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SOUTHERN BELLES

[Craig J. Renner, an editor of the Culture section, researched this story on assignment. Georgia's Sweet Vidalia Onions](#)

Usually, the release of a new Sammy Kershaw record is not a cause of concern. That's not to knock Kershaw; with hits like "Cadillac Style" and "Haunted Heart" the rugged country artist has picked up quite a following over the course of his career. Nevertheless, as the buzz about his new single spread in early 1996, residents and onion farmers in Vidalia, Georgia, were feeling threatened.

The typical country love song, about angst and upset over a girl who has broken his heart, features Kershaw crooning the refrain: "Vidalia, you always gotta make me cry."

Problems was, Vidalia's main industry is onions. More than that, the sweet, edible orbs -- grown only in a twenty-county region of southeastern Georgia -- had been long and successfully marketed as a variety that wouldn't bring tears to anyone's eyes. So when members of the Vidalia Onion Committee finally heard Kershaw's lyrics, remembers interim manager Tina Wheeler, they thought trouble was, well, blooming.

Faster than a farmer trying to beat a thunderstorm, the committee, under the direction of former executive director Shirley Manchester, went into action to counter what it saw as negative publicity. Working with Kershaw's recording label, Mercury Nashville, five-pound bags of sweet Vidalia onions were sent, along with the single, to three hundred radio stations around the country. Additionally, Kershaw, a Cajun cook, was the judge in a Vidalia onion cooking contest. Winner Brenda Blevins of Raceland, Kentucky, received an autographed guitar and a supply of onions.

Because of the quick action, disaster was averted. Since the sweet onion was accidentally

discovered over sixty years ago, it has become the town's most important crop and a big part of the local identity. Now, town and onion are synonymous. "Mention Vidalia to almost anyone and they say, 'I've heard of that [place]; I love their onions,'" says Bill Warthen, 73, a lifelong resident of the town.

From September, when the seeds are planted, until April, when the first onions are brought to market in time for the annual Onion Festival, then through the peak summer sales season, the onions provide this agricultural town of twelve thousand with its largest source of employment. The spring soiree, which attracts thousands of people, brings millions of dollars into the local economy. And though the crop's success has brought changes, Vidalia retains the small-town atmosphere that has been part of its charm since it was founded in 1890.

Vidalias or nothing

On a Tuesday afternoon last December, nearly two hundred people gathered in the banquet room at the Captain's Corner, a restaurant situated on Route 280. They were there for the Kiwanis Club luncheon, something of a social event in this south-central Georgia town. The day's crowd was a little larger than usual: Some local youths were going to be lauded for their scholastic and athletic efforts. But most of the folk had come to hear the USDA agent for Toombs County, Rick Hartley, report on news and trends in local agriculture.

Warthen is a gentle, friendly man with thick, close-cropped white hair, green eyes, and the strong weathered face and hands typical of a farmer. He brings a guest to join his friends in conversation and in sampling the fried chicken, corn bread, fried okra, and other classic southern delicacies available from the buffet bar. The out-of-towner notes the complete absence of onions. "They're out of season now," Warthen informs him. Vidalias or nothing seems to be the local creed.

The retired pecan farmer ("I grew onions but not very successfully," he chuckles) is something of a local historian. According to Warthen, a local farmer, Mose Coleman, gets credit for discovering the sweet onion. Coleman was working a plot of land along Route 280 that is now graced with a highway marker commemorating his find. "People speed right by it," complains Warthen. "They should have put it where people can see it."

There is evidence that other farmers knew of the vegetable during the 1920s, Warthen explains, but they believed sweet potatoes to be more marketable. That changed in 1931, when Coleman managed to sell fifty-pound bags of onions for \$3.50, a heady price in the Depression.

The appeal remained largely local for about a decade. Then events conspired to almost kill the fledgling crop. The Vidalia sweet almost passed unnoticed into history, according to Warthen.

