

FIRST DRAFT

Freeze in early May 1915 provoked many to re-examine fruit industry

Fruit growers in the Grand Valley were accustomed to freezing temperatures in April playing havoc with their crops.

But the blizzard that blew in the weekend of May 1, 1915, and dropped temperatures well below freezing, caught many growers by surprise. It also led to gloomy predictions about the peach business.

"Is the Fruit Industry in the Grand Valley doomed to Failure?" a Daily Sentinel headline asked in late May.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

"The frost of last week ... has completely ruined approximately 90 percent of the orchards" in the Grand Valley, a Loveland newspaper reported on May 6.

Throughout May, there were conflicting reports of how widespread the damage was, which areas suffered the worst. There were also stories of some fruit growers attempting to hastily sell their orchards.

However, the same Sentinel column that raised questions about the future of the industry, urged diversity for crops and tenacity for growers.

"The trouble with most people is that they give up too easily," the paper said.

As it turned out, 1915 wasn't the worst year for fruit growers during the early decades of the 20th century. April freezes in 1908 and 1911 caused more severe losses.

A bulletin of Colorado Agricultural Statistics, released during the 1930s, showed peach production statewide in 1915 was greater than it had been in 1910, 1911 and 1913.

Nearly all peach production in the state came from Mesa and Delta counties.

Nevertheless, the 1915 freeze not only provoked significant hand-wringing in the region, it also prompted a variety of ideas to encourage more diversity in crop production, as well as government efforts to assist those fruit growers who suffered most seriously from the freeze.

Twenty-four years later, a columnist for the Sentinel referred to 1915 as "a pivotal year in Grand Valley history," because of the May freeze and the fact that local agriculture "was then almost entirely given over to fruit raising."

"The policy of diversified farming was inaugurated following the severe frost," wrote Merle M. McClintock in 1939. "Not since then has western Colorado put all her eggs in one basket."

That wasn't entirely accurate, however. The Western Slope began producing sugar beets and had a beet plant operating in Grand Junction by 1899.

Potatoes were grown for a time at the west end of the valley, as were row crops such as wheat, rye, oats and corn. And, of course, livestock — cattle, sheep and horses — had been an important part of the local agricultural economy from the earliest days.

Even in 1915, immediately after the severe freeze, the Sentinel proclaimed in a banner across the front page that "With a diversity of crops more pronounced this year than ever before,



Combustion Orchard Heaters in operation in the Grand Valley, Colorado. Manufactured by The Orchard Heating Device Company, Palisade, Colo.

BOWMAN FAMILY COLLECTION, PALISADE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

An early 20th century postcard shows Palisade-manufactured smudge pots being employed in an orchard.

Mesa County bids fair to have the most profitable year in her history. We no longer depend on fruit alone."

Still, it's clear that after the heavy freeze in 1915, there was a concerted effort to encourage more and different crops.

A series of meetings from Clifton to Fruita in late May and June of that year involved several experts from what was then known as the Agricultural College at Fort Collins.

They touted the advantages of farmers operating small dairies, growing wheat, producing vegetables for canneries and more.

An emergency committee was formed and began investigating activities such as hog production, growing crops for silage, and increasing alfalfa acreage to supply the expected increase in local dairies.

In mid-June, a vegetable canning plant was under construction near Appleton. By late September, it was producing more than 20,000 cans of tomatoes a day.

There was also help from the U.S. government, offers of temporary employment to fruit growers who suffered the worst losses.

With construction completed on the roller dam in De Beque Canyon and on the mainstem of the Highline Canal, the U.S. Secretary of Interior agreed to hire affected farmers to assist in building lateral canals connected to the Highline.

According to the Denver Labor Bulletin for May 22, 1915, "The sum of \$350,000, to be spent by the United States reclamation service, will go directly into the pockets of Grand Valley farmers who are to be employed constructing laterals on the High Line canal project."

The article said the Interior Department agreed to the arrangement after receiving a request from

Colorado Gov. George Alfred Carlson, who had toured fruit farms in the Grand Valley after the frost.

In addition to the direct assistance through employment on the construction crews, financing was to be made available in the Grand Valley for farmers wanting to purchase dairy cattle, hogs and chickens.

The money, according to the Labor Bulletin, would come "through a plan being advanced by private promoters working for the general welfare."

Other people, meanwhile, offered advice on how fruit growers could improve their odds of producing successful crops. Number one on the list of solutions was use of the relatively new smudge pots.

"The practical benefits received from the strenuous use of smudge pots was fully demonstrated in all parts of the valley," the Palisade Tribune reported on May 7, 1915. "All who smudged thoroughly are reporting full crops in return for their labors."

One Clifton-area grower told the Tribune that he used numerous smudge pots in his orchard — presumably peaches, but the article doesn't say.

As a result, he claimed the low temperature in his orchard on May 1, the coldest night, dropped only to 31 degrees, while his neighbors recorded temperatures as low as 21 degrees, and the fruit on trees next to Johnson's orchard was destroyed.

Better thinning techniques and greater use of fertilizer on trees were also encouraged.

Regardless of what practices growers employed, it's evident that damage from the May freeze wasn't universal. The Tribune reported that most of the peaches and other fruit east of Palisade "came through

with but little damage."

Articles in the Sentinel in the days and weeks immediately after the freeze proclaimed that the fruit crops on the Redlands and near Whitewater had survived with minimal losses.

In the North Fork Valley of Delta County, where the peach buds were not as fully blossomed as those in the Grand Valley, the crop was in "excellent shape," the Sentinel said.

Cherries, pears and apples all seemed to have come through with minimal damage, based on Sentinel stories.

The full extent of the peach damage wasn't known until harvest time. As mentioned, it wasn't as severe as some previous years.

Many carloads of primarily Elberta peaches were shipped from Palisade and other locations each day. A hot dry spell in midsummer exacerbated the problems, resulting in smaller peaches.

On Sept. 10, 1915, the Palisade Tribune said that nearly all peach growers in the region were reporting output that was "one-third to one-quarter less than last year."

Although a few growers sold out that year, most remained in the business. One hundred seven years later, while many other crops have been tried and abandoned in the Grand Valley, and many more severe freezes have damaged crops, growing fruit — especially peaches — remains a mainstay of the valley's agriculture.

Sources: Historic newspapers at www.news-papers.com and www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org; "Colorado Agricultural Statistics 1935," by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



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PALISADE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A wagon loaded with peaches is hauled toward the railroad station in Palisade, circa 1915.

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