

MOSES M. COLEMAN

ROUTE 5

LYONS, GEORGIA 30436

TELEPHONE 526-6555

January 20, 1982.

Miss Nancy Neill,
Business Atlanta Magazine,
6285 Barfield,
Atlanta, Ga. 30328

Dear Miss Neill:

Since you didn't tell me if you were Miss or Mrs. I am guessing that it was Miss, if I have guessed wrong it certainly isn't the first time I have guessed wrong in my almost 81 years of life. I will have to make this letter a little brief as I am leaving this morning to go to Florida for a doctor to cut open my right eye, take out the cataract lens and implant an artificial lens in my eye. If you find errors in this letter, please excuse as I can't read what I'm writing but know where the letters are on this typewriter and since the letters on the typewriter are big I can see the letters on the keyboard.

I have lived on my farm all my life and am a lover of the land and to see things grow has always been one of my joys in life. As a little boy of 7 years I started plowing a mule in our cotton and corn fields. After finishing high school I attended University of Georgia where I studied agriculture and after leaving the University I started putting into practice what I had studied at the University. I still grew cotton and corn but also started growing beets, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, spinach, turnips, cabbage, collards, asparagus, white potatoes, sweet potatoes and a few other vegetables. Each afternoon I would ship by railway express the vegetables to Atlanta where a Mr. Fain sold them for me. After a few years when I was about 24 years of age I along with farmers incorporated The Toombs County Sweet Potato Association. The members met and elected me president and general manager. This business grew until we were shipping as much as 16 carloads of sweet potatoes per day during the peak of shipping season. Sixteen cars was the most that we ever shipped in a day and this was from Lyons and other towns that we had members. The sweet potato association prospered until the big depression came along and prices of everything dropped to almost nothing, in fact the farmers had to quit shipping potatoes when the price received at the market would not pay the freight charges. The varieties we used were Big Stem Jerseys which we shipped to Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Seattle and other north cities. The Big Stem Jersey was a light colored, dry potato that the only use in the South was to fatten our hogs. They would not sell in the South but Northern markets demanded them. We grew Porto Ricos for Atlanta, New Orleans, Birmingham, Richmond, Charlotte, Nashville and other Southern markets. The Porto Rico was a red skinned, real sweet potato that would cook soft and juicy.

The depression came and the harder we farmers worked the more money we lost as cotton sold as low as 4¢ per pound, cattle and hogs as low as 2 to 4¢ per pound and ~~xxx~~ everything else in proportion. I still grew vegetables for sale but prices were terribly low. In the fall of 1930 while making out an order for vegetable seed from a mid-western seed company I read in the catalogue about Crystal Wax Bermuda onions. I wondered why Georgia had never produced cured onions, as the bulk of onions sold in Georgia came from the mid-west and a sizeable amount from Orange County, New York. Since these onions that were shipped into Georgia had a big freight cost ~~plus~~ plus brokers and wholesalers charges I believed if I could produce cured onions here in Georgia that I could make a profit. So I ordered enough seed of the Crystal Wax Bermudas for $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre. I produced a big crop of beautiful snow white onions that were so mild that they could be eaten without the strong eye watering effects that I had been used to in onions. I built a little two wheeled trailer that I could pull behind my car and started trying to sell my onions. Since the depression was on in full force it was hard to sell anything as anyone who had a dollar was afraid to turn it loose and they were afraid that they would not get another dollar to replace it. But I would sell a bag occasionally in my going from town to town, In

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Augusta I called on the district office of A & P Tea Co that handled all purchases for all the stores in and around nearby towns. I was pleasantly surprised when I walked into buyers office to find that the buyer was an old friend of mine, a Mr. Paulk. I had some of onions in my pocket and lost no time in taking my pocket knife and cutting a slice and eating it. This surprised him and I offered him a slice which he ate. I left his office with a letter to all the A & P stores in entire area to buy what onions that they needed and at a big price \$3.50 per 50# bag. I sold my entire crop for \$3.50 per bag. The second year I planted about ten times as many onions as the first year and sold them well. The third year many farmers who figured I had found a gold mine also planted onions. I helped them with advise as to planting, growing, curing and selling. In my second year of producing onions I found that a yellow bermuda variety would not only have a mild taste but would produce a greater tonnage per acre and also would keep better than the Crystal Wax but to this day I have never found an onion that tastes better than the Crystal Wax. By cross-pollination other varieties have been produced that retain the best production, keeping and taste qualities and this improving of varieties has developed the present variety that is popular in this area. What is now known as the Granex is the best known of the onions grown in this area.

