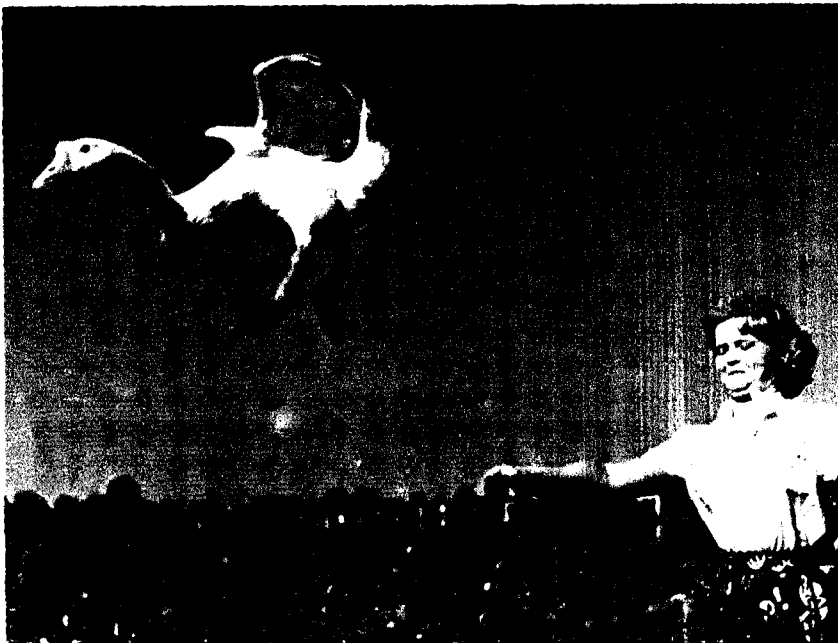


# Farmers



As sun rises over the 8,600-acre James Williams farm, at Natchitoches, La., a hungry crew forms labor ranks and marches off

Geese are replacing hired hands out in the fields. They strip the land of weeds and grass—and save farmers from \$20 to \$200 per acre in labor costs



Claudia Williams, 18, and a pet from her dad's labor force

NY fool living in the country during the last few thousand years could have told you so: geese eat grass; they *don't* eat various broad-leaved plants which produce man's fiber and food. Yet rediscovery of this elementary fact about the goose's gustatory preferences is causing a quiet upheaval in our farm economy.

Because of their predilection for gobbling grass and weeds and leaving tender cotton sprouts and budding cane shoots unharmed, geese are replacing human hoe-hands at a sensational rate. Throughout the South, they have become an increasingly significant source of the farmer's labor supply.

The use of geese in this role began gradually, almost secretly, by a process of spontaneous, inspired memory on farms spotted across the land; now it has become so big that even county agents are beginning to hear of it.

Potentially it is as big, some planters will tell you, as the advent of the mechanical harvesting devices; as big as anhydrous ammonia for fertilizing; as big, Heaven save the mark, as Parity. Such half-astonished enthusiasm about something which has neither the drama of invention nor the novelty of untried practice, but which is primarily a phenomenon of *scale*, stems of course from what the planters have

all been through in the labor market.

Farm produce has sold for less and less; labor, when available at all, has cost more and more as workers left the farms for city jobs with the urgency of populations fleeing an imminent atomic target.

It's easy to understand, then, the appeal of armies of joyous hoe-hands working for free, scalping the furrows as bald as a Roman senator's pate, removing the lusty Johnson grass, the ubiquitous Bermuda, the arrogant crab and giant foxtail; working without benefit of labor laws, of clocks or even of the sun—for geese peck delightedly by moonlight—and with a minimum of attention, doctoring and allowance for emotional problems. You can appreciate, too, why some farmers embraced geese as the solution to all their problems (which they are not), requiring no attention or supplemental diet at all (which is not true) and as brainless birds who would work well under any sort of treatment (they must be treated with tenderness and tact).

