

OUR FIRST FRUIT FARMERS.

PIONEERS OF A FLOURISHING SOUTH
AFRICAN INDUSTRY.



By Allan Cattrick.

One of the flourishing industries of the Cape is fruit-growing, but the earliest attempts at establishing fruit trees were not highly successful.

The early farmers, who followed van Riebeeck's first settlement, planted what fruit trees they could lay their hands on and left them largely to their own devices - which is the one course of action that spells doom for fruit trees in South Africa. Even William Duckitt, who came out as Lord Charles Somerset's agricultural adviser, and who knew something about apples, seems to have found the conditions baffling.

RHODES TOOK THE PATS.

Who then was it who laid the foundations of the fruit trade? Most histories of South Africa, where they mention the subject to all, give the credit to Rhodes and to Pickstone, the American who managed the Rhodes Fruit Farms and made the Drakenstein valley blossom. Rhodes himself always cheerfully accepted the pats on the back he received at agricultural shows and in Parliament. But the truth is that he was not the pioneer.

The first man to realize the possibilities of the Western Province as a fruit-growing area was A. W. Struben, who had been one of the pioneers of the Rand, and who regarded South Africa as the best place for the investment of the fortune he had made.

He formed the Cape Orchard Company, bought land near Wolsely, and brought to South Africa two men whose names must ever be remembered - Dicey and Rodbard Malleson.

These two men were the real founders of commercial fruit growing in South Africa, and to their skill as horticulturists and the courage with which they fought all the difficulties of a new enterprise South Africans owe a debt which to-day runs into millions in hard cash.

Pickstone was a young American horticulturist with some experience of fruit-growing in California. He came out to South Africa without any definite plans. He was looking for a new field to conquer. Rhodes had visited Orchards and been deeply impressed by Struben's new venture. It was precisely the sort of enterprise he liked.

HOW R.F.F. WAS BORN.

In the meantime, Pickstone had been to see Struben, who was favourably impressed. He told Rhodes about the young American, and having found the man he wanted, Rhodes waved his magic wand and the Rhodes Fruit Farms came into being.

It must not be supposed that deciduous fruit trees flourished from the word "go" in the Western Province. There were years of patient research into varieties, climatic conditions, packing and marketing and the Government was not particularly sympathetic.

Dacey, Malleon, Pickstone, Buller, of Stellenbosch, O'Malley and others all put their brains to the task. They experimented, they argued, they went on deputation after deputation to the Minister of Agriculture and eventually they won.

It at last dawned on officialdom that there was an export market for fruit.

Here I should mention the Molteno brothers, of Elgin, sons of Sir John Molteno, Prime Minister of the Cape, sturdy individualists and both of them with a touch of genius.

The Moltenos both took chemistry degrees at Cambridge, bought land on the other side of Sir Lowry's Pass, and settled down to breed pigs. It was not long before they were at daggers drawn with the meat interests who, in their opinion, were not

paying a fair price for baconers. They had kept a wary eye on the fruit-growing experiments in other parts of the Western Province and it was not long before they went into fruit-growing, boots and all.

TERROR FOR OFFICIALS.

I do not think I exaggerate when I say that for over 40 years the Moltenos were the terror of the Department of Agriculture. They had their own ideas about everything to do with fruit, and they were never afraid to express them forcibly.

They too, were pioneers. They built the first private cold storage plant for fruit, and later the first gas chambers. Much that they did was copied by other growers and even the Department of Agriculture reluctantly excepted some of their ideas.

Their group of fruit farms was, and is to-day, one of the finest examples of private enterprise in South Africa, and in any history of agriculture, the late Ted Molteno and his brother Harry must have their place as men who helped to lay the corner-stone of a great industry.

Even to-day, I am told, you have only to whisper, "The Moltenos are coming" in a particular section of the Department of Agriculture to cause an air of uneasiness to spread.

The early growers at the Cape made a splendid reputation for South African fruit. They specialized in packing only the best, and packing it with superlative skill. In those days the grower's "pack" was almost as distinctive as his signature, and thus his brand became well known.

After the war a Covent Garden agent told me that he could recognize the "pack" of men whose names he had known before 1939, even though their fruit came up for sale under the all-embracing label of the Deciduous Fruit Board.

EXPORT OR DIE.

The really tip-top fruit of those days was part of the "luxury" trade. It fetched big prices and went to the tables of the wealthy, to restaurants and to the innumerable banquets

that were a feature of life in those days.

Britain's recent import policy has brought more fruit to more people at prices that have not proved unsatisfactory to the grower. But the specialist whose fruit fetched the highest prices has been hard hit.

The fact that the average South African has never succeeded in grasping is that the fruit industry must export or die. South Africans could not consume the fruit that becomes available at the peak of the season. Nor would they pay the prices that have made the vast expansion of orchards possible.

It is the oversea consumer who has built this vast industry, and to please him half the vineyards and the orchards of the Cape are planted with what are known as "export" varieties, and vast sums of money have been spent on research into methods of packing and cooling.

Yet, even at this stage, the industry is only in its adolescence. As refrigerated ships multiply and the time taken on voyages is shortened, the market grows.

In the fruit from Western Province orchards we have an article for export which northern countries will always want.

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