

63. Down on the Farm

June 30, 2010

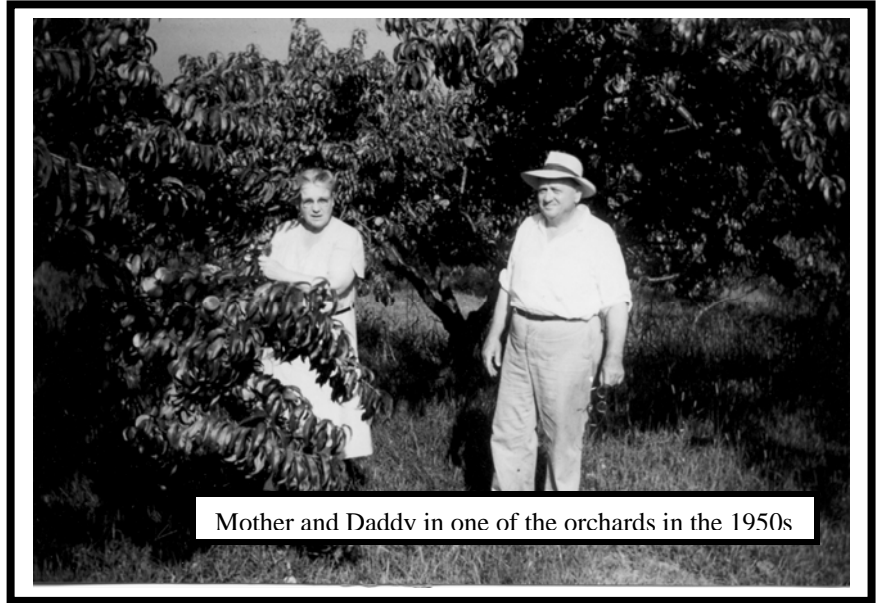
Peach Harvest in the Old Days

Rumors were flying in the mid 1930s that peaches were bringing big money, \$1.00 a bushel. Dad and his two brothers who had been partners growing several other crops since childhood were

excited. This presented the glimmer of hope that income from peaches might pay off the farm mortgage. They picked some of the highest elevations on the farm, the tops of the ridges, and planted about 70 acres in Elberta peaches. Before that the brothers sold steers which they pastured at Oak Ridge, and raised dark-fired tobacco, wheat, corn, and there were two small apple orchards. Somehow through luck and frugality they held onto the farm during the Depression. Each of the three brothers had other jobs which provided income for the mortgage which had been hanging over their heads for many years. At that time, there was only one major proven variety of peach, the Elberta. During those days, most homemakers canned peaches by the bushel for their brood.

There was little thought of growing peaches to ship to other markets up to this time, they were too perishable. Railroad refrigeration box cars equipped with bunkers for ice made shipping of the crop to distant markets a new possibility. Each boxcar held from 387-396 bushel baskets. These boxcars could be loaded near the apple storage warehouses on the sidings at the little villages of Arrington and Shipman. From there, peaches could be shipped to the giant fruit terminals at Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Daddy usually preferred to ship on the tractor trailers which would come to the shed and deliver straight to the customer.

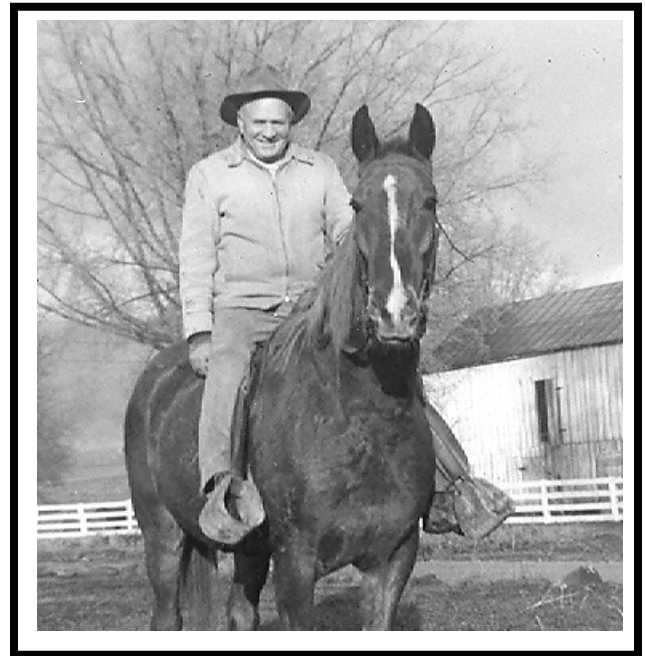
The brothers started growing peaches owning neither a tractor nor a truck. Teams of horses, but most of all, guts, brawn and 'we will figure something out' boosted by an unbelievable trust in each other, all blended together to make it work. Horse-drawn sprayers, with men dragging 50 or 100 feet of high pressure spray hose, sprayed the trees. The peaches were picked in buckets and then emptied into crates. In order to save money, the first boxes or crates used were discarded beer crates from the Fidelio Brewery. A few bushel field crates were purchased, but they cost somewhere about 25 cents and that was big money then. The best boxes were made in Richmond and cost about 50-60 cents, but for the brothers, that was unheard of to pay that much for a peach box. One year during World War II, we ran short of boxes and Daddy had the men build several hundred boxes on the farm in a little assembly line, hand saws, hammers, hasps, and brace and bits to make the handles; no power tools.