Thus there are farmers, not many, who have tried geese and become disillusioned; there are others who figure that anything that looks so good must have serious catches. There are catches, true enough, such as dogs, predatory wild animals, poison sprays, proper

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY CARROLL SEGHERS, II

# Goose



o hoe a cotton field (background): clear of grass

fencing and—yes, love, about which more later. But the surprise is that the catches are so few and so easily circumvented by the farmer's traditional ingenuity.

There are also limitations of crops in which geese may be worked. But when you become aware that they can work cotton, potatoes, corn, sugar cane, sugar beets, truck of various sorts such as strawberries and asparagus, and nursery plantings, you see that a respectably large segment of our agriculture is accounted for—and geese hoe-hands are being tried in new crops month by month.

## A Million Geese as "Grassers"

Five years ago the use of geese as weeders ("grassers" might be a better word, for geese spurn many weeds) was confined to a few widely scattered smart boys who went in for them in medium-size flocks and, of course, to the many farmers with a dozen or two around the house. This year Fred Cervinka, the big goose man of Heart of Missouri Poultry Farm in Columbia, Missouri, estimates that there are a million head at work in the fields. Furthermore, the trend is scarcely launched, because only in 1948 did the hatcheries learn how to remove seri-

ous bugs in commercial incubation.

Already, Cervinka thinks, a half-million acres are being goose-weeded. "As for the cash saving in labor," he says, "this varies from \$20 to \$50 or so for crops such as cotton, sugar beets, sugar cane and potatoes, to \$75 to \$100 per acre in strawberries, on up to as much as \$200 per acre in such high-cost crops as nursery plantings."

Cervinka can reel off endlessly the names of farmers he knows to be using geese this year on an impressive scale (remember, only two birds will keep an acre clean): J. E. Teaford, of Luxora, Arkansas, working 1,800; A. M. Ambrosini, Pixley, California, 1,000; J. F. Twist, Twist, Arkansas, 2,100; Mount Level Farms, East Prairie, Missouri, 750; Hugh Stevenson, Elsberry, Missouri, 850; Charles Riemar II, McDade, Louisiana, 1,900. Those are random samples. Indeed the states of California, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi and Georgia are already markedly goose-conscious, and are growing more so at a rate that portends a national spread of eye-popping proportions.

A look at Louisiana can provide a good spot check of the great goose rally. James Henry Williams is a forty-seven-year-old farmer who operates



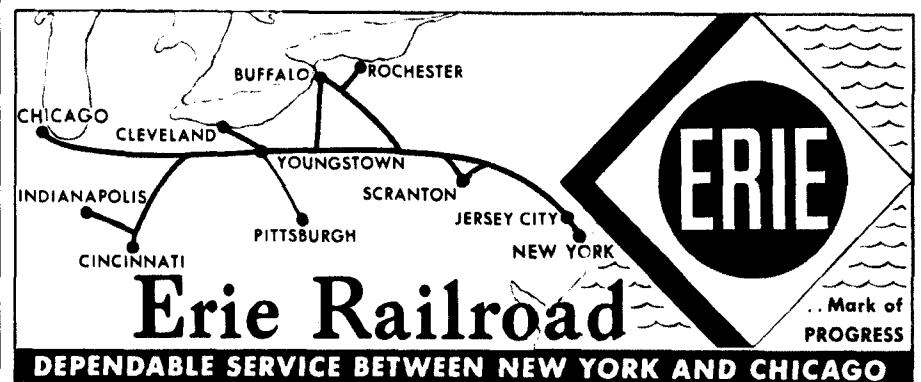
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## The No. 1 fact: three men and 200 geese can do the work of 15 men



Farmer James Henry Williams (left) introduces writer Aswell to two of his 2,200 no-wage workers. Treat a goose tenderly, says Williams, and you have the best hoe-hand there is

8,600 acres of cotton, corn and pasturage on the deltas of the Red and Cane Rivers in Natchitoches Parish. For a few seasons prior to this year, driven to distraction by the scarcity of hoe-hands—indeed of all farm labor—he brought his crops in by importing Mexican farm laborers—*braceros* in the border term. Last year he imported one hundred. But he did so only at enormous cost in time and nervous attrition: he was, of course, enmeshed in miles of red tape swirling from desks in Baton Rouge, in Washington, in Dallas, Texas, and in Mexico City. One year he made the incredible number of 22 trips into Mexico.

