The LOUISIANA ORANGE

A Short History of the Citrus Industry in Plaquemines Parish

"Only one who has eaten the navel orange grown in the Creole State on Plaquemines Parish soil, rich in all the elements of plant food, and which has been fully ripened under semitropical skies, knows what a really delicious orange is."

This tribute to the Plaquemines Parish citrus industry was delivered by Professor H. E. Van Deman, formerly of the U. S. Department of Agriculture and a noted fruit authority.
Navel Orange

The mainstay of the Parish citrus industry is the Louisiana Washington Navel orange, famous for its taste and juice content. It originated in Bahia, Brazil, in the early part of the 19th Century. It was a bud-sport or mutation from the selecta orange which is a seedless variety similar to our common Valencia. It was found propagating in 1820 in Bahia by a Portuguese gardener. It was introduced in the U.S. in 1838 by a wealthy Scotch planter to the southern part of Florida. There is no written history as to what happened to this planting.

A few years later Mr. William Saunders, a horticulturist of the United States Plant Office, which later developed into the Department of Agriculture, planted several trees in the government nursery in Washington, D.C. Mr. Saunders sent two of these trees to Mrs. Luther Tibbets, Riverside, Calif. So far as known, the entire population of the Washington Navel came from these two trees.

There is no record of who introduced the navel orange into Louisiana but it probably came here from California. The navel orange was first called Bahia because it originated from the city of the same name in Brazil.

In the early days of this variety it was also referred to as the Washington Orange because it came to California from Washington, D.C. Later by mutual agreement, the name was changed to the Washington Navel. (The name “Navel” was given to it since the blossom end of the fruit resembles the human navel.)

The navel is a seedless variety that ripens in November. It makes a large fruit with a thin skin. It has deep orange color and is very attractive. It does not bear as heavy as sweet oranges or satsumas but, due to its flavor and heavy juice content, it demands the best price on the market today. It contains no seeds, and the tree grows large, reaching a height of 30 feet. In 1960, about 35 percent of the parish production was navels. This percentage has increased markedly in recent years.

Other Varieties Grown

Louisiana is the mother of the Mandarin in the United States and it is thought that the site of the first tree was near the present Naval Station in Algiers. Credit for introducing the Satsuma, Tangerine and Kumquat is given to the Italian Consul although these came several years after the first Mandarin, probably about 1850.

Other citrus varieties grown in Plaquemines Parish today in lesser quantities include: Orlando Tangelo, Robinson Tangerine, Owari and Armstrong’s Early Satsumas; Louisiana Sweet, Plaquemines Sweet, Temple, Muscot, Valencia and Minneola Tangelos—all oranges; Negamiz and Netina Kumquats; Meyer lemon; and Ruby Red and Duncan grapefruit.

Early History

The first citrus trees in Louisiana were brought in by the Jesuits who were granted a tract of land near New Orleans in 1727. The first citrus plantings in Plaquemines Parish was at Fort Mississippi, an early Spanish Fort about 35 miles off the City of New Orleans where Phoenix is presently located. About the same time missionaries were also planting citrus in Southern California and Florida.

For many years the early Spanish settlers in Plaquemines Parish grew the oranges to beautify their homes and furnish their families with the delicious fruit during the winter months. In about 1859, several of the groves in this parish were producing more fruit than their families needed. So the first Plaquemines Parish fruit went to market in the parish, which, at that time, was a small river port.

Statistics Tell the Story

Statistics pretty well tell the story of the adversities faced by Plaquemines Parish orange growers over the years. In 1919, 37,000 boxes were produced in the entire state. Production increased gradually, reaching 220,000 in 1928. For the next twenty years, production would reach a new peak during the even-numbered years only to fall back during the odd-numbered years. The top production was achieved in 1946 when 410,000 boxes were harvested. (It dropped back to 300,000 in 1947.)

The freeze in 1951 cut production back to 50,000 boxes for that year and for 1952. Except for a setback in 1956, production then grew each year until 1960 when 275,000 boxes were harvested. The freeze in 1962 dropped production back to 15,000 boxes.

What the back-to-back freezes of 1962 and 1963 did not accomplish, Hurricane Betsy in 1965 did. Almost all the trees were killed. It was obvious that drastic steps would be required if the citrus industry was to be restored.

Industry Rebuilds After Betsy

The Parish Government then offered to help the growers by paying one-half the cost of acquiring new trees from Florida and the Rio Grande Valley. During the following three-year period, 140,000 trees were brought into the Parish.

Again in 1969 when the industry was just getting back on its feet, Hurricane Camille came roaring in out of the Gulf of Mexico. Practically all of the citrus trees below Empire were killed. Between Empire and Port Sulphur some groves were almost entirely killed and others survived intact except for wind damage and some loss of fruit. Above Port Sulphur, part of the current crop was damaged but the trees, for the most part, survived relatively undamaged. Again many of the growers face the agonizing problems of starting over.
Orange Wine a By-Product

Prior to Hurricane Camille, the industry also had a by-product that was becoming more famous each year. This was, of course, the Louisiana Orange Wine. The art of making this wine was brought from Yugoslavia some 50 years ago during the Prohibition Era. The commercial brewing of this wine was a closely guarded secret and no one was permitted to enter the winery except government inspectors. Camille destroyed the winery as well as the orange groves that supplied the fruit.

Industry Undergoes Change

The Plaquemines Parish orange tree of today differs greatly from its early day predecessor. The first trees were grown from seedlings, which were thorny and produced fruit of widely varying quality. In addition, these trees would grow to a height of over 30 feet, making harvest difficult. They required seven to ten years to begin production.

During recent years, the citrus industry has undergone a change which today has produced the thornless, prolific, lower growing trees that start producing fruit of uniform quality within two to three years. This change began when the art of budding was brought to the parish.

By taking a bud from one tree and grafting it onto the rootstock of another growers seek to combine the best and most desirable qualities of each. Although these tree breeders have developed vastly improved fruit trees of many varieties, they have not slackened their efforts to constantly improve the tree, the fruit, and their knowledge of the surest and best way to grow the most delectable fruit in the largest quantity and have it ready for market at the most opportune time.

Regardless of the origin of the orange tree—whether it comes from California, Texas, or Florida or is produced locally—when it is planted in Plaquemines Parish soil it produces fruit that is distinctively Plaquemines Parish. This is attributable to the soil and climatic conditions of the lower Mississippi River area which is duplicated nowhere else in the world.

Experiments Continue

At the Louisiana State University Experimental Station, a few miles up-river from Port Sulphur, a series of experiments is being conducted designed to develop a cold-resistant variety of orange tree, and to test various fertilizers and herbicides.

In years ahead, as a result of efforts such as those the orange growers of Plaquemines Parish may have orange trees that will withstand the infrequent freezes and which will consistently produce fruit of the highest quality.

Who knows, someday man may even be able to tame the hurricane. Then, the Louisiana citrus industry will really come into its own.