



Gleaning for Others

Where fresh food does not go to waste

Text and photos by Hannah Miller

The five men and one woman bent over rows of Haywood County peppers one bright morning last September were working so that others living near them might eat. As the sun shone on Cold Mountain looming above them, these volunteers for the Society of St. Andrew picked bucket after bucket of ripe bell peppers, a total of 48 bushels by the end of the morning.

"Bill Bumgardner and Johnny Rose got me into this," said retired waitress Jean Nunnery of Canton, referring to a fellow picker and an absent friend.

But there was seriousness, too. "I just like to help people," said Joe Cassada, retired as a North Carolina Department of Revenue officer for Haywood and Jackson counties. "I think that's our mission in life."

The pickers, all Haywood County retirees, were part of the national Society of St. Andrew's ongoing effort to gather produce left in fields after commercial harvest. What volunteers pick goes to feed the hungry in their areas.

In North Carolina in 2008, 689 farms hosted 11,270 gleaners, who picked 4.7 million pounds of produce ranging from beans to berries. Another 1.3 million pounds, largely potatoes, was contributed in truckloads by farmers clearing their warehouses or seeking an outlet for unsold goods. Farmers get a state tax credit for food donation, but more importantly, says Western North Carolina coordinator Bill Walker, their generosity "helps a lot of people."

In Haywood County that day, pickers besides Walker, Nunnery, Cassada and Rose included Fred Russell of Canton, retired from a manufacturing company, and Charles Williamson, director of faith-based nondenominational Rose of Sharon Mission. The mission truck, parked at the end of the rows while the gleaners picked, would take the day's haul to its Canton warehouse for distribution to individuals and hunger-fighting agencies.



Plates filled by the gleaners frequently include those of children at Broyhill Homes in Canton, homeless people served by the Open Door organization in Waynesville, diners at local churches' Community Kitchen in Canton, and food-bank clients of Haywood County Christian Ministry as well as Rose of Sharon.

The pickings were good that September morning in Haywood EMC member Skipper Russell's field. Rose of Sharon's truck driver, retired electrician Eddie Smathers, repeatedly emptied $\frac{3}{4}$ -bushel buckets loaded with peppers into the truck's bins. "We can fill a basket here in 15 minutes," observed Rose.

"A lot of people need it"

The gleaners had earlier picked cucumbers at the nearby Sandy Bottom Farm owned by Tom Clark, a Haywood EMC member. "We let some of my pickers go in and help," said Clark, who was hosting them for the first time.

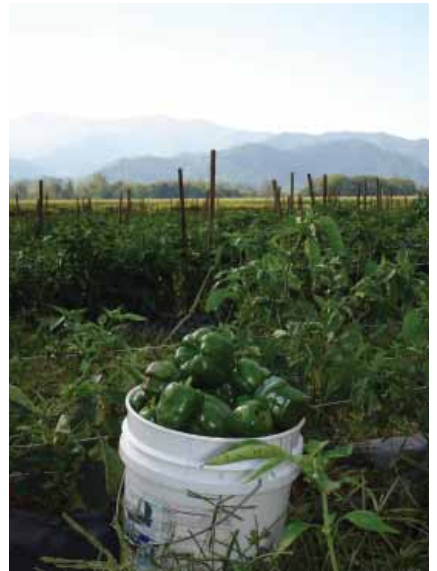
They were also looking forward

to coming back to pick tomatoes at Russell's "if the frost will hold off," said Walker. "Skipper Russell has been so good to us."

Russell, interviewed in his fields, explains that "I'm not one to waste food. It kills me to see produce go to waste if somebody can use it." And, he says, "With the economy the way it is right now, I know there are a lot of people really needing it."

Russell, who ships to grocers and wholesalers as Seasonal Produce Farms in Waynesville, says commercial harvest isn't feasible by the time the gleaners come. "When it's about picked over, the quality is not as good. The market declines. This time of year, the migrants are going to Florida. Plus, we've got the threat of frost."

At The Orchard in Altapass, alongside the Blue Ridge Parkway in Spruce Pine, owner Bill Carson invites the gleaners to pick up fallen apples as soon as the autumn color show subsides. He sells his apples through his on-site



Fields of Hope

At Fields of Hope, the Mars Hill farm of French Broad EMC members A.C. and Susie Honeycutt, everything grown is given away.

In 2009 that was more than 83,000 pounds of corn, beans, potatoes, cabbage and several other vegetables. It went to their fellow western North Carolinians, through hunger-fighting agencies like Asheville-based Manna FoodBank.

At one place that Manna delivers to, says A.C. Honeycutt, there were 150 families waiting one day for the truck to arrive. "The hunger need here is huge."

A regional manager of commercial banking for First Citizens Bank in Asheville, Honeycutt grew up on a farm and once ran a Christmas tree and shrubbery nursery. "I do most of the tractor driving," he says. Susie, retired from a teaching career at North Buncombe High School, organizes the volunteers, who come in droves to harvest after the Honeycutts have tilled, planted and cultivated the five acres of bottom land loaned to them by another French Broad EMC member.

Honeycutt says: "We have youth groups, college students, high school students, lots of people from our church (Mars Hill Baptist), friends, people passing by and seeing the sign we have up and saying, 'What are you doing here? We'd like to get involved.'"

The Honeycutts started Fields of Hope three years ago when, realizing how their own lives had been blessed, they sought a way to help others.

Now, he says, they know that "Today, tonight, tomorrow, there will be food on people's tables that would otherwise be going hungry."



gift shop/snack bar/country music hall and says that when the fall colors fade, so do sales. "So we're very happy to find uses for our apples," says Carson, a member of Rutherford EMC.

Whether picking from bushes or an orchard floor, the gleaners feel the effort in their muscles. At the end of the day, admits Cassada. "You're tired. That's for sure."

But they also feel it in their hearts. "I enjoy it," says Nunnery. "It's just helping."

"Pays good," quips Rose. "(You) get the heavenly blessing. Seems like the more we pick, the more He blesses us." 🍅

Hannah Miller is a Carolina Country contributing writer who lives in Charlotte.

Photos, left to right: Jean Nunnery of Canton goes pepper picking in Skipper Russell's field in the Bethel community near Canton.

Left behind at the end of the season, these peppers will help fill somebody's plate.

Cold Mountain looms in the background as Joe Cassada manages his overflowing buckets.

Fresh-picked peppers wait in the field to be loaded on Rose of Sharon Mission's truck.

Cold Mountain looks down on the Haywood County pepper field where Society of St. Andrew gleaners gather food for the hungry.

Want to Help?

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