

The world's an apple for this Sussex family

By Nancy E. Lynch

BRIDGEVILLE — Walton Smith's world turns on apples. 150,000 bushels a year.

Smith is the second generation of three involved in what he says is Sussex County's largest volume apple business.

In addition to Smith, who is president of T.S. Smith & Sons — named for his father, founder of the business in 1907 — are three other Smiths: Robert Sr., Smith's brother and vice president; Walton Jr., secretary; and Robert Jr., treasurer.

"It's a family business all right," says Smith, the senior partner who, at 70, says he's "awful old."

Although Smith was born in Newark, he moved to Bridgeville in 1900. "My father came down here to take over a general store. After six years he was threatened with tuberculosis. The doctor told him to get rid of the store and get out in the air."

T.S. Smith took his doctor's advice, traded a large bill — "In those days farmers paid only once a year and the merchant shad to carry them through the year" — for 47 acres of farmland and decided on the apple business.

"Some friends of his in Dover were in apples," Smith explained, "and apparently were making money at it. So that's how he decided to get into it."

In three years — 1910 — the older Smith had planted his 47 acres with nursery apple trees. "At that time it was 50 trees to the acre," recalls Smith. "It usually takes 6-7 years for apples to come into light production."

While he was waiting for his apple crop, T.S. Smith planted other crops among his apple trees. In 1912 he bought 120 acres a half mile "from this place and moved the family out to the big homestead on the farm."

Strawberries, tomatoes and grain crops tided the family over until 1915 "when we formed a partnership — my father and my brother and I. We planted 40 more acres with apples and planted heavily with asparagus."

And as C. Walton Smith says, "From there on it was a matter of continuous expansion." The Smiths added six additional farms to the operation. "We're now tilling about 2,000 acres, about 300 in apples," he says with satisfaction.

The Smiths grow seven main varieties of apples today. "Apples have changed greatly over the years with new and better varieties being developed. We have made extensive plantings in the last eight years."

By extensive, Smith means about 20,000 new apple trees and 200 acres of new orchards. Smith predicts that the 150,000 bushel annual yield will double "within the next five years."

The majority, or about 60



Walton Smith and apple of his eye. (Staff photo by Frank Fahey)

per cent of the Smith's apples, go to processors. "They're paying as much as \$3 a bushel for them, that's about double what they had to last year."

Prices are up because of supply and demand. "This has been a particularly good year for us," says Smith. "The (apple) crop for the U.S. is about 6 per cent lower than average, mostly because of the weather, but the demand is greater too."

"Processors use the apples for apple butter, apple sauce or sliced apples, Smith says. "We pack between 25 and 30 per cent of our crop in three- and four-pound bags. These are what we call count packed." They go all over the U.S. and are exported."

The remaining 15-per-cent of sales are left for individual customers, the over-the-counter trade. "People come from all over Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and Virginia for our apples."

It's not unusual, Smith says, for 1,000 bushels to sell over a weekend to motorists. All sales are made from the 50-year old packing house, off U.S. 13 near Bridgeville. Cider, not a staple, is a natural by product of the apple business.

Harvesting begins about the first of September and continues until mid-November. During the peak season, 109 employees pick, grade and pack the apples.

The recent addition of a cold storage room holds 50,000 bushels of apples at 31 degrees almost indefinitely. "We call it a controlled atmosphere," Smith says. "And if necessary, we can keep apples until

March or April."

Smith points out that the freezing point of an apple is 28 degrees — "That's because of all that sugar and those calories."

Present plans call for an apple sell-out by the first of next year. "The main reason is that we can't grow quite as hard an apple as they can in the higher elevations. The hard apples keep a little better."

The Smiths also sell peaches, but we only sell to the local trade. We don't pack them."

Smith looks back over the years in the apple business. "It's been real interesting," he concedes. "It's provided a good living but Uncle Sam takes a nice big chunk."

Although there are fourth generation Smiths, none of them has yet stepped into the apple business. "They're all out of state, they're in agriculture, but not apples," says Smith. "The way it looks now, we're at the end of the line."

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