

HERITAGE | THE FAMILY BUSINESS



R.C. Hatton: A partnership built around innovation and family

BY **ELIZABETH LOUISE HATT**

The Great Depression was the worst global economic depression of the 20th century. Characterized by failure across industries and an agricultural drought that triggered a 60 percent drop in crop prices. Clearly, the early 30s in the United States was not a time to start a business.

Yet, that is exactly what Robert C. Hatton did.

In 1932, the year before the United States saw its highest rate of unemployment in history, Hatton planted the roots for what was destined to become not just one of the largest sweet corn producers in the country, but a family legacy: R.C. Hatton Farms.

He founded the namesake busi-

ness growing sweet corn and green beans on less than 300 acres of fertile farmland beside Lake Okeechobee in Pahokee, FL. Eighty-five years later, the company now farms 12,000 acres across the southern Florida region, and as of 2004, in southern Georgia.

Much of the land stayed dedicated to sweet corn and green beans with Hatton in charge; but when his son, Roger Hatton, took the helm in the 1960s, the company began a tremendous growth spurt. Unafraid to explore out-of-the-box opportunities, Roger Hatton adopted a vision for innovation that opened the doors to new crop production methods and business partnerships that helped the company not just stay ahead of the curve but reshape the market.

It was soon into Roger Hatton's leadership that the team expanded its crops to include fresh sugar cane and utilized aerial pest control methods — one of the first pioneers to use the technology.

It was at this point that the company really started to take off, explained Paul Allen, co-owner and president of R.C. Hatton. "It began with Roger and his father adding sugar cane into the mix. There was a big boom across the sugar cane business in the 60s and 70s that Roger saw as an opportunity. From that point on, he grew the company exponentially, probably to 10 times the size."

A major driver of the growth was the partnership that bloomed between Roger Hatton and Hugh Branch, the founder of the packing,

shipping and marketing company Hugh Branch Inc., known today as Branch: A Family of Farms.

Progressive for his time, Branch was a forward-thinking marketer in the early days, said Brett Bergmann, the current president and co-owner of the South Bay, FL-based company. "He was very engaged and wanted to stay abreast of the market, putting prices out in advance — something people didn't necessarily do at the time."

Operating in parallel fashion to R.C. Hatton, Branch was also family-owned and operated with Branch's brother Julian Branch and his son Hugh Jr. (Chip) both playing key roles. Today the company is run by Bergmann, who bought into the company in the 1990s, alongside Chip and Hugh's son-in-law Dan Shiver. Mainstays through the years were Sam Scruggs, George Mills, Gary Stafford and Robby Carter.

With family and innovation at their core, Roger Hatton and Branch built a partnership that has withstood the test of time. Notably one of the largest sweet corn shippers in the United States — and possibly worldwide — Branch has been the sole shipper-marketer for R.C. Hatton's produce since its 1957 foundation. In the 1970s they built Glades Precooler, based in South Bay, FL, to pre-cool and ship fresh sweet corn.

The new leadership has proudly maintained the same tightknit relationship that proved instrumental in shaping the regional industry. Bergmann and Allen have — and continue to — work collaboratively to enhance both the fresh produce and value-added offerings in the marketplace.

"In the early 1990s Brett and I traveled the world together in search of the best packaging technology to develop a state-of-the-art tray pack facility for sweet corn," explained Allen. "We recognized a growing need for value-added products in the marketplace, and we wanted to stay ahead of the curve."

To do so, R.C. Hatton/Branch established a packaging company, Performance Packaging, to expand

its offerings to include consumer-ready, pre-packaged sweet corn and green beans as well as retail bags of green beans.

Allen is continuing Roger Hatton's legacy of both market-leading innovation and family. Having dedicated his career to the company since joining right out of school in 1984, Allen is as good as family. He bought into the business in 2000 and now works alongside two of his brothers and his son, Jonathan, is a recent graduate from the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association's Emerging Leader Development Program in 2013 and is excited to one day take on his dad's responsibility.

"My son learned from the ground up," noted Allen. "Everyone in a management position here has learned from the bottom up and can handle anything on the farm. We are very hands-on, from start to finish."

This is a piece of the culture that appeals to the farm's dedicated workforce, some who have been there for more than 30 years. Treating employees like family has been part of its mission statement since day one, and the R.C. Hatton website boasts: "Our mission is to produce and package the best products possible, while providing a safe, clean working environment for our highly valued employees."

"We are more interested in what we can do for our employees than what they can do for us," said Allen. "From Robert to Roger to myself, we honor our employees and their families by doing our best not to work on Sundays so they can be together and worship if they choose. We are also sensitive to the generation of younger folks who work less weekends, and have invested in more equipment and people to offset the weekend work."

Allen is true to this word noting how he has a personal relationship with every employee on the farm: "Any worker, the guy on the tractor, can come talk to me any day — and I'm the guy who makes the decisions. You don't get that in most places," he said.

Many of R.C. Hatton's innovations are inspired by enhancing the

work environment. In the 2000s, the company started packing corn on a corn line instead of in the field. It was the first in the glades, said Allen, and it provided a more comfortable work experience and higher quality product.

Supporting others extends beyond the company's books. Giving back is built into the company's business model and the team provides extensive support to the community through a variety of programs around hunger-relief, education, and more. The company connects with its employees, consumers, partners, and the extended community through social media; "Facebook and Instagram have been very successful for us," added Allen.

The same sentiment is reflected at Branch. It is about respect, said Bergmann: "We respect our employees and in turn we expect them to respect themselves and the company." According to Branch, his workers are one of the top three factors in his success: "God, the people and a great relationship with our customers."

Bergmann hopes they would feel the same: "I think our customers view us as people that do what we say we are going to do. I think people like doing business with us because we look out for their interests, as well as the farmers' interests — and always do what we say we are going to do."

Looking forward, what do the companies have in the works? Allen said that right now it is about succession. "Brett and I are the next generation, running our respective companies. It used to be Roger and Hugh and now it is Brett and me."

Allen added, "You know what's funny? Our ages align. Hugh is 93 years old. Roger is 73. I am 53 and my son Jonathan is 33."

The previous generation may be retired but that is not to say they are not involved. Allen visits Hugh Sr. at his home in Pahokee once a week to bring him sweet corn.

"White sweet corn. He loves it. He has always been known as the 'White Corn King,'" laughed Allen.

