

Wayne Bailey Produce Co.



Wayne E. Bailey and his partner, Bernard Peal, were big buyers of strawberries back in the 1930's and 1940's when Chadbourn, NC was known as the Klondike strawberry capital of the world. Bailey owned part of the strawberry market in Chadbourn. One day in 1942, the market was opening up and he and his partner said they were going to buy every strawberry that came across the market. At 2:00 in the afternoon, the local banker, Lacy Tate, who had a lot of loans out to local farmers, saw all the out-of-town buyers on the street and was worried that the market had closed. When he asked

the buyers about it, they said they couldn't buy anything with 'those two playboys' down there. That was how we got the Playboy label, but in those days, a playboy was a classy, outgoing kind of guy, not what you think of today."

In 1970, Bailey's son, Elroy, took the leadership role and with it changed the sales paradigm of the company. These changes served as a springboard for his successor, stepson George Wooten, who joined the company in 1977. "I told my stepfather I'd like to try to sell some sweet potatoes," Wooten remembered. "He said we didn't really have any to sell, but told me I could take the Blue Book (a produce industry credit reference book) and start calling. But he said not to drop the price. I called for a couple of years without much success." One reason is that sweet potatoes were traditionally a seasonal, holiday item back then. Wooten, however, saw their potential and set out to market them year-round.

In 1978, they had to build a new facility. "We built storage for 90,000 to 100,000 bushels and my stepfather let me be a little more aggressive since we had some extra supplies." That same year, Wooten attended the annual convention of the Produce Marketing Association for the first time and began to get ideas. The company began exhibiting the following year and has not missed a show since. They also had to build more storage.

In 1989, WEB bought Sampson Produce Company in Clinton, NC, and changed the name of the firm to Pride of Sampson. It has approximately 70,000 square feet of storage. "When we started exhibiting at the conventions, we started expanding and our sales became greater than we could handle at our own facility. We buy sweet potatoes from farmers in the fall and then we also buy them from farmers who have their own on-market storage. Then we market them," Wooten said.

It was back then that Wooten began eyeing the foodservice market. "It's been steadily growing ever since," Wooten said. "It's going to continue to mushroom. There is more and more interest. A lot of steak houses serve sweet potatoes and quite a few family restaurants are serving them every day." Wooten's gift for marketing, development of customized packs, and thirst for innovation has driven the company to be a leader in the sweet potato industry. He was named Company President in 1991.

"We have since added several local storage facilities as well as storage and packing facilities in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. On August 30, 2007, we moved into a brand new facility that has 229,000 square feet featuring the most modern equipment in the industry," he continued.

Now with George Wooten III and Adam Wooten, George's sons, working in the company, it is a fourth generation family business.