In 1941, the crop in Texas, the state that produces the most onions, failed. When the Vidalia crop came in a few weeks later, demand was high. Prices soared; farmers who had planted onions were making about twice the profit per acre they had expected. It was a windfall for folks still staving off the Depression.

"So next year, everybody planted onions," says Warthen. A local promoter, Phil Friese, lined up buyers all around the country. But just as events broke Vidalias' way in 1941, in 1942 events broke against them. The Texas crop came in bigger than expected, causing prices to drop. Friese counseled farmers to wait to dig their onions.

Unfortunately for Friese, it began to rain. If rain gets inside the sheath of an onion ready for harvest, the onion can rot. Local farmers, not completely familiar with the crop, didn't realize what was happening and eventually shipped the onions anyway, expecting to receive about \$2.25 a bushel.

But when the onions arrived at market, inspectors discovered the damage. The price plummeted to fifty cents or less. Outraged farmers went looking for Friese. "Rumors flew he was selling them to German U-boats [off the Atlantic coast]," Warthen remembers. "Friese had to flee town. I think he ended up in the Navy."

After the war ended, the state opened a farmers market in Vidalia. Placed at the juncture of some of south Georgia's most traveled highways, the market helped spread the word about the onions. Large grocery chains started placing orders.

As the onions' popularity spread, so did rivalries. Just what was the crop called? The mild onions are grown elsewhere, too, and growers in surrounding areas weren't all that keen about calling their produce Vidalias. Residents of Lyons, for example, called the onions they grew "Toombs County Sweets." In a parochial fit of pique, remembers Warthen, "one farmer there refused to sell his onions as Vidalias."

Meanwhile, as their crop's popularity grew, rumors flew that other growers were trying to muscle in on the burgeoning market. In the early 1980s, a trade war started to brew. Complaints were made that Texas farmers were shipping onions to Georgia, then rebagging and retagging the interlopers as Vidalias. Consumers, local growers protested, were complaining about eating hot onions that had been falsely sold as Vidalias. Confronted about the matter, former Texas Secretary of Agriculture Jim Hightower growled that "they're the same damn onion. I can't believe they want to start this sort of competition."

In 1986, the Georgia legislature passed legislation giving the Vidalia onion legal status and defining the twenty-county production area. Later, the USDA extended the definition to the federal level. In 1990, Georgians went a step further, naming the onion the state's official state vegetable. Grudgingly, growers in areas surrounding Vidalia accepted the name. The status of the onion (and the town) was secure.

[Where the onion is king](#)

R.T. Stanley guides his pickup truck along a dirt path at the edge the field. He parks his vehicle, then talks to a foreman overseeing about two dozen migrant laborers. Men and women workers, some with children in tow, are busy transplanting bundles of onion sprouts into rows plowed into the rich, Georgia loam.

Stanley is in his late forties. Like Warthen, he has the solid, weathered features and strong hands common to farmers. He is worried: It rained again last night. It is already early December; the yellow seeds planted in early September have matured into sprouts and must be transplanted. The mature Vidalias will be ready for harvest in late March and early April.

Stanley and his wife, Dianne, began farming on five acres after they married in the early seventies. "The onions were getting to be real popular then," remembers R.T. "It's just continued to grow each year." Now, along with their three adult sons-Brian, Tracy, and Vince--they plant 800-1,000 acres each year. Most of their harvest will be onions, but they also produce carrots, cotton, and other crops that they think will prove profitable. In addition, they operate the Vidalia Onion Factory, a restaurant and country store that attracts tourists and mail-order business from around the country, as well as a substantial

local clientele.

For the Stanleys and other farmers in and near Vidalia, onions are king. Approximately 225 growers plant approximately 16,000 acres of onions annually. Depending on the yield and the weather, the crop pumps \$40-50 million annually into Georgia's agricultural economy, ranking it with peaches and peanuts, but behind tobacco, as a cash crop.

