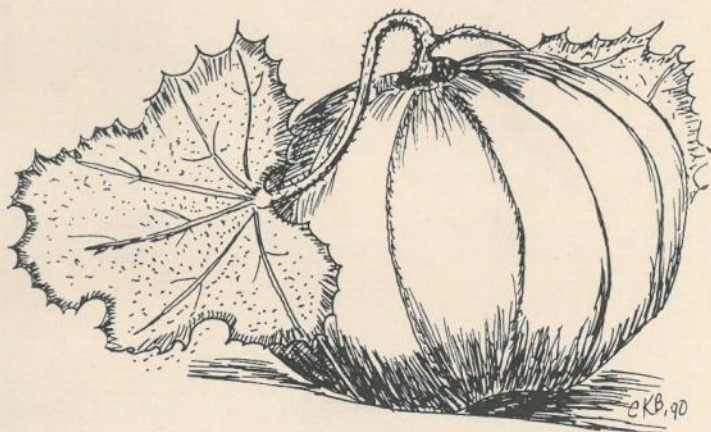


**Charles Bender
And
The Bender Melon Farm:
A Local History**

By

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**Cover drawing
by Constance Burns**

**Dedicated
To**

**William Taylor
The Lagrange Family
Abram Furman
The Winne Family
Sam Youmans
James Slingerland
The Vanderbilt Family
Alfred Le Vie
Peter Ten Eyck
The Appleby Family
The Tommells
Robert Allen
The Van Wie Family
The Houcks
And
All New Scotland Farmers
Who Tilled The Earth
Or
Tended Herds
With Care**

Introduction

In Howell and Tenney's history of Albany County published in 1886, Jacob Markle described the farmers of New Scotland as an "intelligent class." Indeed the farmers below the Helderbergs had learned early on how to come to terms with the temperamental soils they had settled upon. They grew magnificent crops of hay, oats and Indian corn, they mastered the cultivation of apples and plums, of peaches, hops and berries. And they made significant advances in the raising of livestock. Matthew Bullock introduced an excellent breed of short-horn cattle that were a boon to farmers everywhere and Joseph Hilton's prize-winning strain of Devon cows were sought by farmers far and wide.

But perhaps the best known of New Scotland farmers, at least during the first half of the twentieth century, was Charles Bender, his reputation derived from his famed cantaloupe, the Bender melon. Bender began experimenting with melon seeds about the time Howell and Tenney were preparing to publish their history book and by 1900 had developed a variety that was to have a major impact on melon growing in the United States.

While Bender's efforts were to put his New Scotland farm on the agricultural map, the New Scotlander was not the only farmer of that era trying to produce a distinct variety of muskmelon. Tapley, Enzie and Van Eseltine in their Vegetables of New York, Vol IV: The Cucurbits point out that in the decade between 1880 and 1890, more than 17 new varieties of muskmelon were developed by farmers across the country. The next decade was to see even greater abundance when nearly 30 new and worthwhile melon varieties hit the market. Charles Bender's melons were among this generation as were the celebrated Tip Top, Long Island Beauty and Paul Rose.

The first two decades of the 20th century saw the largesse continue with the introduction of several dozen additional varieties and between 1920 and 1935 more than two dozen new varieties of cantaloupe melon were introduced. Truly an agricultural bonanza.

In reviewing the history of the development of muskmelons, it becomes readily apparent that there was no one greatest variety. However, varieties such as Christiana, Netted Gem, Surprise and Fordhook brought radical changes to the cultivation and marketing of muskmelons in this country and abroad.

While wanting to give due credit to each and every melon that has added something special to the luscious tastes of summer, New Scotlanders and residents of Albany County feel a special pride for the "Bender" and for its native son who worked tirelessly to develop and market it. They think the name Bender sits atop the list of great summer melons.

In the following pages is told the story of the Bender melon, its singular slices offered to all who savor the juicy sweetness of a chilled summer melon, but especially to those old enough to have cut into the bountiful ribs of a Bender. They lived the times when these delicious globes were thought to be as essential to summer as a cool glass of water.

Fortuitous Beginnings

On an early August evening in 1905 Town of New Scotland melon farmer Charles Bender boarded the night boat at the port of Albany headed for New York City. Accompanying Bender on his journey were two barrels of his best looking, most aromatic cantaloupe melons which he called his "Golden Queens."

Five years earlier Bender had developed this distinctive variety of melon after seventeen years of persistent experimentation with some of the best melon varieties available at the time. He had marketed the melons upstate in select stores and markets, now he was on his way to the capital of American cuisine to peddle what would become one of the leading varieties of melons ever grown in New York State.

Bender was confident that these sweet, juicy melons with their thick orange flesh and prominent ribs, averaging seven pounds in weight, would win the hearts of every gourmet restauranteur and hotel owner in the big city. When the boat docked in the morning Bender rented a horse and wagon. He loaded the melons onto the wagon and, now a street peddler for the day, headed for the hotel and restaurant district.