When I planted the first seed of the Crystal Wax Bermuda in November 1930 I never dreamed that I was starting up something that would make this area known all over the United States. It is a big business here. My farm is halfway between Vidalia and Lyons and some people refer to the onions as Toombs County Onions, Vidalia Onions and folks at Glennville have tried to establish them as Glennville Onions but as a general rule the best known name for these onions is Vidalia Onions and the largest portion of the growing and selling is located in the Vidalia area. My wife and I visit Commanjilla, Mexico where there is a famous hot springs resort. A few years ago while in the swimming pool at Commanjilla I heard two men speaking in English, which attracted my attention but what attracted my attention even more was that I listened to one of them telling the other about the wonderful Vidalia onions. I swam over to where these two men were and introduced myself to them and told them about overhearing their conversation about these onions and the reason for my great interest was that I was the one who grew the first onions that are now known as Vidalia Onions.

After my small beginning in 1930 I finally became a pretty big producer and had a place on the market in Columbia, S.C. and also in Washington, D.C. For a few years when our Georgia onions were out of season I would buy Orange County Yellows that were grown in Orange County, N.Y. and shipped to Pennsylvania Terminals in Philadelphia where they were sold by the carloads at public auction. I would buy these onions at the Pennsylvania Terminals, haul them down to the waterfront where I loaded them on steamers operated by Merchants and Miners Steamship Lines to Savannah, Georgia. These onions were called Orange County Yellows and were strong tasting. At the Pennsylvania Terminals where there were many carloads of onions the auctioneer sold the onions at what they called Dutch Auction. The auctioneer always started selling by offering them at more than the market price and when no one would buy he would lower the price and keep lowering it until someone would be willing to pay his price, if too many offered to buy at price named then the auctioneer would raise the price a little, but otherwise he would let the one who held up his hand have the lot at price he was asking. During these depression years I could very often buy carloads at near 60¢ per 50# bag and the freight on the ship to Savannah was only a few cents per bag, I would haul the onions from the ship docks in Savannah.

I still grow a few onions for my home use and my wife still prefers the sweet, mild, snow white Crystal Wax onion although I think the Granex is about as good.

Miss Neill, if it isn't too much trouble I would like to see the article that you write before you put it in print to see if any errors. This isn't mandatory. Sincerely,

Moses M. Coleman

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June 24, 1982.

Miss Julia Faucette,
R.F.D. #1, Blair, S.C. 29015

Dear Miss Julia:

What a pleasant surprise I had last night when I got your telephone call. I feel honored to be remembered by you. I am happy that your health is good. I was getting along fine until about 4 months ago when I went to bed one night and could see well but woke up the next morning completely blind in my left eye. I was carried to an eye clinic in Florida where an emergency operation for detached retina was performed. After a 2 hour operation I could see again out of the eye but two weeks later they said all was not right and they would have to undo what had been done and do the operation all over again. One thing brought on another and so far I have had 6 operations on this eye and presently can't see anything out of the eye but the surgeon tells me that after the swelling, inflammation and medication from last week's operation is over that I will gradually get some of my sight back. I sure hope so. I have had lots of pain and suffering during past 4 months. I had great hopes of being with you all at the re-union but looks like I will have to miss this year.

You asked about "Vidalia Onions". Fifty one years ago (November 1930) I decided to experiment with growing some cured onions. I obtained some seed from the mid-west of a mild Bermuda type onion and I gathered the onions in the latter part of May 1931. I didn't know it at the time but I was the first to grow cured onions in Georgia and started up something that brings in a good many millions of dollars to this area of Georgia and has made Vidalia famous as the home of Vidalia Onions.

You wanted some information for your local newspaper. Using my right eye gets mighty tiresome and causes the left eye to hurt so I can't do much writing. But I am sending you some clippings which you are at liberty to use the information as it is information that came from me. It gives pretty much the complete story of the origin of Vidalia Onion.

I should have written our good friend J.P.Coleman but a big part of my time for past 4 months has been spent on operating tables, hospitals and been in bed a big part of the time. I hope that the worst of my trouble is over and I can get back to being my normal self. "J.P." visits me and since it has been about a year since he visited me I am looking forward to a visit from him sometime soon. "J.P." and I have been very close friends for over a quarter of a century. Evidently there is something about his make-up and my make-up that draws us together for we have been very close friends over these many years.

Miss Julia I will close this letter with every good wish for your health, happiness and well being. My every good wish goes to you.

Sincerely,

