

ARTESIAN FARMS INC.

Tradition provides ongoing inspiration

Small firm is run by Glenn Dickman, a third-generation 'tomato man.'

By John Unrein
Eastern Editor

RUSKIN, Fla. — Glenn Dickman's grandfather Paul once advised that when it cost \$250 to produce one acre of tomatoes, it was time to quit farming.

It costs \$5,000 an acre today.

Yet Glenn Dickman still tightens his belt every season and grows another crop. He's been following the same routine for 20 years.

"There are not a lot of small independents left. We're one of a dying breed," he said of his 400-acre tomato business, Artesian Farms Inc., located about 20 miles south of Tampa, Fla.

Lesser men would have quit by now, but Dickman has more to prove than the average grower.

Tradition is at stake, in his case, for he is a third-generation "tomato man" whose family grew one of the first crops in Ruskin, an area now surrounded by 13,000 acres of tomatoes.

"His grandfather pioneered the tomato industry in Ruskin and built a lot of his own farming equipment," said Wayne Hawkins, manager of the Florida Tomato Committee, which represents the state's \$400 million tomato industry.

Innovation was Paul Dickman's middle name.

Recognizing that mules were too slow for farm work, Glenn's grandfather designed his own high-ripr tractor with a 108-inch axle to maneuver two four-foot tomato rows. That size tractor is still in use.

His crop grew from 1.5 acres of tomatoes in 1928 to 3,000 acres of tomatoes, corn and other vegetables by the 1940s.

Then a bright idea struck. People would pay more for vegetables packed at shipping point in a more convenient form. It was 1946. Dickman started washing and packaging Florida spinach, beans and other vegetables in cellophane bags and sold the products through Ruskin Vegetable Distributors, a marketing cooperative he helped form in 1941.

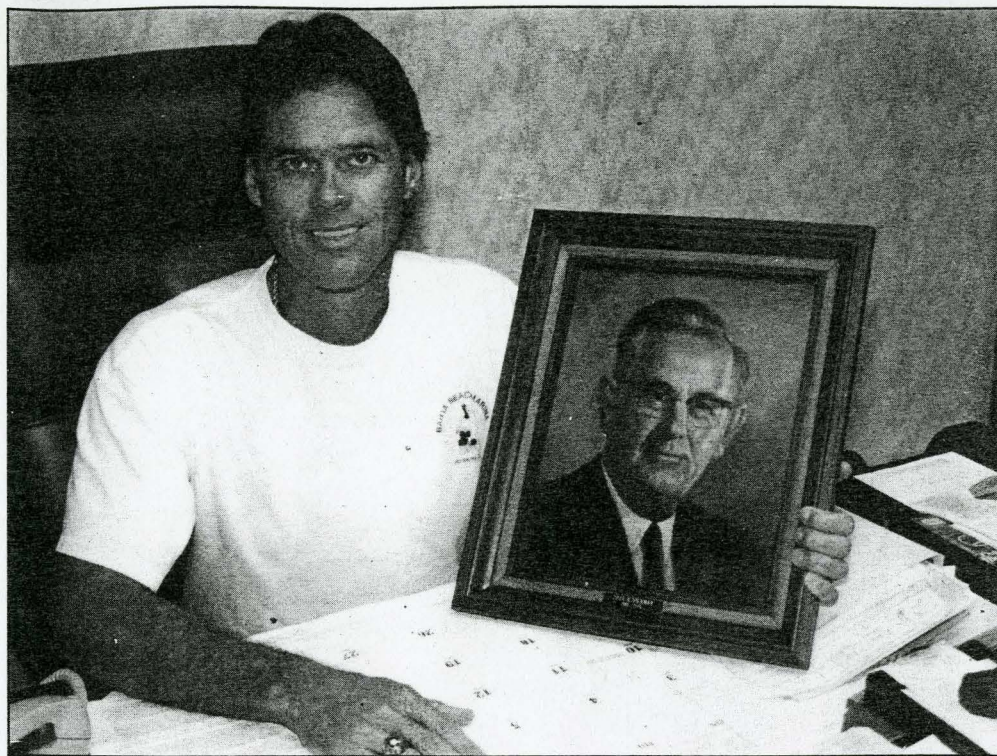
He shipped 5 million packages under the Ruskin Brand label in 1952.

"Nobody in Florida had ever done that before," Glenn Dickman said of his grandfather, the first president of the Produce Prepackaging Association, now the Produce Marketing Association.

"My grandfather said innovation is where you make your money. He had more foresight than I have hindsight."

