

## AGRICULTURE - - Blueberries

Mrs. Katherine (Katie) Bissett  
914 No. 4 Road, Richmond.

Interviewed - January 30, 1973.

. . . at the age of 14 yrs. to Richmond from Ft. Francis, Ontario.  
C.1933 . . . usual then to go pick blueberries at Johnson Bros. on  
Blundell Road which was then a dirt road with no house numbers . . .  
No. 4 Road wasn't there then, nor Westminster Hwy., no other blue-  
berry farms then. Johnson Bros. had brought plants in as experiment  
from Scanalls, New Jersey . . . cultivated high bush type.

. . . future husband, Bill Bissett at 17 quit school . . . into  
poultry business . . . supplied Johnson with chicken manure (because  
of great amount of nitrogen) wheeled 1½ miles down Heather St. and up  
Blundell . . . used only a shovelful . . . growth on bushes tremendous  
. . . with peat there is no nitrogen in soil . . . peat was 10' - 12'  
deep. 1941 . . . Katherine and Bill married . . . bought place  
with one acre . . . then got 5 acres . . . then 20 acres in blue-  
berries plus poultry.

. . . at first cultivated ground only . . . takes 10 years to  
get full crop . . . sought information from University and Night  
School . . . most information on poultry but suggested bone meal  
for blueberries . . . helped but no nitrogen in it . . . feed  
companies brought in chemical companies who advised chemical formula.  
. . . phosphate was too low . . . added nitrogen and boron (a soil  
sterilizer and good for sickly plants) . . . use 0.9 to 1 ton every  
three years . . . get good crops.  
1955-56 . . . One year University tested they got 10 tons blue-  
berries to one acre . . . peak year.

. . . important what you put in soil and care . . . Dr. Eaton at U.B.C. does experiments, helps . . . use for 10 years 427-27-25 plus little boron. Honey Bees improved blueberry crop . . . tried wintering hives from California but lost from cold . . . bee man put hives in for season, charge for service and collect the honey . . . 120 - 150 growers in Richmond use bee hives . . . pay \$7.00 a hive . . . Mrs. Bissett puts in 20 hives yearly . . . bee man makes \$140. - \$150. yearly from Bissett farm, plus honey . . . some hives also in black currants. Honey people almost depend on blueberry people and vice-versa.

Shortage of honey . . . Japanese found this out . . . gave honey to their children in school in Japan . . . buy Canadian honey, price went up. Kinds of honey: alfalfa, clover and blueberry.

Mr. Doug Oldershaw, provincial bee man, very knowledgeable (now going to Peace River re clover, alfalfa) has 150 acres blueberry farm with son at No. 4 Road . . . has fabulous slides of honey bees).

Fred Shaw on blueberries and Jim <sup>Thomas</sup> on cranberry brought in early from N.J. by Western Peat to start this growth, still here.

Blueberries sometimes called a luxury fruit . . . struggle to start . . . blueberries give slow returns, need other jobs to sustain . . . Bissetts in poultry business . . . fought elements, bugs, weevil . . . formerly used Aldrin but this now banned . . . weevil havoc with young plants . . . Aldrin in planting hole gave 5 years protection.

Leatherjacket found in ground . . . affects gardens . . . don't know effect on young blueberries . . . Jack Rains 'bug man' will tell us eventually, grows cranberries.

If could get wild bees, or bumble bee plus wasps, hornets these could pollenate but honey wouldn't be recovered . . . Black bee (Italian

works in cold weather . . . yellow bee a good worker but not in cold weather . . . bumble bee works all the time even at night.

Blueberries require care, feeding, pruning, good varieties. Most plants from U.S.: New Jersey and Michigan. An M.P. from Nova Scotia (Annapolis Valley) came out some years ago to begin blueberry growing there . . . main crop wild blueberries as in Quebec.

Largest cultivated growing areas: Richmond, then Pitt Meadows, Pitt Polder (where Dutch reclaimed the land), few in Abbotsfort, Coquitlam . . . most growers belong to the co-op.

