

On June 30, 1946, the Spartanburg Herald-Journal called itself "The Peach Paper." A row of peach trees in silhouette bordered the top edge. The banner headline "O.P.A. DIES AT MIDNIGHT: TRUMAN ASKS PRICES NOT BE INCREASED" hovered over a large aerial photograph of a peach orchard with the word "PEACHMONT!" in large, bold type. Below the photo, "Atom Bomb To Drop Today" was squeezed in next to the headline, "S.C. Peaches Best To Can: Processing Key To Better Market." When a piece of fruit gets more press than the Bikini Atoll A-bomb test, it illustrates just how powerful the peach was in the South Carolina Piedmont.

Articles about peaches and ads thanking peach growers filled almost every page; the Commercial National Bank in Spartanburg printed a photo of President Truman holding a basket of Carolina Queens

saying, "They're the prettiest peaches I've Ever Seen." On page D-1, the headline read: " Howdy Neighbor – Inman! Business Hums In Piedmont Peach Center: New Telephone System Tops Improvements of the Town." Large photographs bordered an article proclaiming Inman to be " a hustling, thriving' agricultural, commercial, and industrial town." R.D. Hicks, owner of the Inman Telephone Company, joked: " Today, Spartanburg becomes ' just a suburb of Inman, the peach center' of the Piedmont."

1946 was the year that put Inman on the map as the largest producer of fresh peaches in the country and the largest peach loading point in the world. It set the stage for Spartanburg to become the "Top Fresh Peach County" and South Carolina the "Number One Fresh Peach State." Dubbed "Peach Town U.S.A." in 1957, Inman was once the busiest peach center in the nation. Inman's contribution to the peach industry is extremely important and far-reaching. The economic windfall emanating from the Inman-Gramling Peach Belt rippled outward, touching upon the lives of everyone in Spartanburg County and, ultimately, the entire State of South Carolina. Inman no longer retains its number one status in the country or the state, but the "Heart of the Piedmont Peach Belt" is still beating.

There are several factors that led to Inman earning the title of "The Fresh Peach Center of the World." The pluck of the first four growers, the support of the Clemson Extension Service and Spartanburg County agents, the work of the South Carolina Peach Growers Association and the South Carolina Peach Councils, the help of the Farm Bureau Federation and South Carolina Farm Bureau in the orchards and in Washington D.C., the pledge of the farmers to sell a high quality product, the expansion of the rail road, and the hard work of all of the local people who brought the peach from farm to table: all of these elements came together, and the fame of Inman's peaches spread worldwide.

The history of the peach industry in the Inman-Gramling peach belt was reported in The Spartanburg Herald-Journal many times. On January 11, 1921, over fifty farmers met on the second story of Ben M. Gramling's general store. They assembled to hear a talk given by a county agent, an extension horticulturalist from Clemson, and a nursery

representative from Tennessee. Mr. Gramling had noticed that J.V. Smith of Greer took his family to Atlantic City every summer while the cotton farmers were struggling due to the devastation of the boll weevil. In an interview with the Herald-Journal, Gramling said: "We figured he had something we didn't. He had a peach orchard."

Agent Ernest Carnes and horticulturalist A.E. "Shorty" Schilleter made a good case for diversification, but only four "bold plungers" planted peaches in 1921: Ben M. Gramling, Andrew J. Harris, Mack F. Johnson and Paul J. Woodfin. Bruce Woodfin, descendant of P.J. Woodfin, recalled that the farmers ordered more trees. "When their order of trees came in from the nursery [my grandfather, Edgar Woodfin] was sent by his father with a large two horse wagon out to the Gramling depot to pick them up, thinking it would be a big load. He was surprised to learn that their order of 500 trees consisted of nothing more than several bundles of tightly packed 'switches.'" The trees were the Elberta and Georgia Belle varieties.



1925, a pruning demonstration held at the orchard of Ben M. Gramling between Inman and Gramling. Shown in order of left to right are: A.L. "Shorty" Shilletter of Clemson College, Judge Gentry, Count Culbreth, George Settle, Claude Bishop, Bill Tinsley, T.B. Harmon, County Agricultural Agent Ernest Carnes, Ben M. Gramling, Paul J. Woodfin, Mack F. Johnson, John B. Turpin, and John Tinsley. Photo courtesy of Bruce Woodfin

When their trees bore fruit in July 21, 1924, the farmers pooled their crops in order to have enough to ship to northern markets. Four carloads were loaded on an old cotton-loading platform near Inman. The business would one day grow into a multi-million dollar industry that shipped peaches as far away as Alaska, Canada, and London, England.

Many farmers declined to take the initial plunge with Gramling, but some growers were willing to take a chance.



Peach picking crew, Paul J. Woodfin farm circa 1930's
Photo courtesy of Bruce Woodfin

An August 22, 1970 Herald-Journal article said: "Following up the decision made by the original four, other men in 1922 decided to plant trees also. Among them were J.J. Cudd and Judge Joe Gentry." A photograph taken at Gramling's "Big Hill" in 1925 captured eleven early peach growers attending a winter pruning demonstration; other area farmers were also beginning to grow peaches.