He began knocking on doors. He went from restaurant to restaurant, from hotel to hotel, only to be turned down by every buyer. The stewards were either too busy to see a melon grower from Albany or they had already made arrangements for their season's supply of produce.

Bender's stop at Rector's at 1510 Broadway, then the pinnacle of haute cuisine in New York, proved to be no different. But Fate has a strange way of smiling on even the worst of situations. As Bender was making his way back to the wagon, he recognized one of the workers at Rector's as someone he knew from Albany, perhaps an acquaintance from the days when he worked as a grocery clerk at Coughtry's on the corner of Hamilton and Eagle Streets.

A conversation ensued. Bender told his new-found friend about

his unfortunate day thus far. He probably split one of his prized melons and gave a piece to this former acquaintance with great pride. He then talked his friend into getting Mr. Rector to try one of the melons. It's not known what the worker said to the famed restaurateur but shortly after Mr. Rector approached the wagon at the curb.

Charles Bender ran his knife along the rib of his ripest melon, lifted out a slice of the juicy orange flesh (carefully scraping the seeds into a container to bring back to the farm) and offered it to George Rector. As they say, the rest is history. "Send them in!" exclaimed Rector, "Tell the chef I want these melons for my breakfast in the morning!"

Soon the Golden Queens were a regular feature at Rector's and, through the influence of this noted epicurean, Bender's melons were soon added to the menus at the Waldorf-Astoria, the Savoy, the Lambs, and other fine hotels and restaurants in New York. The Belmont Hotel for years had a standing order for ten baskets a day, each basket weighing as much as fifty pounds. This hotel's bill alone for one month's melons ran as high as \$2,200.

The fame of the Bender melon spread further and further each year so that at one time in the history of the farm they were being sold internationally. They were shipped to England and Vera Cruz, Mexico and were said to be served even in some Parisian restaurants.

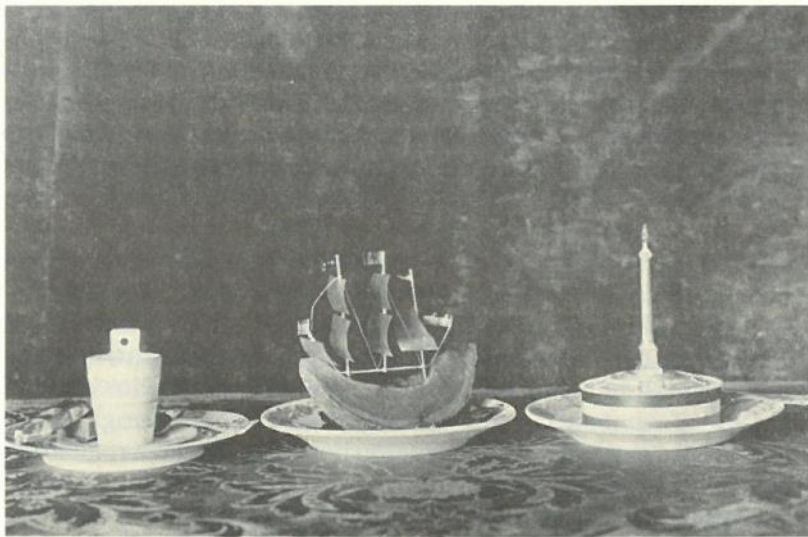
The Benders were exceptionally good keepers and shipped well in comparison to many of the other popular varieties of the day so that with the aid of shorthaul trucking, passenger ships down the Hudson, and the railroad, shipping became one of the most important aspects of Bender's trade. During the farm's peak years, melons were being shipped to as many as 33 states.

A large part of the orders for these melons came during the racing season at Saratoga. After the races visitors would flock to the farm and order crates of melons sent as gifts to friends and relatives across the country. The melons were packed in large wooden potato barrels and then wrapped in burlap. They were loaded onto one of the farm's large

market wagons and carted to the New Scotland railroad station.

Now in her eighties Margaret Jane Blessing (Mrs. Joseph Phibbs) recalls that, during her grammar school days, she and her classmates paused in the playground of New Scotland School No. 8 as the huge Bender wagon passed driven by the farm's foreman Mike Forester. Blessing says what a wondrous sight it was to see Bender's beautiful brown horses move slowly down New Scotland Road.

Of course not all the melons were shipped great distances. A large part of the farm's sales was local. The melons were sold to Albany restaurants and stores. For a good many years they were featured at Keeler's restaurant. A peek at Keeler's breakfast menu in the mid-1920s shows a slice of Bender melon at the top of the menu selling for 35 cents. Keeler's continued to feature Benders as part of its summer



Bender melons had attained such a status that they were chosen to be the first course of a grand banquet at the Hotel Astor marking the tri-centennial of Henry Hudson's discovery of the North River. In the center is a ceramic replica of that course which was given to guests as a banquet favor.

fare even into the early 1940s when William Taylor had taken over operation of the farm from Charles Bender.

