

Auman, Watts: Peach Picking Time ^[1]

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Watts Auman: Peach Picking Time

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/8/2004. Copyrighted.
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Watts Auman's peach orchard and roadside stand are just outside of West End, in the pine barrens of Moore County. I try to get by there at least once a summer. Auman grows 18 varieties of peaches, and they're all delicious. My favorite time of day to stop by is just before supper. That's when the 65-year-old bachelor often takes a breather from his farm chores to visit with friends and relatives who gather at his stand. They sit and talk about politics and peaches, while Auman greets customers who have come from as far away as Raleigh and Durham. The other afternoon, he also talked about the history of peach growing there in the Sandhills as he lived it and as he heard it from his father and uncles.

In Watts Auman's words:

I remember peach picking time in my early childhood. It was a good time really, because even during World War II, and after World War II, there were people from other towns that would come to help us. They'd live in the boardinghouse in W
I also remember German prisoners of war being here during World War II. They'd help with the harvest. They were very friendly. They were so friendly that the MP guards would just go to sleep under a tree. My brother and I would ride on the
As a child going to school, we didn't get wrapped up in the farm too much. We'd be around the packing house with all the workers, and I think we thought that we had a lot to do with the harvest, but we were probably getting into some mischief
But I do remember as a child, 7 or 8 years old, when Dad had to be away, selling peaches to truckers who would come there. They'd always want to bargain to get the best price. I'd seen Daddy do it enough, and I'd tell them that we needed it
I've heard stories that my father would take loads of peaches to Durham. These would have been maybe culls and overripe peaches, but good, solid peaches, and he would sell them for 50 cents a bushel or three bushels for a dollar. He'd drive
There's not a lot of that anymore. Now some of the peaches go to the Farmers Market in Raleigh, but 40 years ago there were a tremendous number of people who had pickups who would come in and buy 30 or 40 bushels. They'd take them
I think peach farming here started with a gentleman -- Van Lindley was his name -- who moved to Southern Pines to start a nursery. It is pretty much believed that he's the one who started planting peach trees. That was in 1893, I think it was
In the 1910s, there must have been eight or 10 families who as children had been to Harvard and Yale and Princeton and moved here to plant orchards. One of the guys, named Pumpelly, traveled quite a bit. There's a Samarkand in Uzbekistan
These were well-traveled people, and socially prominent. They were so socially prominent and well off, they hired people to do a lot of the management of things. In the book "Sand in My Shoes," which is about a peach farm near Eagle Springs
That would have been the first wave that came in perhaps around 1910. And when they had good years, there was another wave of people that came in the mid-1910s and 1920s. And then in the early '30s -- that's when my father and his brothers
I'm sure the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma might have been worse, because those people had to gather up and go to California. But there's stories of men coming knocking on our door at night with a deed in their hands. They'd tell my father, "Clyde
Typically, if you had a tract of timber and the landowner would sell the timber to a sawmill, the landowner would say, "If you want to, just go ahead and take the land with it."
The way Dad got started, he and his brothers -- there were seven brothers -- would lease orchards from the wealthy people who wanted to get out of it. They would haul peaches to New York in open trucks. I think they went in the Holland Tunnel
In those days, New York City was a good market because men would have a horse and wagon, and they would go through the streets and sell watermelons, cantaloupes, peaches. A lot of peaches were moved in New York City in those days
When I was coming along, when I got out of the army and for 10 or 15 years, there still were young guys getting married and farming, but I can't imagine it happening today. They may be doing it. Maybe I'm not seeing it. On this farm, if we have
I know, during a lot of these periods, Dad got in right much debt. But it's one of those things, you're into it and the idea was to keep going. Because you felt like if you stopped -- well, I've never played poker, but poker players have a term call

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