Mother and Daddy in one of the orchards in the 1950s

The first crop of peaches was harvested in the summer of 1940 and Daddy and his brothers could see that their packing shed which they built that year was too small. They had to add onto it two sheds, one of which today is in the center of the farm market.

Picking crews from different communities came to harvest the fruit. Nelson County was one of the leading peach producing counties in the state and all the growers needed help at the same time. The picking crews filled the boxes of peaches along the tree rows leaving just enough room for a ground slide, a two runner sled, to pass between the rows of filled boxes. In real heavy picking, I have seen a row with boxes filled with peaches, side by side, almost touching each other. These little slides or sleds usually held 11-12 boxes and were pulled by a mule or horse to the landing for the shed delivery truck. Sometimes we got behind taking the fruit out, then fruit boxes were stacked two deep, 22-24 boxes on the slide. This was real tricky, keeping the top layer from tumbling over; there were no “standards” to hold the top layer in place.



Uncle Dick riding his horse, Choice, as he coordinated the picking in the orchards. No four-wheel drives, no radios, nor cell phones then. This was his way to move quickly between the different crews, coordinate the hauling, watch the pickers and tell the foremen where to pick.

We got our first farm tractor in 1942, an International crawler, and were lucky to get it since World War II was demanding so much of the American industrial output. Tractors were rationed out to the farmers; you had to have a high priority to get one. Occasionally we used this tractor to pull a much larger picking slide, and it wasn't until the late 40s and 50s that we began using the two-wheeled farm wagons. All of the orchard work was done by horses and mules, Doc and Lucy, Mike and Mary, Sam and Prince. At the landing, fruit was loaded onto the crew-boss's truck for the trip to the packing shed. These same trucks had brought in the picking crews in the morning and were used to haul the fruit from the orchards. Sometimes they were used to haul the packed fruit to the railroad box cars.

The pickers ranged in age from 12 year old water-boys to 70-plus year old patriarchs, who were leaders from their communities and were bosses of the picking gangs. No four wheel drive tractors, no twenty bushel bins, just bushel crates and brawn—pick, haul, and deliver peaches to the packing shed, bushel after bushel, hour after hour in the midst of August's summer heat.

Rain storms played havoc with the picking. In those first years with the old packing machines, the fruit had to be dry before it was picked, or the fuzz would roll up when wet and make the peaches unacceptable. We wanted the peaches dry entering the shed. The fuzz on the peach skin was very disagreeable. When you got fuzz on you on a hot day, you itched and itched. In the shed, the dry-brush de-fuzzed the peach, but in so doing, peach fuzz flew all around the brush. Each morning before packing, someone had to go to the fuzz box below the brush and clean out the *bushels* of fuzz that had accumulated from the day before. There was no fun in this job, but there was one man, Ned, who would do it. He got an extra pat on the back; fuzz didn't seem to bother him. We would brag on him and he just smiled from ear to ear and hoped for a tip, which he deserved.

We did not have a truck until about 1945 when Daddy bought an old International and the motor blew up in the middle of the season while hauling a load of peaches to the shed before we had owned it a month. In 1946 when the factories were converted from manufacturing World War II armaments back to producing machines for civilian life, Daddy bought a new Ford stake body truck. We really thought then we were in tall cotton then.

The pickers wanted to be paid on Friday afternoon for all of the work that they had done that week including that day. Work till 5:00 p.m. and then pay up in about an hour for all the work including that last hour. This was an orchardist's nightmare, figuring up all of that time while the workers waited impatiently for their checks. This increased the chances for making mistakes, big time. No calculator, no adding machine, just figure it out the old way. Daddy was a super mathematician and he got it done.



Stacks of boxes of peaches on the left, the top box was one of those we made on our assembly line, note the name is slanted. Peaches on the conveyor belt en-route to the packing line. In the distance, a boss's cattle truck unloaded of fruit, ready to be filled with empty boxes and go back for more.

Our biggest day ever was about the mid 1950s and there were over 100 persons picking. The peaches were ripe, the fruit was big, and we picked nearly 5000 bushels, 3000 bushels of which we packed. There has never been a day since then that was anywhere near that big. Remember in those days it was a one variety show, not 30 varieties as today. All the fruit then was ripe in about ten days to two weeks and not three months like it is now. A big picking today might be 1/10 to 1/20 of what we picked that day over 50 years ago. Peaches are usually harvested in four pickings, harvesting each time only the ones that are ripe. That monstrous day, it seemed that they were all ripe at the same time; probably it was the second picking which was usually the largest picking of the four. The total number of bushels of today's crop is about the same as the crop of years ago, probably a little less. And today's crop is so much easier to manage.

And now, many years later, one lady recently smiled as she told me. "Mr. Saunders, I came to work here when I was 14, my mother fibbed so I could get a job. She said I was 16." For many, this was their first job, and the first pay check they got, ever. Now they had their own money to buy their school clothes and had some spending money. Most of them smile as they tell of their experiences, catching the truck to work, getting peach fuzz all over them, going to the spring for water, and for one, she told of trips to the nearby creek at nighttime to wash off the fuzz.

I had my jobs to do but sometimes I begged off and got to go on the trucks to carry fruit to the rail cars. One of my favorite things was to put a penny on a rail and let the passing trains flatten it or to stop at a country store and buy a Pepsi or Nehi-orange, or some Bit-O-Honey candy.

Sweet memories! So long for now,