Before the 1954 planting season farmer Williams was informed that his area had been removed, for reasons known only to Louisiana state labor officials, from the labor-scarcity list. He would therefore not be permitted to bring in any Mexicans at all. More in desperation than hope, with 20-odd of his tenant houses hopelessly vacant, he bought 2,200 white Chinese geese from Deane F. Stahmann, of Las Cruces, New Mexico, who will re-enter this story presently.

"Geese," says Williams, "are the doggonedest characters you ever saw. They'll keep me out of the red in an off-crop, drought, scarce-labor year.

"I've worked Negro labor all my life on the farm. They're good and we get along fine—but they're moving to town everywhere. Mexicans are great as productive workers, but I can't get them any more. Geese are the best hoe-hands of all.

"Next year I'm buying 20,000, to work those I need, the rest to resell because farmers all over this country are going to be wanting more geese than

they'll be able to find, when they learn the story. This thing is terrific. Next year, with what I've learned, I should easily save \$60,000 with geese."

Williams has the story in detailed, cost-accounting terms, based on the scientifically persuasive use of a "control." He planted two 1,000-acre tracts to cotton; the land was similar in fertility and yield records. On one tract he used geese to do his grassing, on the other, human hoe-hands.

On the land worked by geese he saved almost exactly \$25,000 after allowing generously for every conceivable differential and writing off the whole cost of the geese, which he still has on hand. "I could give them away and still be twenty-five grand ahead. For next year I have a contract with a big packing house to buy my geese." That is because he wants to avoid wintering them, working the voracious goslings through their first year only; older ones can be used but tend to grow lazy and even, once in a while, take a swipe at the young cotton when the grass is scanty.

Here is the astonishing conclusion Williams' painstaking figures lead to—significant both in terms of future farm costs and the national farm-labor supply of nearly 8,000,000 workers:

*Three men and 200 geese will do the work on 100 acres of cotton which formerly required 15 people.* Do it a great deal better, in fact. I saw hand-labor and goose-labor cotton on opposite sides of the road. The latter was as bare of grass as a bowling alley, the former ragged in spots. And cotton picked by machine after goose hoeing grades higher—being cleaner—than cotton machine-harvested after human hoeing. The three

men, incidentally, see that the geese are amply watered, fed a bit of grain when they run out of grass in the furrows, discreetly herded and furnished with moral support and companionship. The men also do some plowing, weed hoeing and cultivating but are never overworked.

"You must fence for geese," Williams explains. "That costs around \$4 an acre. And you must feed them a little corn to round out their diet of grass. You must have water available to them at intervals around the field. And somebody should be near to keep an eye on them most of the time. Otherwise they get lonesome and sulky."

### Facts About Marital Customs of Geese

Geese not only de-grass, but fertilize, and gobble some pestiferous insects. Wild geese are monogamous to the point of fanaticism. After many centuries of association with human beings, domesticated varieties are not so stuffy, but ganders insist on a small, unchanging circle of wives. Flocks raised together will have no traffic with strange geese and set up banshee, xenophobe protests when alien waddlers cross their path. Geese live to extravagant ages. There are reasonably well-authenticated cases of a gander breaking the century mark; his wife lays eggs until she is past fifty.