Inman had the perfect location for those little "switches" to take root and thrive. The red clay sub-soil and the proximity to the mountains in the area would ensure successful peach growing.

Carnes explained that the soil had been depleted by cotton. The bold step to diversify and end dependence on cotton would not have been possible without Carnes and the Clemson College Extension Service. An orchard school was started to inform the farmers about commercial peach planting and sustainable agriculture. Their early advice was invaluable in those early years.

The first four orchards totaled thirty acres; in 1923, South Carolina was dead last in shipments, sending sixteen

carloads out of the state. The industry grew to nineteen orchards in Spartanburg County in 1926; a freeze in 1927 wiped out almost every peach in the area, but the people of the peach belt proved Carnes was right, and they stuck it out. In 1928, they shipped 103 cars of peaches to market. Sales in 1929 totaled \$160,000.00 with banner sales in 1930 of \$225,000.00.

In "the lucky thirties," peaches were productive, labor was cheap, and Georgia was experiencing peach failure. In 1935, South Carolina shipped more than 1,000 carloads for the first time. By 1938, Inman growers had produced one fourth of the 1,600 carloads that were shipped from Spartanburg County. The Herald-Journal reported: "T.C. Tinley, J.H. Settles, E.P. Blackwell and W.L. Hines made four of the best records this year. All of the orchards are in the Inman Community." The S.C. Peach Growers Association began plans for two new packinghouses that year, and the growers agreed to Federal Inspections so the quality of their peaches could be guaranteed, sight unseen.

In the 1940's, H & J Fruit and Produce Company plant, M.R. Murray and D.C. Strother's "modern" packing shed, and the Caruso packinghouse were built in Inman. Distributors like the Gentile Brothers and American Fruit Growers moved to the area. Over two million new peach trees were planted in 1940, which led to 4,000 unsold peaches being dumped into a gully. A 1942 marketing agreement passed that would "regulate quality and grade of pack," and encourage the sale of U.S. Number One peaches, and require the dumping of culls by large growers. In 1946, the Herald-Journal reported: "For the first time in history, South Carolina has topped all states in the shipment of fresh peaches...more than Georgia, heretofore the 'No. 1 state...At this time, South Carolina's long standing reputation for quality peaches that carry and hold up paid off."

The trains played a big part in getting those peaches to market. Additional tracks were laid in 1939. Southern Railway expanded the West Hayne yard and upgraded its loading and dispatching facilities to handle East Bound and West bound cars simultaneously. Emory Bishop, owner of Bishop's Farm in Inman, recalled how most of the peaches from the farm went by rail. "Up above the big Inman First Baptist Church, that's where we loaded all the peaches on a train, box cars filled with ice on each end of it, and we shipped car loads of peaches out by the train load."

The marketing by the South Carolina Peach Growers Association in the 1940's gave Inman the final push it needed. The pioneer peach farmers cooperated with the Clemson College Extension Service to establish the association in 1924. Those early planters had little knowledge regarding the shipping and marketing of peaches. In an interview with the Herald-Journal, A.E. Shilletter said: "We had no buyers,

no contracts, no nothing. We formed the association as an emergency necessity and have kept it going." Local author James W. Lawrence, Sr. wrote: "the association became the largest fresh peach distributing cooperative" with their own cannery in Inman. They packed peaches under the name Carolina Gold ...[and] marketed peaches for the growers under two brand names, Blue Goose, and Palmetto Queen."



*Emory Bishop of Bishop's Farm photo by
Bonnie Werlinich*

The Inman and Greater Spartanburg County Chambers of Commerce worked hard to publicize peaches in the Piedmont. In 1946, a map showing 254 peach sheds in Spartanburg County was planned so truckers would know their locations. The map was distributed to the drivers, and peach information centers were set up at gas stations. Inman was named the "Fresh Peach Center of the World" in 1958; Jaycees ran the Inman peach information booth as a community service project to help the town retain its newfound status.

In order for those peaches to be transported, there had to be pickers and packers, people willing to drop everything each summer when the peaches were ready to go. Without these locals, there would have been no peaches to promote. Teenagers who wanted pin money, housewives saving for a blonde coffee table, and grandmas with empty nests worked side by side with farmer's wives and just plain folks who were trying to provide for their children's education. Even Inman's Mayor, Cornelius Huff, worked at the Bishop's Farm roadside stand when he was just seven years old.

Emory Bishop's wife Nan remembers how much fun the teenagers had in the packing shed. "My daughter was the oldest and she got a job at Cribb's packing shed. I was getting pretty upset when my little girl was still out there working at 4 o'clock in the morning, but all the kids were doing it and they loved it. It was something that they made money at and had fun doing." Women were especially proficient at grading the peaches in the packing shed. Electric lights installed in 1946 made those all-nighters possible.

