

THE HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORAGE BERMUDAGRASS: II. PROPOGATING A NEW INDUSTRY

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It is no accident that improved bermudagrasses are the most widely grown warm season perennial forages in the Southeastern US. As a tribute to the Georgia Cattlemen's Association's celebration of their 50th year, we continue this series of three articles that recount the story of the development of bermudagrass. It is the ultimate story of making lemons into lemonade, and many in the state of Georgia have played an important role in many steps along the way. In this second installment in the series, attention is turned to some of the enterprising seedsmen in South Georgia and how they helped spread bermudagrass across the southern US.

An Industry is Born

Around 1940, L.L. Patten, a cattleman, innovator, legislator, supporter of agricultural research, and owner/operator of Patten Seed Company, toured through the grounds at the USDA-ARS program in Tifton and saw 'Coastal' growing in one of the nursery blocks. Patten was impressed with what he saw and wanted some of the grass. Silas Starr, then director of the CPES, convinced Glenn Burton, the USDA-ARS geneticist who developed 'Coastal,' that Burton should give a few 'Coastal' bermudagrass sprigs to Patten even though the grass was not officially released. Patten took the grass to his farm in Lakeland, GA, where he increased it to a 16-acre field. This demonstrated the practicality of vegetative propagation. In the early 1940s, a few farmers showed interest in 'Coastal.' Burton gave it away. Interest in 'Coastal' continued to grow, but not much was said about distributing bermudagrass from the CPES to plant in fields, because of the stigma associated with spreading a "noxious weed" around the region.

Still, "word-of-mouth" was apparently all it needed. Bill Roquemore (son-in-law of L.L. Patten) said, "ranchers would come to Tifton with a gunnysack and a pitchfork, to dig a few sprigs." By the late 1940s, distribution in fertilizer bags and gunnysacks became too time-consuming. As a result, the Georgia Crop Improvement Association (GCIA) was formed (L.L. Patten served as the second president). Today, the GCIA is a premier organization that inspects and ensures that growers receive pure planting materials for a number of agronomic crops, including the forage and turf bermudagrasses.



Mr. L.L. Patten was instrumental in the commercialization of 'Coastal' bermudagrass and, later, other crops through their development and service to the Georgia Crop Improvement Association.

Bermudagrass Spread Across the South

Patten became the first certified grower of Coastal. At that point, Burton started directing people to Patten as a source of a few free sprigs. As the demand for free sprigs increased, Patten decided he could buy some equipment to dig the sprigs, a hay rake to windrow the sprigs, then

“pitchfork” them into people's trucks and sell the sprigs cheaper than people could come with hired labor. Roquemore recalled that he got “drafted into the seed and grass business” by Patten in 1947. By 1950, interest in Coastal was high and Patten built a brisk business in selling sprigs to cattlemen from the Carolinas to Texas and Oklahoma, mainly as a result of word-of-mouth and popular press articles in the Progressive Farmer magazine. Patten would dig sprigs only on Monday so that he had time for his other farming operations the rest of the week. Roquemore remembered one Monday morning on arriving at work, there were 65 trucks from a half dozen states in a line stretching around the court house in Lakeland, GA, waiting to be loaded with 25 to 50 bushels of sprigs. Burton recalled that Patten came to him a number of years later and remarked, “you know, Burton, I made more money selling bermudagrass than anything I ever did in all of my farming operation.”



Digging of sprigs with a harrow (above) and raking them with a parallel bar rake (below) prior to loading them in a truck or wagon and transporting them.



Forking of sprigs into a truck for transport (above) and an early commercial sprigger (below).



Modern sprig digging (above) and sprigging equipment (below).



In the early 1950s, Roquemore felt there was money to be made delivering sprigs to farmers and got his wife's grandfather to endorse a bank note to obtain enough money to buy a new truck and build a new bed on it. Roquemore started taking orders, and every 5 or 6 days would haul 1000 “honest” bushels west to Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Being

behind schedule, Roquemore remembered 1 day when 40 or 50 farmers were at the courthouse in Coushatta, LA, at an hour before midnight waiting for him to arrive with the 'Coastal' sprigs. By the time he arrived with the sprigs, the farmers had already opened up a liquor jug and he felt that they wouldn't have minded if he had arrived in the wee-hours of the next morning.

To keep the sprigs from getting hot, Roquemore put 2 tons of ice on top of the load before heading west. The ice would melt during the trip and keep the grass cool. However, on one early spring trip to Texas, the ice melted and the entire load froze solid when they hit an unexpected cold front in Dallas. Roquemore said, "delivering Coastal sprigs out west put me on my feet financially." By 1958, many counties from East Texas to Virginia had two or three farmers selling Coastal sprigs.

Next Month

In next month's article, we round-out this story with a look at how bermudagrass breeding began to focus more on forage quality and digestibility and how this ended up setting a precedent for how forage breeders would develop new varieties thereafter.

In the meantime, you can learn more about the development of forage bermudagrass and the number of different bermudagrass varieties that are available by checking out the bermudagrass-related Extension publications on our website at www.georgiaforages.com or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office.

got questions?

Have a question or topic that you want Dr. Hancock to address? Email him at: questions@georgiaforages.com.