

# That First Vidalia Onion

by  
Kitty Peterson

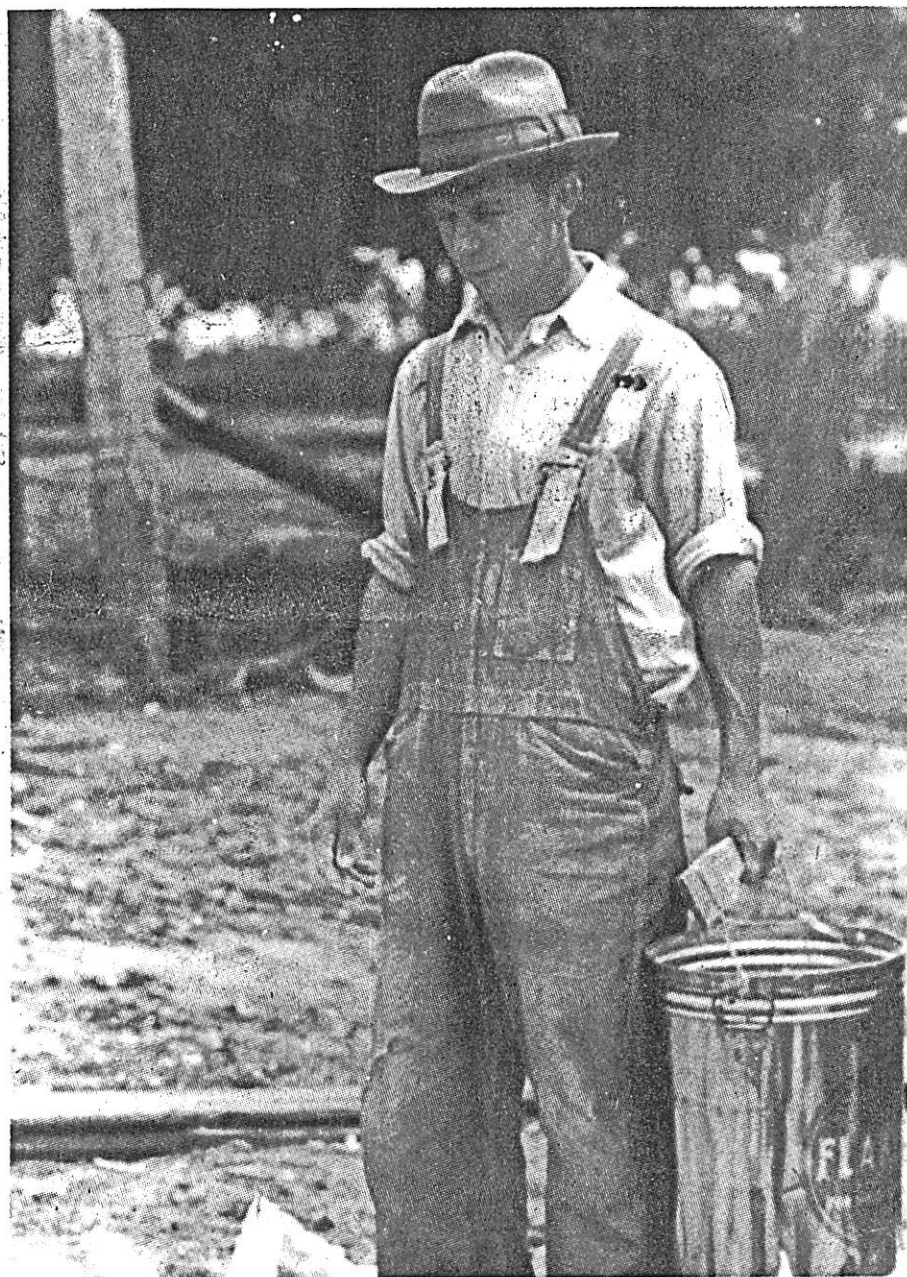
Millions of onions have rolled out of Vidalia and Toombs County since the first one was grown commercially in this area. When was that, and did the man who grew that first one know that he was putting his county on the map? The answer is 1931, and "No". Mose Coleman, who recalls planting those first onions out of curiosity says he has always liked to try new things, and for this area growing onions was new. "But," he adds with a chuckle, "I never expected it to turn into anything like this."

"It began in the fall of 1930," he remembers, "I was getting up my seed order, and my wife, Alice, was helping me. I had been trying things such as spinach, and lettuce, and asparagus, and when I saw the ads for onions in the catalogue I wondered why people in Georgia didn't grow them. I decided I couldn't go wrong with a few so I placed the order."

The variety he ordered was Crystal Wax Bermuda, which was snow white in color, shiny in appearance and very sweet. He planted  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre in a drill, and when they came up he thinned them out to a stand. The result was a crop of beautiful, "great big" onions "as shiny as if they had been polished with wax."

But once they were grown he had problems. There were far too many onions for his family to consume. He had them gathered, and hung with cotton tobacco twine in the smokehouse where he usually hung his sausage and hams, and still there were onions left over. He cleaned out the barn and with twine and tobacco sticks hung the remaining Bermudas there. There his problem was compounded for the onions cured out beautifully. He cut the tops and roots off and knew that he had a beautiful product. BUT, the Depression was beginning, and store owners were suspicious of onions grown locally. It had never been done before, and although they looked mighty pretty, the grocers were afraid they would not keep for a long time.