Eventually, the packaged vegetable business was sold, although the Ruskin Brand is available today in Florida supermarkets.

Paul Dickman was as much a marketer as an inventor, his grandson recalled. The story goes that Paul Dickman so loved his hometown he would doo-



John Unrein/The Packer

Glenn Dickman of Artesian Farms Inc., Ruskin, Fla., learned about farming from his father Lyle and grandfather

dile the name Ruskin on a napkin at the dinner table.

"He always believed this area was a natural for farming because of the warm climate near Tampa Bay and the Artesian wells," Glenn Dickman said. "He had a love for his community that you don't see much anymore. He believed you've got to give something back."

Glenn's father, Lyle, also became a farmer and was the first in Ruskin to ship sweet corn by air from Tampa to the Northeast.

But by the 1960s, the time seemed ripe to move on. Paul and Lyle Dickman got into real estate development. They shut down the vegetable farm, but kept their citrus and cattle business. Paul Dickman brought in a dredge to open a channel surrounded by swamp land and started developing waterfront property. They opened the Bahia Beach Resort in 1960.

By 1973, Glenn Dickman was out of college and looking for work. His family's long tradition of farming was staring back at him.

Paul (in painting). The Dickman family is considered one of the leading pioneers in the Florida tomato industry.

He convinced his father and grandfather to give him a small plot of land, and in 1974 he grew 15 acres of tomatoes, onions, peppers and squash. The one product he made money on was tomatoes, and that's all he grows today.

"I guess all this heritage attracted me. I love farming," he said before a brief pause. "But it's a heart-breaking business."

He runs the vegetable farm, and two brothers, Paul and Ned, also work in the family business, which includes real estate, cattle and greenhouse plants. Sadly, they lost their father and grandfather in the same year when both died in 1976. But the Dickman name lives on.

In 1982, the family donated \$1 million to set up an eminent scholar chair at the University of Florida. The program, called the Lyle C. Dickman Endowed Chair for Plant Improvement, is getting off the ground now. Glenn Dickman said the program will help Florida growers conduct valuable research, including work in biotechnology.

Thomason

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extra to get it right the first time."

Thomason knows what retailers want because he's been there.

He was head produce buyer in 1976 and '77 for Pick-N-Pay Supermarkets, now part of First National Supermarkets Inc., Cleveland. He followed with a two-year stint as a buyer for Topco Associates Inc. in Belle Glade, Fla.

But produce was not his first career choice. After earning a degree in aerospace administration from Middle Tennessee State University in 1973, he thought about becoming an air traffic controller. But one fateful day he visited a friend in Cleveland and wound up with a job offer as a salesman for the local Sunkist Growers Inc. branch office. He accepted, and the produce bug had bit him.

"Why did I get into produce? Basically, it was a mistake," he said frankly. "Sunkist told me I wasn't going to get rich selling produce, but I would do lots of different things and talk to lots of different people."

Variety is what keeps his engine running.

Thomason moved to Florida in 1979 where he continued working for other bosses. Eventually, he discovered the quickest way to job satisfaction was to be self-employed. He wasn't afraid of long hours and hard work.

In 1982, he started Diamond T Produce, now Diamond T Enterprises. He and a partner founded American Growers in 1988, and Thomason became majority owner within a year.

Since then, he's tapped into a retail demand for one-stop suppliers.

"Ten years ago, a buyer could pick up the phone and call two or three guys and know what the market was in Florida," he said. "Now, a lot of growers do their own sales and have their own packinghouses. So it takes 15 calls on each item for buyers to know what's happening in the market."

"That's where our service comes in. They don't have time to call 10 or 15 people in Florida. We do all the legwork and information assimilation and hopefully give them a cohesive look at the market. As long as we describe markets accurately and give them the quality they need, we're providing a service."

In some cases, Thomason has to take service to a higher level.

For five years, American Growers has bought green, red and yellow bell peppers and shipped product 50 miles to a packinghouse in Immokalee, Fla., where misshapen peppers are taken out and cartons of jumbo and extra large sizes are repacked by hand.

Florida's hot and humid weather can cause problems for peppers, in particular, causing the product to grow in irregular shapes and with paler color and thinner walls.

"The end market likes a darker color and a thicker, blockier shape," he said about pepper. "One of the problems we face as a Florida shipper or broker of Florida-grown product, mostly peppers and cucumbers, is that if you ask chain buyers to rate the overall quality of packs, they'll usually rate California first, Nogales second, Texas a close third and Florida fourth."

"A lot will tell you that unless you can give 'em a product that is complaint-free, they're going to avoid Florida. We're trying to overcome that perception."