

History of the Eastern Black Walnut Nut Industry

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Most writings, papers and books on the subject of the Eastern Black Walnut have been almost one hundred percent directed to the growing of Eastern Black Walnut trees and treating the nut merely as a seed which may, with proper care, ultimately become a tree. Few papers and certainly no book has been published on the subject of shelling and processing Black Walnut nuts for human consumption. To my knowledge, no paper has ever been written which would give proper credit to those persons and companies that have been “the industry” in the 20th century. Therefore, I am pleased to accept the challenge for hopefully presenting at least some of the facts about how the industry developed and by whom.

Most of my knowledge comes from my own experiences in running the business which was started by my father, B. Ralph Hammons, in the year 1946. In 1946, I understood that his was sort of the beginning of the industry and I guess that really was the beginning, but I later learned that even prior to 1946 in many parts of the United States where Black Walnut trees are native and where the nuts grow wild, various individuals, had tried to find a way to crack and process the nuts commercially. One of the first in the business and possibly where it all started was Mr. E. A. Smalley, who, while living in Kansas City, Missouri, invented a way to separate small particles of soft nut meats from the hard shells by machine. Mr. Smalley first patented the process, moved to Knoxville, Tennessee and then founded Smalley Manufacturing Company to build its machines. His machine was mostly sold and used in the pecan industry at first, but he adapted his machine for sorting Black Walnut nutmeats as well. Mr. Smalley also built and installed the first machines used to crack the hard-shelled Black Walnuts and most all efficient high volume cracking machines built since that time have at least some of the same principles as discovered by Mr. Smalley.

Several small companies were started in the mid 1940's and one of the first was in Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. It was started with a group of employees using hammers to crack the nuts and others picking out the goodies and sorting and separating the good nutmeats from the shell - - all by hand. That company moved to Gravette, Arkansas in 1955 and was re-organized as Gravette Shelling Company, owned and managed by Mr. Mandel Raffee. When Mr. Raffee died in 1965, the company was purchased by the Hammons Products Company and managed by Mr. Lloyd P. Harris of Gravette. Another company was the Akar Walnut Company. Mr. Akar cracked Black Walnuts in a plant in Morristown, Tennessee and then transported the nutmeat goodies to his plant in Broadway, Virginia for final processing, inspection and boxing. Mr. Akar developed health problems and closed his operations around 1960. Another plant in Virginia was located in the town of Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley, but that plant closed in 1946.

Two other plants were started in Nashville, Tennessee, sometime in the mid 1940's. One was called Block Brothers which was owned and operated by Mr. George Block and his brother, Sam Block. George's son-in-law, Jimmy Cox, ran the company from about 1950 until his death around 1980 and the business was closed at the time. The Block company was mainly in the business of buying and selling furs, hides, roots and herbs. The other plant in Nashville was located directly across the street from Block Brothers near downtown Nashville. It was owned and operated by Mr. Frank

Fleishman and Mr. Fleishman sold his business to the Block company around 1970. The Mick Walnut Company was started along about that time also with a small plant in Kentucky. Mr. Mick operated the plant in the late 50's and early 60's but then closed after a few years. Some other start-up plants were in existence in Kentucky in the mid 40's and 50's but none lasted more than a few short years. The R.E. Funsten Nut Company, located in St. Louis, Missouri owned a shelling plant in Kentucky in the 50's. They shelled and processed black walnuts but they closed their plant around 1960. Barnes Walnut Company was started in Bolivar, Missouri in the early 1950's by Mr. Bufford Barnes. Mr. Barnes sold his business to the Funstein Company around 1975 but then the Funstein Company closed in 1980. Indiana Walnut Company was started in 1987 by Mr. Norman O. O'Bryan in Lafayette, Indiana but the business lacked financing and only lasted about three years.

