



*36. Down on the
Farm*
June 30, 2009
Peach Picking Time

Mr. Hubert Carson from Concord, who is 81 years old and going strong, is shown with his granddaughter, Mindy [left], and daughter, Trudy, who live in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Mr. Carson, everybody's friend, has been a part of the farm market since 1992. He works during the mid-day hours Wednesday through Saturday.

*"When it's peach picking time in Georgia,
Apple picking time in Tennessee,
Cotton picking time in Mississippi...
Then it's girl picking time for me!"*

We used to sing this old song as we approached peach picking time, exuberant, enthusiastic, and timely, and I still sing it. It is now peach picking time and I love it. It is in my blood. I have been a part of it for near 70 years.

We picked our first peaches a couple of weeks ago and we will be picking the 30 or so varieties until about mid-September, one variety coming in after another, although there will be some overlapping. We will have the white flesh ones to go along with the yellows, each variety being picked for about a week to 10 days. Some of the older folks will remember harvest 60 years ago

beginning about the first of August when the Elberta variety was king. That has now changed and I will eat fresh peaches as part of my breakfast every morning for about the next three months. These first varieties are clingstone. This means that the flesh of the peach clings to the seed, then about mid to late July; we begin the freestone season where the seed will just turn loose from the flesh. We grow more of the later varieties and for those who freeze peaches, freestone is the favorite.

My mind drifts back to years past when all of our harvest was over in a ten day to two week period. There were peach orchards all around the hilltops in Nelson County. We, along with Albemarle County, were two of the largest peach producing counties in Virginia and the main variety was Elberta. The peach itself was big, the trees were big and productive, but the mature fruit skin color was greenish-yellow, with maroon where it faced the sun. Maroon, not red, and you would think I would be partial since maroon is my Va. Tech "Hokie" color, but the reddish-orange with splashes of yellow on other peaches is far more attractive.

Trucks came from the coal-field villages of West Virginia to get fruit to take home and sell to those who canned peaches. Canning peaches for the homemaker was about as important in the life in our community as hog-killing or apple butter making. Mother often canned several bushels of fruit. It was our dessert or treat when we came home from school in the afternoon, and often it was our dessert after we had finished our meal at suppertime. The Elberta was fine for canning. Just about everyone did a lot of canning in those days before the home freezer. Pantries typically were filled with jars of vegetables from the gardens and we must have had at least two shelves full of mama's peaches.

Many housewives now have found jobs away from their homes and canning is soon going to be a forgotten art. We don't grow Elbertas any more. It has given way to the Blake and Sugar Giant and the Mr. Carson varieties. The customer wants the peach with "impulse cosmetics," that grocery-shelf magnetism which pulls the customer to that variety, and they cannot pass it up even though sometimes the 'not-so-attractive-one' may taste better.

I have to shake my head as I think what has happened in the old big red 40 by 80 packing shed over the past near 70 years. I remember so well when we built it in 1940. All the lumber for the shed was from timber on the farm and it was sawn at the Walter Ramsey mill which adjoined the farm. Daddy bought an old second hand fruit grader. We marveled at it. The machine sprawled over some fifty-to-sixty feet from one end to the other. It was replaced about 1945 when the peach crops started bringing in some money and Daddy bought a new one equipped with many motors and drives and then we really thought then we were in 'tall cotton.'

That first machine had one big five horsepower motor that ran the whole contraption through belts, pulleys, and cogwheels; it was a mechanic's dream and a grower's blessing when everything worked right. Dad and the men managed to make it work with pieces of wire to splice the belts and drives, some spare belts, extra chain links, and as much as anything, a lot of luck. First, a peach brush took off all the fuzz and dirt. Then the peaches passed by six ladies who sorted out the bad peaches and placed them onto the cull belt; and these were sold at a reduced price. The good peaches then rolled onto a group of rotating cylinders which sorted the big fruit from the little. Then there were the pretty teen-age girls who worked making the ring-pack; the showy top layers of beautiful peaches for the baskets. The girls worked on one side of the grader and made eyes at the boys who working on the other side. They flirted back and forth until suppertime or time to go home.

It took about 30 people to do all of the jobs. Whole families worked; father, mother, and all of the children. There were jobs for everyone, the older men did the final packing of the fruit in the baskets, and the youngsters had the job of stenciling the tops showing the variety and grades. Some of the younger children worked putting on the "Blue Goose" label which identified the peach brokers who sold our fruit. The kids who put on the labels often had the sticky flour-glue splattered over their hands and they threatened to plaster it on anybody that came close. Some kid had to go to the spring and bring water for the workers. We all drank from the same water bucket, and most everyone used the little water dipper. We all watched the old Coca-Cola wall clock for the supertime break.

Peaches in 90 degree temperatures get soft real fast and we had no refrigeration which meant that often we worked late into the night to finish packing all of the fruit we had picked that day. Sometimes it was after midnight when we finished packing. One of the thrills was to see a beautiful basket of fruit ready to be shipped, and see the workers bragging and claiming, "Look here what I grew up at 'our' place."

Tomorrow we would have another orchard to pick and more to pack and we smiled.

So long for now,

Paul Saunders