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ACROSS THE ISLAND

York Seed Business Spans The Continent

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MOST READERS like ghost stories best, but I like to tell the stories of Islanders who have made good at home. I like to talk to people who have built up businesses here in this province where it's all too popular to say there's nothing for an ambitious man to do.

I talked a few days ago to Arthur Vesey who recently opened an attractive seed distributing shop alongside his home in York. Few Islanders realize it – I'll admit I had no idea – but Art Vesey has one of the most widely known mail order seed distributing businesses in this country. I don't know how it compares with some of the biggest businesses in the larger provinces, but I know it's the largest mail order seed business in the Atlantic Provinces.

This modest Islander ships seed orders all over this country, from Newfoundland to British Columbia – Vesey's seeds go even to Alaska. And seeds are shipped to Maine. The business is increasing as the years go by. Of course there's a reason.

200 Letters Daily At Peak Period

ART VESEY has been seeking the newest and the best in garden seeds for many years. He competed in the vegetable collection exhibit at Charlottetown when he was only 11, and that's a long time ago now. He was sending letters even then to many parts of the world, in his search for the best garden seeds obtainable. He's still searching for something that's new and different.

He put out the first Vesey's Seed catalogue in 1939. His catalogue always offers items that are obtainable nowhere else. There are 25 to 30 such items this year, for example. Requests for his catalogue are increasing each year. The mail averages 200 letters per day at the peak of the enquiry season, as new customers send for them. There were 30,000 catalogues mailed out the second week in January, the period when they are mailed out each year.

I like the way the Vesey Seeds people – Bev Simpson has been a partner for the past seven years – get their catalogues mailed. Obviously it's a tremendous task to put 30,000 catalogues in that many envelopes.

So "we have parties" Mr. Vesey told me. They called them "bees" and sometimes "frolics" in the days of a half century ago. People liked them then, and the Vesey neighbours like them now. About a dozen neighbours gather and place catalogues in envelopes for mailing. Afterwards they have a feed, and "they seem to enjoy it", this enterprising Islander told me. The fact the "parties" are held in the Christmas holiday period adds that extra touch of desirability.

Mr. Simpson is a bit younger, and his generation makes up the second party. So more catalogues are placed in envelopes. The third party completes this task, I gather.

The envelopes are addressed earlier in the year by one of the young ladies who does nothing else for several months. The seed packaging and selling season lasts less than half the year, but the work lasts through the year. Five people are employed through the 12-month period. There are 10 to 12 people working at the peak period.

Every Item Is Carefully Tested

I WAS impressed by many things this modest York businessman told me, but I liked particularly the fact that no seed is advertised under his firm's name that has not been carefully tested, in the extensive Vesey gardens, and has proven to be satisfactory.

"I can picture the vegetable growing in the garden, and recall how it looked, when I write the information about it for the gardener," Mr. Vesey told me.

The seed is purchased in many parts of the continent, and the effort continues to keep his product the very best that is obtainable. Next year's catalogue will advertise an Island product. "York" turnip has been developed largely through the efforts of Research Officers George Ayers and Keith Lelacheur, Experimental Farm. It's resistant to Club Root, and was found originally on the farm of Leonard Andrews at York.

The seeds are shipped in large quantities. There were 6,000 pounds of corn in this year's orders. Many items ranged higher than the 10,000 pound bracket.

In corn, for example, they have early, medium and late varieties. And the Veseys are convinced all three varieties are the very best obtainable. And that reminds me of a story about "early variety" claims.

One Canadian mail order seed house advertises a variety that is "the earliest in the world". In the same catalogue, though, they list the same vegetable that "is three days earlier than any other variety." And that, of course, is nonsense.

I found the story of the seed business development interesting. Away back in the 1920's they always grew garden vegetables at the Vesey farm. They always grew more than they used at home. So they gave away the surplus. It went mostly to Charlottetown friends, for they were the only ones who had cars in those early days of automobiles. Of course neighbours got some too.

With Arthur constantly developing new and better varieties as he sought the best from the scores of places to which he wrote for catalogues, and information, the neighbours started coming to him and asking for seed. First thing he knew he was in the garden seed business. "It wasn't planned that way, it just happened," he told me.

First Cash Return Is Recalled

MR. VESEY can remember vividly the first time they received any money for garden products. His father took a basket of cucumbers to Cudmore's store in Charlottetown and was paid one dollar for it. That was a lot of money then, and it was particularly interesting as it came from something most people gave away at the time.

He started with a small room in his own house given over to the sales of garden seeds. Gradually it has grown until the business requires the present spacious and attractive quarters.

Recalling the Vesey pupils in earlier P.E.I. Music Festivals, I sought the story of his early development as a musician. I found it interesting and here it is.

Rena Wood, now Mrs. Edwin Johnstone, had been giving piano lessons for 35 cents. When she left the province Arthur Vesey had to pay \$1.00 a lesson to Professor Fletcher in Charlottetown. So he started giving lessons himself to beginners at 25 cents a lesson. He wanted four pupils, so he could make that dollar to continue his own study.

Well one pupil told another, and first thing he knew Mr. Vesey had 50 to 60 pupils. I believe he taught piano for something like 20 years in all. He studied piano himself for more than 10 years, I understand.

Money Was Scarce Item Then

YOUNG PEOPLE today will probably fail to understand the need of “making” that dollar for the Fletcher lesson, instead of getting it from his parents. My own youth goes back to about the same time, and youngsters just didn’t have money then, unless they earned it. Money was a mighty scarce item.

One other story about the Vesey career and I’m through.

Recalling that I had seen this man direct dramatic productions, I found that “Ma” Henry (Mrs. Arthur) had directed production of the York players one year a long time ago. Next year Arthur Vesey tackled the job himself. There have been many entertaining productions since then from the York group.

There are many things an enterprising son of this province can do, if he has the initiative, and the courage to try it, and the determination to stick with it. I have in mind a chat with a neighbor of Mr. Vesey’s for a later column. The man doesn’t know it yet, but I believe his story will offer further inspiration to some Islander to create a business of his own.