Though it's lucrative, growing Vidalia onions, particularly on a large scale like the Stanleys do, comes with some risk. A hard freeze (below fifteen degrees for eight hours) can kill off an entire crop. The risk, plus the high annual investment required to produce the crop, limits the number of onion growers. Additionally, farmers in Texas, Washington, and other states are developing sweet onion breeds to capitalize on the growing demand. With all that can go wrong, "I'm a nervous wreck sometimes," says R.T.

But right now, it's the fickle weather that worries R.T. Though it's not raining, clouds still cover the sky, threatening to dump more rain on already muddy fields. Onions, he explains, grow best with about three inches of rainfall a month. More than that and disease or rot will claim the onions before field hands can. "If it continues to rain, we'll have some problems," he muses.

The rain exacerbates what he calls his biggest problem, lack of labor. Though his sons came back to the farm after college, young people keep leaving Vidalia in search of educational and professional opportunities. One young man, working as a bartender, remarks to me that he'll be moving away to Savannah or Atlanta as soon as he has saved enough money. He'd been raised nearby and though appreciative of Vidalia's rural appeal, he laments that "there's not much of a future here."

In recent years, Vidalia-area farmers have tried to address the labor shortage by relying on migrant laborers to harvest the lucrative crop. Since the mid-eighties, Hispanics have been a growing part of this community; initially attracted by the work, an increasing number of migrant workers are putting down roots in Vidalia.

Tommy Williams, a former onion grower and past president of the Chamber of Commerce, has attempted to help acculturate the new residents into the larger community. "Most businesses that employ these people are very happy to have them here," he says. Still, "We are trying to adjust to a new culture. It can be a very positive thing, but sometimes I have a hard time convincing people of that. People who don't have business with Hispanics wish the city could go back to the way it used to be."

That's highly unlikely. Estimates of the area's Hispanic population run as high as 10 percent of the total populace, though an exact figure won't be determined until the next census. Still, they are a growing part of the community fabric.

For his part, Williams now tries to serve as liaison between the two communities. "I see a lot of their needs," he says.

One result of his efforts has been the creation of Primero Iglesia Bautista, a Baptist house of worship catering to the Hispanic community. It was built for \$140,000 with donations primarily from local businesses that work with Hispanics. Williams hopes the church will help acculturate the former migrant laborers into the larger Anglo community, in addition to ministering to their spiritual and social needs.

The Toorobs County school system, he points out, has hired employees who work

specifically with migrant communities and Hispanic residents. The educational requirements of the children will be addressed, even if they attend the local school only for a few months during the onion-growing season.

Spring's sweet Onion Fest

Whatever growing pains might be associated with the onion industry, there is no denying its positive impact, economically and culturally, on Vidalia. In late April and early May, 65,000 people will flock to town to celebrate the twenty-first Vidalia Onion Festival. They'll take part in a street dance, and the more adventuresome will enter an onion-eating contest. The culinarily-inclined will learn the best ways to cook the vegetables, and some local beauty will become teary-eyed over being named Queen Vidalia 1998. Yumion, a cartoon character created to promote Vidalia sweets, will entertain kids and adults alike. "It's a family event, something you could bring your grandmother to," says organizer Dan Murray.

In years past, taste tests were held; residents still crowd over defeating the best onions that farmers in Walla Walla could come up with. They never had a chance, says Kitty Peterson, a writer for the local paper. "The Coca-Cola folks used to run sugar tests on our onions--apples, oranges, even Cokes." The Vidalia onion, she claims, has a higher sugar content than any of them.

She remembers how that news inspired her husband--and a vintner he knew--to make wine from the onions. "I don't drink [alcohol], so to me it tasted as good as any other wine. And it was wonderful for marinating steak," she recalls.

Still, there was a drawback. "We had a party, and those who got past the smell liked it. But they had to wear a clothespin over their noses."