"I didn't know that either," Mose admits, "but I didn't think the mer-



Vidalia's First Onion Grower, Mose Coleman, 1931.

A lot of onions were produced that year, but the price had fallen to \$1 to \$2 per bag. It was still a good price. Compared to the amount other crops were bringing it was very good. And Mose Coleman was learning more about the business. He was learning how to grow the onion cheaper and to make it last longer. One savings came from buying his plants from Texas rather than growing them himself. These plants which were grown along the southern border by Mexican labor cost only 60 cents per thousand delivered. And the yellow Bermuda-

Mose and not to buy any other k until his supply was exhausted.

A lot of onions were sold that ye and with so many people grow them, Jim Coombs who had a truck, sent his brother out to Texa bring back a truckload of plants to the local farmers. They went like cakes.

But the Depression had gro worse. Too many onions w produced to be sold, and a lot farmers, including Mr. Coleman, several hundred bags to rot. It then that a Mr. McNeal, who lived

admits, "but I didn't think the merchants should try to keep them forever. I thought they should seal them, and that the people who bought them should use them. But back then," he adds, "most grocery stores were individually owned--there weren't many chains--and the owners were very cautious. Since they had never seen white, especially shiny, onions they were afraid they were just pretty and wouldn't keep."

But the more often merchants said "no", the more determined Mose Coleman became to acquaint them with his onions. His concern for the onion was becoming more than just that of a farmer trying to unload a crop, he was becoming the champion of that crop. With a two-wheel trailer made from the rear end of a Model-T automobile hooked behind his car he went from town to town, and finally sold all of his onions. He sold them for \$3.50 per 50-lb. sack, and in those days that was a very big price. "At that time cotton was almost nothing," he explains. "Hogs were as low as 2 cents per pound and cows were selling for 3 and 4 cents per pound. Those onion prices were mighty encouraging to me for I had raised, picked and sold butterbeans for 1 cent per pound and cabbage for just \$20 per ton."

The next year, Mr. Coleman planted 2½ acres of onions and received \$2.50 to \$3.50 per sack for them. "With the Depression on," he continues, "other farmers couldn't get enough for the products they sold to pay for their fertilizer. They all thought I had found a gold mine."

With that attitude prevailing the next year, the third year that Mr. Coleman had planted onions, the farmers of this area engaged in a sort of agricultural "Follow the Leader"; and began replacing standard crops with the white Bermudas. Two who were prominent among the move were Maxwell Smith and Luther McDilda.

Mose Coleman, recognizing an opportunity to help the smaller farmers, and himself at the same time persuaded some to plant for him on halves. He furnished the fertilizer and plants and they grew and gathered the onions. The results were divided. It was a popular move and he soon had people planting for him around Lyons, Cobbtown, Collins, Mannassas and Glenville.

cost only 60 cents per thousand delivered. And the yellow Bermuda, which wasn't as pretty as the Crystal Wax but was just as good, kept longer. Mose switched varieties. "They are all Bermudas," he explained, and are sweet, mild and tasty. The Granex, which farmers are growing now, was developed, I believe, after I got out of the business, and it is a combination of the best qualities of the others."

Selling onions to grocers who had tried them was no longer the problem it had been in the beginning for they, too, were champions of the sweet onion; however, it was during the mid-thirties and the depression was taking its toll of people's pocketbooks. To help sell the onions farmers had raised for him on shares Mose rented a place at the Farmer's Market in Columbia, S.C., and sent up truckloads of onions to his brother-in-law Red McCorkle who was in charge there.

Then he, Mose, began pedaling again. When Vidalia had an A&P Company, located where Sutton's Gift Shop is now, Mose had sold produce to its manager, a man named Paulk, and liked him. The store had closed, but Mr. Paulk had been retained by the company and placed over the Augusta-South Carolina area stores. Mose went to see him and carried some onions. There he sliced one up as an apple, took a bite and handed another to Mr. Paulk. It was all he had to do, Mr. Paulk gave him a letter to show to all A&P managers directing them to buy their onions from

several hundred bags to rot. It then that a Mr. McNeal, who lives McIntosh Street and managed Tanner-Brice wholesale grocery company produce department for Mitch Brice, secured the warehouse (now the brick warehouse where Warthen buys pecans) and stored onions which he bought for company from farmers for 25 c per bag. The bags had cost 10 c each, so the price paid did not cover expenses, but it helped.

After this most of the farm stopped growing onions. But not some held on, and kept the business alive. Mose Coleman stopped when he opened his wholesale paper company in Vidalia. This, a large wholesale paper business in a small town, was another first, and it took most of his time. But he never lost interest in onions.

Asked how he feels now about his part in the onion business which has become this area's best known product, he replied, "Let me tell you this way. About five years ago I was in Comanjilla, which is a town in Mexico, taking a hot bath. I overheard two men near by talking. One was from north Georgia and the other was from Oklahoma. The one from Georgia was telling the one from Oklahoma that he should grow some Vidalia onions because they were the best onions produced. To get that far away from home and to have my town and its onions praised that way made me feel mighty good."