Blueberry flowering starts around the end of April or mid-May . . . takes 60 days to mature. Harvesting starts mid-July to mid-September . . . some as late as October . . . early frosts have caught berries September 11th, ruins berries . . . one year co-op picked soft berries but had to sell the berries for juice.

Harvesting berries: first two pickings by hand. Ten years ago Bissetts started using machines . . . use hand machine that vibrates berries off machine into canopy (machine made in Michigan) . . . then into cleaner (to blow out leaves, green berries) then onto a belt to be rechecked by hand.

Cold storage plants quick freezes berries and stems drop off saving time . . . growers adopting machine, picking more . . . Eastern U.S. uses 'over the row' picker used with operator sitting on it . . . steel arms vibrate the bushes and one acre blueberries are picked a day with three people operating . . . ground too soft to use machine in Canada . . . hand vibrators need repairs.

In N. Carolina blueberries grown on sand, Michigan on sand, Washington moist sandy clay with rocks, New Jersey peaty and rocky . . . best growing area is here, Washington and Oregon . . . largest growing

area is Michigan . . . Quebec and Maine equal areas but Federal Government subsidizes Quebec growers, built them three cold storage plants.

Early growing blueberries a struggle . . . got 15 cents a pound when wholesaler shipped to camps . . . as more farmed blueberries price cutting started . . . so co-op formed to stabilize prices.

People now realize blueberries have iron, vitamin C when properly grown . . . strawberries and black currants have more vitamin C . . . groups in New York and Michigan experimented checking vitamins of blueberries . . . depends on proper nutrients put in soil . . . Bissett supplies Health Spas here with blueberry juice adding honey, also pure cranberry juice with honey . . . planned to ship these juices across Canada . . . got Gov't okay, labels made, then many obstacles . . . made some blueberry wine (Calona wines?) using some blackberries in liquor stores . . . in Michigan or New Jersey they make blueberry champagne.

Blueberry business in B.C. now 1½ million dollar business . . . improving each year except land sold for housing . . . East Richmond now mainly dairying, strawberry and vegetable growing . . . all South Arm from No. 2 Road to No. 5 Road is frozen for agriculture . . . farmer annoyed when offered \$7,000. to \$10,000. an acre and can't sell . . . \$2. an hour wage will affect farmer . . . Government wants costs of wages to go up and cost of food to go down so we are in a bind.

. . . recently sold 19 acres of her land because adjacent neighbors complained about noise, birds, mosquitoes, water, municipality complained about size of her signs against trespassing. Starlings major problem: birds have 3 nestings yearly with 8 birds to a nest . . . some growers lost half of crop to birds . . . used boom boom guns to scare off birds . . . Mrs. Bissett got permission from municipality

to shoot birds with shotgun.

Total acreage of Bissett farm was 30 acres of which 20 acres was blueberries, some in vegetables, strawberries - sold 19 acres this year . . . now has 9 acres plus house . . . rents other land . . . share crops blueberries with 3 or 4 other farmers (means they grow berries, Bissett's pick and market them and share profit.)

Youngsters enjoy working on farm . . . happy relationship . . . past year unusual thru co-op get 30 cents a pound to grower, but usual price is 18 to 19¢ a pound depending on supply and demand . . . market is good . . . U.S. realizes this more than us . . . state of Georgia plan on 50,000 acres more blueberries, different type called Rabbit's Eye Blueberry . . . North Carolina and New Jersey have labor problems because of rate of pay to hand pickers . . . problem of Caesar Chavez coming into Michigan and in New Jersey and North Carolina have Black Power.

Provincial Government is keen on marketing boards . . . Mrs. Bissett feels this creates black market, boot legging. Personal feeling enters into growing blueberries . . . you can train blueberries the way you want . . . enjoyable picking blueberries.