But mostly the festival recognizes the crop that has become central to the town's heritage and identity. Without the onion trade, says Stanley, local agriculture would be much different. "Without onions, there would be just a few large farms. You'd need to plant a thousand acres just to survive," he says. "The onions give us something to grow that we can get a fair price for." Onions have helped make up for a slump in tobacco prices that resulted after settlement of the class-action lawsuit against cigarette makers.

Some question just how far the onion market will expand. Local agricultural agent Rick Hartley suggests that onion acreage will probably be maintained but not significantly increased in the next few years. "You only have so many consumers out there," he contends. He believes that farmers in the region will diversify, especially as agricultural acreage in Florida is taken out of production because of development and conservation pressures. "We have an opportunity to expand into the fresh vegetable market, especially carrots," he contends.

Stanley disagrees. In recent years, the advent of a cold-storage method has lengthened the time the crop can be preserved and sold, meaning that fewer onions are lost to spoilage and that more are available in November and December.

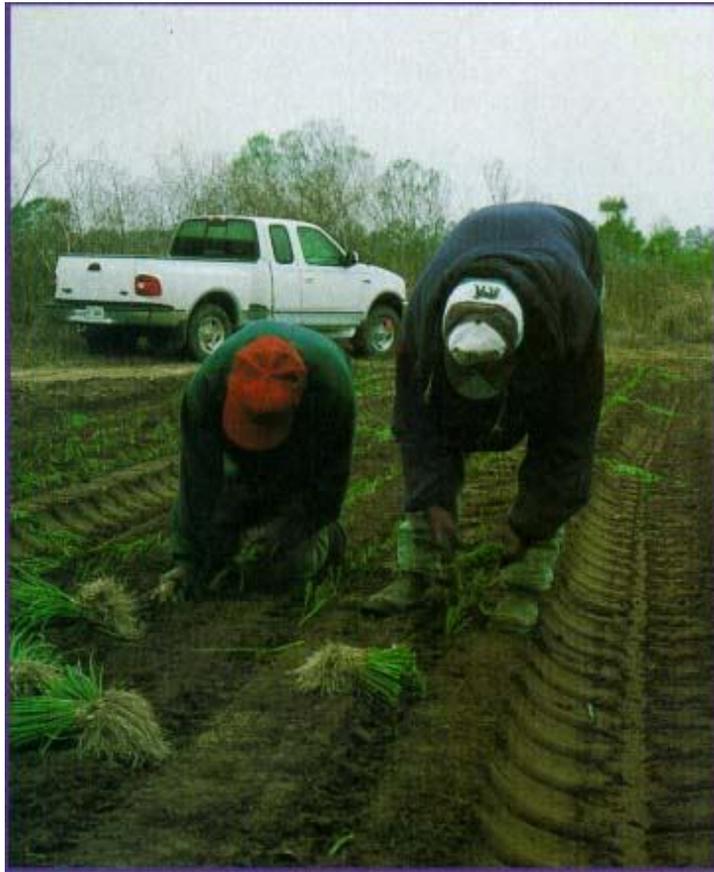
Still, he's hedging his bets. Driving back to his office, he stops to check on another field. Stooping down among plants in a row four across, he pulls up some carrots fourteen inches long. Georgia sweet carrots, he thinks, "might become real valuable like the onion has." No matter how lucrative the onion crop is, when you're a farmer it's wise to keep all your options open. "Just when you think you know how to grow a crop," he says as he climbs into the cab of the truck and drives off, "Mother Nature will throw you a curve."



Opposite below: A laundry basket filled with sprouts ready to be transplanted.



Left: Children crowd around Yumion, a lovable character created to promote the crop.



Below: Migrant workers planting a row of onions. Itinerant employees provide much of the labor necessary to produce the crop.



Opposite: Onions ready for harvest.



Below: R.T. Stanley checks on a field of Vidalia carrots. Area farmers are seeking to diversify their produce.



Opposite: Displaying some of the entries at the annual Onion Festival Bake-Off.

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By Craig J. Renner

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