The "Palmetto Peach Special" flew peaches to Washington, D.C. Palmetto Peach Queen Annabel Cribb presented them to President Harry Truman. Inman was a "City on the Grow," after the peach season

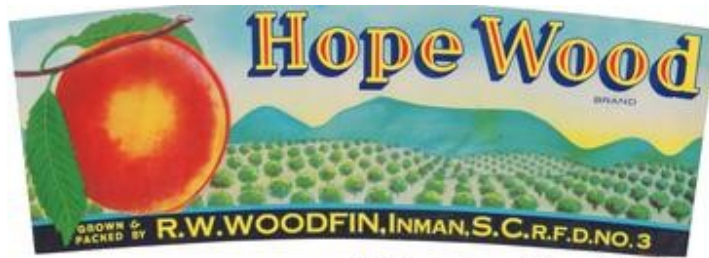
was over, that is. The June 30, 1946 Herald-Journal reported: "Work on Clyde A. Corell's \$30,000 repair and parts shop has stopped...Meetings of the Junior Women's Club are off...because it's peach season." Mayor Beason told of plans to build a new City Hall. The Miller Brothers Motor Company, Bob's Cola Plant and Mrs. Guy Blackwell's flower shop were being built, while Willie Maxwell's Inman Beauty Shop and the Deluxe Purol Diner had just celebrated their grand openings.

It seemed that the prosperity in Inman would go on forever. "South Carolina Tops Nation In Fresh Peaches" was the headline on January 30, 1954. New construction in Inman boomed; nine houses, a low-income complex, two new schools, and a pulpwood yard were built. The peach industry in Inman was benefitting everyone, not just the growers, pickers and packers; it helped to support chemical companies, ice producers, construction companies, railroads, truckers, and equipment manufacturers. Basket and box suppliers benefitted, as did the banks, and the stores where people spent their peach money.

The industry began to change in the late 1950's. New varieties were added, extending the growing season. Canned peaches from California began to outsell fresh fruit. The linear trend for fresh peach consumption peaked in 1952 and fell steadily, while the linear trend for canned peach consumption rose. South Carolina harvested a record 416 million pounds of peaches in 1968; by 1975 that number had dropped to 215 million pounds. Peach farmers faced higher costs, restricted markets, and lower sales. The Farm Bureau helped them get a square deal by writing legislation on minimum wage, unfair trade practices, and marketing orders. Peach farmer Bruce Johnson of BBB Packers noted: "You cannot have a marketing order without legislative backing."



Bruce Johnson photo by Bonnie Werlinich



Label courtesy of Bruce Woodfin

Johnson served as the State Director for the South Carolina Farm Bureau. He was also a spokesperson for the growers during the independent trucker's strike. On Monday June 25, 1979, truckers and peach farmers had reached a stalemate in their talks in the old Ramada Inn in Spartanburg. The peaches were in limbo, waiting to be shipped in storage facilities: all they needed was the trucks to haul them to market.

Johnson had been at the meeting in Columbia earlier with Governor Riley; he knew most of the truckers in the Ramada room. "Things had to move or the season was over," he said. Johnson remembers standing up and saying: "Look fellas, whatever the price for hauling these peaches is, don't forget, the peach is what pays the freight. The peach is what pays all the expense." The next day at 9.a.m, two trucks arrived at Johnson's packing shed in Inman, and sixty percent of the truckers returned to the highways in a "good faith gesture" to haul the peaches to market.

Peach farmers began to sell land to developers in the 1980's and 1990's due to consistently bad crop years and low prices. A late freeze in 1996 reduced the State's peach crop to only 20 million pounds. Emory Bishop recalled how his farm survived the hard years: "We would make up for that with the gladiolas that we planted, alfalfa and grain." According to The Produce News, peach farmers in the Upstate are still diversifying, planting greens and other crops to subsidize their income.

Nowadays, Bishop plants pine trees. His peach shed has been converted into an events barn that is available for hire. Emory Bishop is proud to say: "I am still living on the same soil I was born on." Bruce Johnson grows peaches as well as blueberries and blackberries. He sells peaches to local stores and to the public from his packinghouse in Inman. Johnson is looking forward to having pick-your-own peaches in his orchard this summer.

South Carolina is now the #2 peach producing state, second to California, but it is still the leader in fresh peach production. Inman's streets are no longer crowded with trucks loaded with peaches or packinghouses humming at 4.a.m., but the import of the industry can still be felt. There has been a resurgence of interest in preserving Inman's peach heritage as a way to honor all of the people who made Inman "Peach Town U.S.A," and the economic impact it had on this state. As Bruce Johnson said, "the peach is what pays," and for Inman, South Carolina, the peach paid off big time.

Inman, South Carolina: Peach Town U.S.A.

By Bonnie Werlinich

<http://www.destinationinman.com/peach-history-article.html>