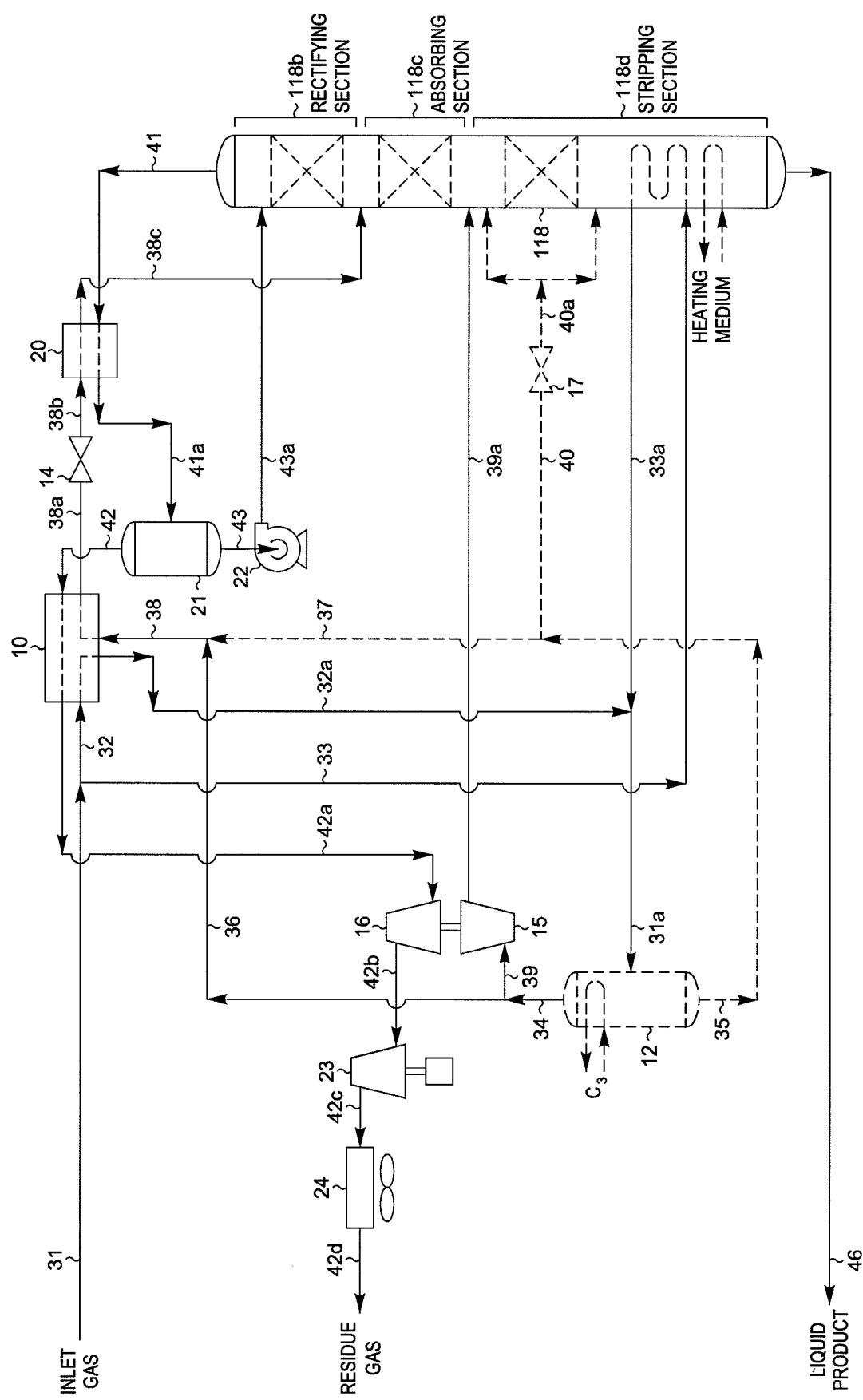


FIG. 9

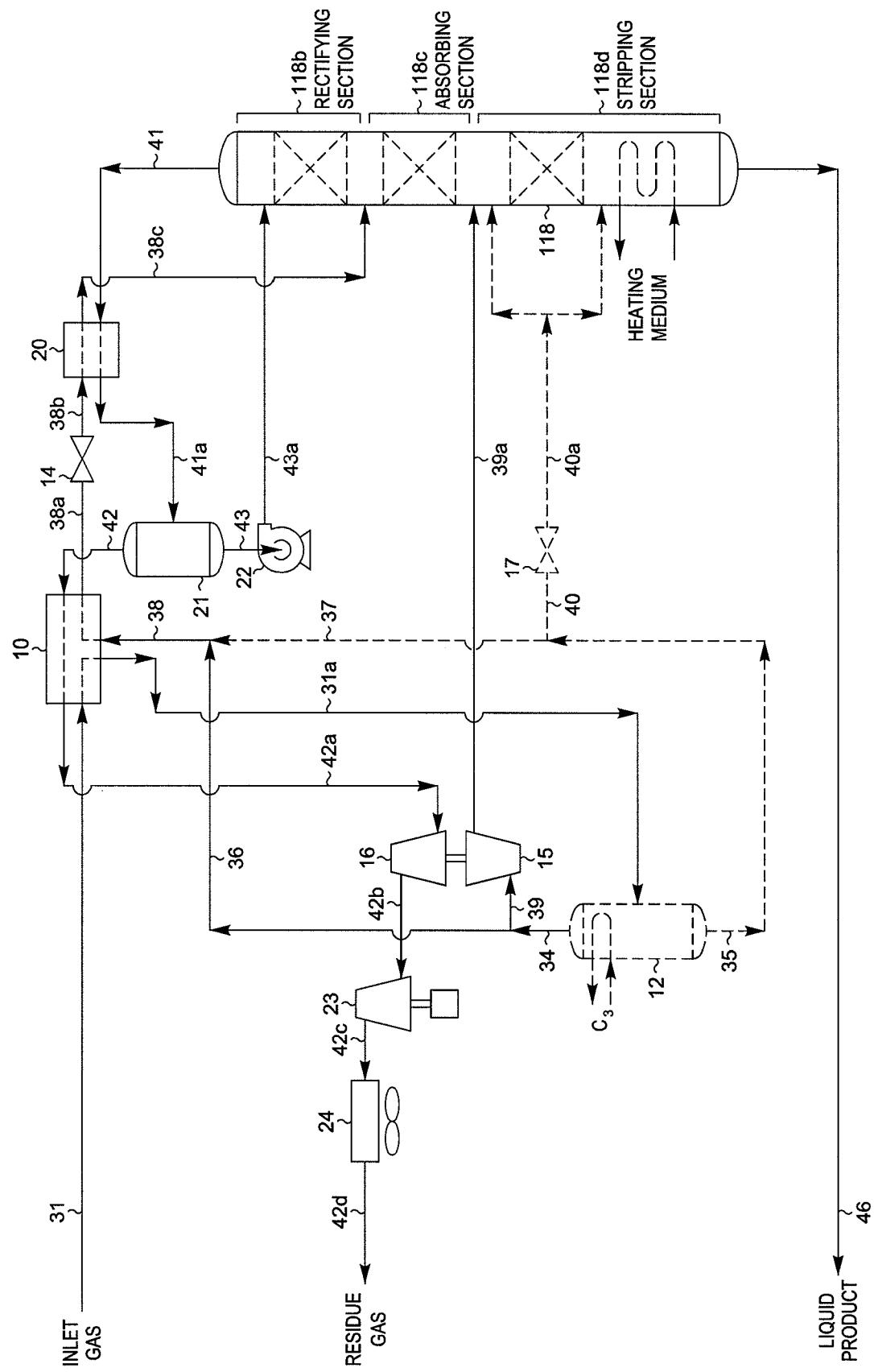


FIG. 10

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US2011/029409

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(8) - F25J 3/00 (2011.01)

USPC - 62/620

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 (2011.01)

USPC - 62/619, 620, 621, 623, 625

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched
ECLA - C10L 3/10; F25J 3/00B, 3/02A2, 3/02C2, 3/02C4

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

Patbase

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	US 2005/0229634 A1 (HUEBEL et al) 20 October 2005 (20.10.2005) entire document	1-44
A	US 2004/0172967 A1 (PATEL et al) 09 September 2004 (09.09.2004) entire document	1-44
A	US 2009/0100862 A1 (WILKINSON et al) 23 April 2009 (23.04.2009) entire document	1-44
A	US 2008/0078205 B2 (CUELLAR et al) 03 April 2008 (03.04.2008) entire document	1-44
A	US 4,854,955 A (CAMPBELL et al) 08 August 1989 (08.08.1989) entire document	1-44

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
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- “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

09 May 2011

Date of mailing of the international search report

17 MAY 2011

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