All these facts Williams has learned about geese in one short year of intensive study. He is not yet an expert; that status is attained only when the student is able to differentiate a goose from a gander at two paces. That will come in time—perhaps. Meanwhile Williams is so excited about this answer he has discovered to the shorthanded planter's prayers that he has begun an evangelistic and educational campaign among his neighbors. He has commissioned a professional cameraman to film the complete story of his white Chinese, has bought expensive projection equipment, and when the movie is ready, will go out proselytizing. Some of this is public-spiritedness; some of it is profit-mindedness, in relation to his plans for a side line in what he will bet you a hat will be the most meteoric, flash-news business of 1955's farm world; some of it is sheer excitement over an idea and its continent-spanning implications.

Other farmers in Louisiana are already real gone on geese. Around Bunkie and Cheneyville, at least 80 per cent of the planters use geese, notably Philip Wemple, who originally sold J. H. Williams on the project. Wemple estimates that there are 10,000 geese within a few miles of his place, whereas last year there were no more than 2,500. And this may be significant: this tiny area in central Louisiana, encompassing perhaps 15 or 20 square miles, is one of the very few spots in the United States with a sizable farm-labor *surplus*. Wemple and many of his neighbors bought their goslings from Wayne Alleshouse, of Norwalk, Ohio, successful proselyter and hatcheryman for his hunk of America, proving how the goose traffic is spanning state and sectional boundaries.

I went deeper into the delta to Donaldsonville, Louisiana, where Frank Noel of McManor Plantation is a big planter of sugar cane. Last year he tried 300 geese, skeptically. For an hour he spoke with restrained excitement about the marvel of his no-wage hoe-hands, and told me that he and a group of other farmers plan to combine next year to purchase 10,000 goslings. He, too, had kept accounts, and his figures dovetailed neatly with those of J. H. Williams in the northern part of the state: \$25 an acre saved, net, including the price of the geese.

Back in Natchitoches, I told farmer Williams that I was flying out to the goose headquarters of America, to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where Deane F. Stahmann has done spectacular things with the birds and is probably more responsible than any one man for launching the current big-scale invasion of farmers' fields by geese.

"I've just come from there," Williams said, "but

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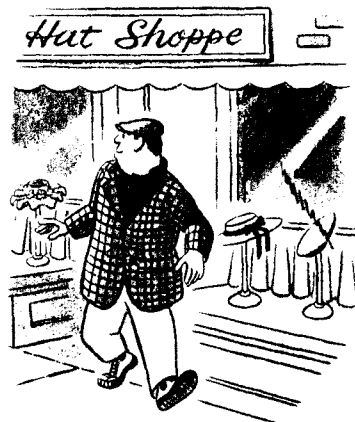
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# THE BARGAIN

By BOB PAPLOW



## Unloved geese may die of melancholy

I think I'll take a run back with you. I want to see it all again."

We went, along with Jared Pratt, another operator of large acreage and Williams' neighbor and friend. Deane Stahmann doesn't preside over a farm so much as a principality. Joe Cason, one of his two pilots, met us at El Paso in one of Stahmann's private planes, a four-seater Cessna, and flew us up an irrigated strip like green tape pasted to the desert. The harsh brown and red peaks of the Franklin and Organ Mountains jumped here and there from the dead floor of the long Colorado Plateau—to the south, hundreds of miles of parched nothing; to the west, the same; and to the east, whence we had come, Texas panting, dying of drought. Very different country from Louisiana, with its annual 60 inches of rainfall, green even in its current severe drought.

What grass would geese find to nibble in this scathed waste? Surely grass was harder to raise than geese here—but that was reasoning without Deane Stahmann's pumps, which, from 80 feet down, lift water at the rate of 2,000 gallons a minute to flood his fields. Suddenly, after no trees at all, we came upon a great many—Stahmann's grove of 96,000 pecan trees, largest in the world, planted on 4,000 acres amidst the cotton.

As Joe Cason banked and took us lower, we saw the geese—great white stains, flowing in strange undulating waves across the land. That's how they move. They saw us, too, and flowed away in stately panic like milk spilling out of a bottle. Five minutes later we were taxiing up to a shed housing cars and planes beside the Stahmann manor house, which is low, and built mission-style around a patio.

