

GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

THE ONION LANDSCAPE OF GEORGIA*

THOMAS FREDERICK HOWARD

East-central Georgia's qualifications as a specialty vegetable-crop district are not immediately obvious. Inland from the piney woods of the coast, yet not far enough inland to have been an important part of the cotton kingdom, the region today would be in the distant outer rings of a Johann von Thünen diagram centered on any notable southeastern city. Nevertheless, on these rolling sandy plains an onion district of national fame has come into being—netting close to \$100 million in a good year. Vidalia, a town of some 11,000 residents, has given its name to a crop now sold in supermarkets nationwide.

Soil and climate make Georgia's coastal plain a good place to grow low-pungency onions, but the region is not unique in this regard. Georgia's onion landscape is also the result of cultural factors, including perhaps a shrewd appraisal of American consumers' subliminal anxiety about the placelessness of their diet. Vidalia onions are a place-identified product, and the 800-number direct marketing that some larger growers have adopted emphasizes the regional image along with the product. Behind the casual folksiness, though, lie the federal marketing-order system, trademark law, and a high level of organization by growers.

Onion cultivation also depends on innovations in labor and agrotechnology (Figures 1 and 2). The labor system is not typical of the region, and two important forms of technology are imports as well: overhead sprinkler irrigation, and a cold-storage technique borrowed from apple growers in the Pacific Northwest.

According to local lore, the Vidalia onion entered the world in 1931, when a Toombs County farmer named Mose Coleman noticed that some of his onions lacked the usual pungency. Coleman saw a market potential and sold the crop at the premium price—in those days—of \$3.50 for a 50-pound bag. His neighbors imitated him, and soon sweet onions became a local specialty, sold at roadside stands along U.S. Highway 1, then an important tourist highway for Florida-bound wayfarers.

Growth in onion acreage was slow, even after two supermarket chains, Piggly-Wiggly and A&P, started to carry sweet onions in their southeastern stores. As late as the mid-1970s they were grown on only 700 acres. Georgia growers found that the geographical identity of their product was being diluted, as sweet-onion bins in many southeastern supermarkets were being stocked from other producing areas

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✪ DR. HOWARD is an associate professor of geography at Armstrong State University, Savannah, Georgia 31419.