Co-op shipped blueberries to Australia, Honolulu, Hawaiian Islands but with England and Germany we had to cater to carriage trade (expensive). North American Blueberry Council extends through Canada and U.S. to which all blueberry growers belong is very good, information supplied on weather, price and market conditions . . . helps each other . . . ship 70 to 73% blueberries to U.S. (including Australia) looking for market.

"Our Canadian blueberry happens to be just that much better than theirs (U.S.)", cold weather and longer maturing makes berry sweeter,

firmer, have better freezing facilities . . . our product is A-1. . .  
annoyed at Co-op cutting off Canadian markets to sell to U.S.

Propagate Blueberry Plants for sale, an industry of its own:  
take 'whips' from bushes, cut certain way, put in soil to root, into  
plots for rooting system, sold at 1 year to 2 years old as rotted  
cuttings, or yearlings or 2 years old to people starting blueberries .  
. . . mainly at Pitt Meadows at "Blueboy" . . . also by Steve Aderneck  
at No. 4 Rd.

Problem: with people going to bog to get seedlings for bushes .  
. . . in D.O.T. area or Nature Park birds have dropped seeds . . .  
plants mature at different times . . . use as hedges . . . 25 varieties  
of blueberries, each different taste.

Special kinds: "Berry with Scented Taste" cinnamon . . .  
Bissetts have two acres called Coleville . . . "Rancocas" a medium  
berry makes good pies . . . large berries are Bluecrop, Coleville,  
Blue Ray . . . "Dixie" very tart . . .

On Grouse Mountain are excellent wild blueberries to pick.  
Eastern Canada and Eastern U.S. have "protein" fruit . . . all have  
maggots and can't ship fruit to California . . . so B.C. commands  
markets into Washington, Oregon and California . . . our B.C. fruit  
has no bugs or maggots. No spraying of B.C. blueberry bushes for  
bugs . . . only spray ground in February for fungus.

Re water sprinkler system on blueberries as protection against  
frost: Too expensive for general growers . . . Western Peat tried it  
earlier. Crop Insurance offered by Government. Bissetts had for one  
year . . . would have to lose more than half their crop to collect  
price . . . in blueberry growing over 30 years never lost half crop .  
. . . Cranberry growers have crop insurance but have water sprinkling

system so don't need it . . . strawberry growers need crop insurance .  
. . . but find price high.

Freezers or coolers: some independent growers have walk-in plants for blueberries . . . at Co-op: B.C. Ice freezes berries, adds cost to grower, approximately 7 cents a pound overall cost added (includes finding markets) and running of co-op, manager's wages.

Kennedy Round: unhappy result - promised when duty would come off on American side, it would on Canadian, but actual result - duty came off to U.S. growers and not to Canadians. Americans grew strawberries on land leased in Mexico and dumped here until complaints. Farming - every phase - needs education, specialized.

Cost for farmers to bring blueberries to the Co-op to be sold is approximately 13¢ to 15¢ a pound . . . fight elements, frosts, birds, etc

Should have Blueberry Days, like Salmon Days.

Growers have "Pick-your-own" fields kept as such for public . . . people come from prairies, Vancouver Island, Powell River . . . Bissetts charged 25¢ a lb. and got the best berries, easy to pick . . . advertised in dailies and N. Westminster, Langley, Previously Co-op had a booth at Trade Fair . . . with canned blueberries, blueberry purees, recipes.

Son, Andy, farming with Mother since age of 18.

Trend coming to farm: of people want to pick their own vegetables . . . hippy type. On Blueberries - no pesticides, herbicides used. If everyone returned to organic farming it would take 5 years for bugs to destroy each other. Incident of spraying with Melathian 12 years ago - to kill leaf roller bug on blueberries . . . didn't succeed, still have leaf roller, got another worse bug . . . leaves drop off when blueberries machine picked . . . then cleaned.

Mrs. K. Bissett

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Underground drainage put in Bissett farm: these are covered by cedar wood . . . price now high so others use plastic pipes, last a lifetime.

Bees bring in pollen dust which is never utilized . . . a coming thing.

Dellis Cleland