We toured the plant in a cluster of buildings housing a commissary, the business offices and the slaughtering and quick-freeze departments.

### Sympathy for Abattoir Victims

We watched as the geese were herded into the abattoir from outside pens, and then moved head down on shackles until, finally, they emerged as frozen birds in clear plastic packages weighing from five to seven pounds each. It was all bloody, oppressively hot and eerily disturbing. Unlike chickens, geese are graceful and strange of mood. And now that I knew they could live to be a hundred years old if left alone, this softie writer felt a twinge—but not the gaily chattering Mexicans who work on the Stahmann goose disassembly lines.

Stahmann Farms produce three commodities: pecans, cotton and geese; \$2,000,000 worth of pecans, \$350,000 worth of cotton and 250,000 geese this year.

In 1932, Deane Stahmann owned 4,000 debt-heavy acres. He had an engineering degree, no money and a driving, stubborn enthusiasm for all ideas—provided they were big and new. Now he is several times a millionaire. In his 44-foot living room, hung with a fortune in art, air-conditioned and lushly furnished, he resembled a younger Lewis Stone of the old silents. He is alert, precise of speech and highly literate.

"Any farmer who can't make geese pay off as weeders," he said carefully,

"isn't giving them the minimum care they must have. They can't be unloaded in the fields and left to their fate. They must be watched and herded; they must be fed a little."

He smiled. "They must have love. They are very sensitive to the men who tend them. They like to be talked to affectionately by their human friends. They like to discuss matters intimately with the herder; otherwise they grow melancholy and even die."

### As Laborers' Wages Increase

Stahmann revealed that possibly 40,000 of his 250,000 geese this year were sold for weeding: "That may be ten per cent of the total used for that purpose; it may be less—it's hard to be positive. And some farmers use old geese, year after year. But there should be a steady increase in direct proportion to the increase of wages for hand labor. We shipped Robert Pfost, in Fresno, California, 12,000 this year—I understand Pfost has sold 36,000 altogether this year for weeding cotton, potatoes, tomatoes, berries, grapes and orchards. Paul Martin, in Atwater, California, bought 5,000."

In California the wageless hoe-hand is becoming a very sizable factor. Also they're eating geese out there. The supermarkets carry them in competition with turkey. A half century ago there were 8,000,000 geese in the land. Now the U.S. Department of Agriculture guesses—and it may be a bad guess—there are about a million. But the number is going up so fast an intelligent guess is difficult.

Stahmann stood up. "Geese are a big story, it's quite true; Americans scarcely yet realize the birds are making a comeback as food. But there's another angle we haven't covered yet."

He left the room almost at a run, returning with three strange objects which he handed around.

"These," said Stahmann, "are goose pelts." They were skins, goose-shaped as a bear rug is bear-shaped, with the long neck of the bird obvious. They were dyed garishly, Easter-egg purple, neon green, baby pink; the furry down was delectably soft to touch.

"The French make powder puffs out of these," Stahmann pointed out. "The Russians use the down to make linings for aviators' suits and arctic soldiers' uniforms. We may have to fight a war someday up around the Arctic Circle and there is absolutely nothing comparable to goose down for such purposes. Our plastic and fiberglass aviation suits are poor substitutes, as all the experts know; a man can't sweat in them with comfort, because they're airtight, unlike the goose-down article."

He sighed and shook his head. "A lot of feathers and down are sold to overseas markets—not to Russia, but I have the uneasy feeling many shipments may be ending up there. I'm sure my buyers are innocent, but I have a hunch that the Russians are stockpiling. Come war in the arctic, our shortage of goose down might be comparable, as a story, to the rubber squeeze in World War II. But perhaps all that is wholly irrelevant to your weeders."

I said, not altogether. Farmer Williams declared that, on second thought, he might be able to use 40,000 head in 1955. We took our leave. ▲▲▲

Collier's for November 26, 1954