

Bassham Remembers Summer Sweet

[A History of the Cross County Peach Business](#)

Robert Bassham, longtime Crowley's Ridge peach farmer, relates some of his memories in the following narrative. Summer Sweet Orchards was mostly in St. Francis County; there was very little of it in Cross County . My dad (Al E. Bassham) began work there in 1942 and stayed until about 1964.

In those early years, Summer Sweet was owned by Home Investment Company which was a group of men from Lincoln, Nebraska. Daddy managed it for the company until about 1956 when it was divided and sold. Bill and Wilson Morgan bought part of it, and Charlie Davidson of Colt bought a part. Daddy, Thomas McDaniel of Forrest City, and Mr. A. C. Eichberg from Lincoln, Nebraska, partnered and bought a part. That part still went by Summer Sweet, but there weren't but about three hundred acres in it.

At one time, Summer Sweet was advertised as the largest orchard in the United States. They had five hundred acres of Elberta peaches at one time. That was the only variety that they grew at Summer Sweet then. They heavily fertilized half of them so they would not all come off at the same time. They packed the peaches in those years at Forrest City. But back in the forties, there was a packing shed in Wynne, right across Front Street from the old Cross County Bank.

In the fifties and sixties, a lot of people worked for the highway department and in other jobs, and they'd take their vacations in the summer and pick and sell their peaches, but a lot of the families up and down the Ridge from Wynne to Forrest City just had a ridge in back of their house that they had anywhere from fifty to a couple of hundred trees. At one time, there were approximately a hundred peach growers from Helena to Paragould, all up and down this ridge. Now, probably, there are no more than fifteen or twenty in that same area. Most of the land has gotten too valuable to raise peaches on,

and they've turned it into house lots and things like that. So, I guess the peach industry will be going out entirely on the Ridge when we old folks get out of it, unless some enterprising young man comes along.

In the sixties, Herman Young of Forrest City bought the part that Daddy, Mr. Ike and Mr. McDaniel had, and also the part that Charlie Davidson had, and he raised peaches on it until, probably, the nineties. Mr. Cotton Roberts owns it now, and he has houses and a lake on it.

During the late sixties, Gerber Products came in and contracted with several growers up and down the Ridge to set out some "non-melting clings" for the company to process into baby food. This continued until the mid-eighties and then Gerber slowly moved its growing areas to South Carolina and Michigan. I was the last grower to have Gerber trees, and the last year I sent any to them was 2006. Peach growing worked out well for some growers, but for others it didn't. A lot of the growers didn't stay with them very long; but there was a considerable acreage of processing peaches grown during the time from the late sixties until the late eighties. That's about the extent of the Gerber business around here.

[Peach Memories by Edwin Harris](#)

Bob Stewart had a peach shed somewhere in the north part of town, maybe on North 7th Street which is now North Falls Boulevard. The shed downtown was owned by an organization that was headquartered in Lincoln, Nebraska. I think they also owned the land on Crowley's Ridge where the orchards were. There were officials that would come down to Wynne during the packing season to supervise.

I remember they would pick the prettiest peaches and put them in a circular tray, then put them on top of the bushel basket so the prettiest would be on top when the owner opened it. They would ship them to market by the box car loads. They were refrigerated cars and were iced at Wynne Ice and Coal Co. (owned by Mr. Fiscus.) The shed was next to one of the set of tracks and they would park an empty box car next to it and slide the filled bushel baskets onto the car to fill it up.

During the height of the peach season, the shed would work on 24 hour shifts. I worked there a week or so when I was about 12 or 13 years old. That was when peaches still had fuzz on them. They would run them through a machine that had a lot of brushes that would clean the fuzz off and put it in a big sack (Mr. Harris lives in Tennessee and is the son of the late Gladys and J. E.Harris of Harris Lumber Company.

Courtesy of the Cross County Museum, October 2011

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Mrs.Bridget Hart, Editor

Picture of Peach Festival Queens about 1930:Click on this link.....

<http://www.argenweb.net/stfrancis/TIMES/NEW33.htm>

Queen Elberta and her Court: Upper Left, Miss Elizabeth Fussell (FCHS 1929), to her right Princess Evelyn McDaniel (FCHS 1928), below left to right, Misses Eleanor McCown (FCHS 1929), Margaret Eldridge (FCHS 1929), and Mabel Parker (FCHS 1929).

(From the Forrest City Times Herald in the early 1930's)