While the efforts of these many companies greatly added to the demand and marketability for Eastern Black Walnut nutmeats while companies were in business, the Hammons Products Company located in Stockton, Missouri has played a major role in developing the industry as we know it today. My father, B. Ralph Hammons owned a retail grocery, feed and produce business in the small rural town of Stockton. In 1945, there was a large crop of Black Walnuts in Missouri, there was no market for the crop, and the crop of nuts was just going to waste. Dad learned that the plant in Staunton, Virginia was needing more nuts and he contracted with them to buy and sell the nuts he could get here in Missouri. So he organized a buying program with produce dealers and companies in many of the small towns in southwest Missouri and he brought some three million pounds of nuts that were hand-hulled, sun-dried and packed in burlap bags. He hauled the nuts by truck to a rail siding in the town of Diggins, Missouri, east of Springfield, and shipped them to the plant in Virginia. The plant in Virginia closed down the next year so Dad decided to take a chance and put in his own plant in Stockton. That first year, 1946, he bought only one hundred thousand pounds of nuts but at least that was a beginning. Of course, the business grew through the dedication and determination of my father and others working with him. The company now averages buying and processing approximately 26 million pounds of nuts in shell each year that are purchased from buying stations located across sixteen states.

The main reason that Hammons Products Company has survived and grown where others did not was keen dedication and determination of the people themselves. Mr. Myrl Roberts was in charge of our plant operations and productions of nutmeats from the very beginning. Myrl was with my father in 1946 in Knoxville, Tennessee to look at machinery built by Smalley Manufacturing Company. After Dad agreed to buy the machinery, he and Myrl started driving home and Dad asked Myrl, "Do you really think we can make it work?" So Myrl looked Dad straight in the eye, paused and in great seriousness stated, "Well, Ralph, you've bought it so now we've GOT TO MAKE IT WORK!" That's the way it's always been in the Hammons Company - - if we start it, we've got to make it work. Kenneth H. Howard, a highly skilled machinist, was a son-in-law of the inventor, Mr. Smalley. Ken Howard became a close friend to my father and Ken joined the company in 1948. He brought new ideas for cracking and processing the hard nuts and from 1948 to 1953 Ken Howard, Myrl Roberts, and my father together designed and built three new cracking machines. These machines have been over-hauled and modified many times but we're still using the basic cracking machines today - - because we've never found a better way to do it. When Dad and the industry recognized the need for a machine to remove the outer soft hull in order to buy enough nuts in the shell, again Ken Howard, Myrl Roberts and father found a way to do it, and they patented the new discovery and invention.

In 1954, Dad suffered a severe heart attack, which was thought to have been brought about by the stress from working twenty hours most days trying to make the business work. On several occasions, Dad had discussed the Black Walnut business with his brother-in-law and my uncle, Mr. Clarence C. Cavender. In fact, Clarence told me that Dad had tried to get him to join him in the business at the start, in 1946. Anyway, Dad asked Clarence to come to Stockton and keep business going until he recovered and could return. Clarence accepted the challenge and liked it so well he stayed until officially retiring from the business in 1977. A lot of credit for growing the business and the total industry must be given to Clarence. Clarence and I worked together in running the plant. I took care of nut meat sales and marketing. Clarence was in complete charge of all nutshell operations. He did the job! At 86 years of age, Clarence is still interested in seeing the company and the industry continue to grow.

As the second generation manager of business, I owe a lot to all the dedicated, hard-working people who have helped make it work. I sort of grew up in the business doing what I could to help in the summer months when school was out. My first paycheck was in June, 1948, at age 15. My job was to wash and dry the nut shell that had been discarded and bulldozed down the hill behind the plant. Dad wanted to recover that shell to grind in a hammer mill and sell to powder companies for making dynamite. That was the beginning of our nut shell division. For the first several years the shell was strictly considered to be a by-product from cracking and processing nuts. But now the shell business is really a separate industry of its own. It has become a very major part of our business.

In 1969, I invited Mr. Gus S. Rutledge, to my office to discuss planting new Black Walnut trees to increase our supply of nuts for processing in the future. Gus soon joined the company and was in charge of our public relations in agriculture, which included growing new trees. Gus possessed many talents and later was in charge of buying all nuts to be processed as well as heading up our nut shell division. Gus retired in 1996, but he continues his keen interest in the business.

Dad's brother, Ferrell O. Hammons, retired from the company in 1973. He had been in charge of buying nuts in the shell. At his retirement party, I announced that Ferrell had bought enough Black Walnuts in the shell that if all the nuts that he bought were loaded in one-hundred-thousand-pound rail cars, it would take a train 60 miles long to haul them all. That was in 1973, and we bought and processed nearly one-half billion pounds of nuts since that time. Certainly Ferrell Q. Hammons did a lot to help in the success of the company.

Certainly there are many other persons, each in his own way, that have all played a part in making the history of the Eastern Black Walnut industry as it is today.