Retail sales of Benders were limited to no more than one or two places. One of those was Banfill's, a fancy grocery store located as 293 State Street. And Margaret Jane Blessing recalls seeing slices of the Golden Queens being sold at Hosler's ice cream parlor at 193 Lark Street topped off with a scoop of ice cream.

The melons were also sold retail at the farm. Many from the cities would take a drive to the farm situated at the foothills of the Helderbergs for fresh air and a chance to get a taste of one of summer's great delights. On a given Sunday afternoon during the melon season as many as 150 cars could be seen parked along the road to the farm while buyers waited on line.

Those who bought the best Golden Queens had to be people of some means for Benders sold at about \$9. a basket and, because of their size, each basket contained only about seven or eight melons. In the prices of the late 1980s that translates into about five or six dollars per melon.

For those of lesser means who yearned for a taste of the succulent Benders, affordable culls or seconds were also sold at the farm at about half the price of the best quality melons. These melons were every bit as good in flavor as the so-called number ones but they were either too small or not the right shape for the more elite market. Regardless of what customers would pay, a line of watering mouths could be seen stretching from the melon house up the farm road to the Voorheesville Road (Route 85A) just north of the junction of Route 85.

As those who came to the farm to buy melons were to tell, one of whom was a young William Taylor 10 or 12 years old, the melons were sliced open, the seeds scraped out, the halves put back together, and the melons handed to the customer. The saving of the seeds was close to a sacred ritual for Charles Bender for they were the source of his continuing livelihood.

The Seeds And Their Genealogy

Whenever the sale of Charles Bender's melons is discussed by those who remember the farm, told and retold is the story of how the melons were cut in half and the seeds scraped out for saving. Charles Bender was covetous of his seeds, even secretive, and always careful to get those from the melons he considered the cream of the crop.

Each fall, when the seeds for next year's crop were finally collected, sorted and graded, they were stored for the winter in safe deposit vaults. Moneywise the seeds were said to be valued at about \$25,000., an important consideration for any businessman. But for Charles Bender, farmer, they were also the source of his life's work and love of growing.

A better understanding of Bender's seemingly paranoid attitude toward his seeds can be had if we keep in mind that these were the days before hybrids and seed patents. The seeds of Bender's melons, as most seeds of the day, were open-pollinated. This means that anyone who got the seed could grow the same variety of melon as Bender and claim the variety as his own. The farmer or seedsman who had spent years developing a unique variety would receive no compensation or royalty, if you will, for the work he had done.

Bender's concerns, therefore, were well founded in the then current reality. As Robert Becker of the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, New York relates, there was a considerable amount of pirating of seed in those days. A grower would get hold of seeds he liked, grow them for a year or two and then give the variety his own name.

In the era of open-pollinated seeds, those who wished to grow a variety of melon that was new or distinct in some way did so through a process of selection year after year. Seeds were saved from the best melons each year and planted the following year. The farmer defined "best" as those melons that had the most desirable characteristics. By following the selection process year after year the most desirable characteristics were selected in and the least desirable characteristics eliminated.

This is precisely the process Charles Bender followed in the development of his Golden Queens. He began experimenting with melon seeds in 1884 when he was 23 years old and continued to experiment for the next 17 years before he was satisfied that he had developed a variety of melon that was distinct.

Bender began growing melons on the family farm which he leased from his father. At the time most of the farm's acreage was planted to hay, oats and Indian corn. Newspaper accounts several decades later said that, with the planting of the melon, the farm was put to better use. The first year's crop netted \$196. considerably more per acre than anything else grown on the farm.

Experimentation with the cantaloupe was begun by Bender using a variety of seed known as "Surprise." This explains why in older seed catalogues, Bender's melons are not listed as Golden Queens but as Bender's Surprise or just plain Benders. Interestingly, no where in the scientific or marketing literature is there found a reference to Bender melons as Golden Queens.

Surprise was well known to Bender from the start, not only because of its exceedingly great popularity but because it was introduced by the Price-Knickerbocker Seed Company which was located in Albany where Bender was working at the time. It was G. H. Price, seed grower and co-owner of the seed company, who was responsible for the selection of Surprise and its introduction in 1876. What is strange about the introduction of Surprise is that Price left no record of its parentage, strange because most of the celebrated varieties of the time have well known parentage. Later we will offer a conjecture that might shed some light on the mystery that surrounds Surprise's origin.

But, whatever the true parentage of Surprise, it was from the beginning a winner. Tapley, Enzie and Eseltine in The Vegetables of New York, Part IV: The Cucurbits, the most important reference work on melons since its publication in 1937, call Surprise, "The greatest contribution to the list of melon varieties of that period." Seedsmen

Parker and Ward in their 1886 catalogue characterized Surprise as "the finest melon grown."

Bender began his experimentation, therefore, with the cream of the crop, if you will. Surprise was described not only as sweet and juicy in taste but as an economic boon to farmers as well. A glance at the color page of the 1879 seed catalogue of Price-Knickerbocker (many seed catalogues of that era had only one or two color pages inside) reveals testimonials from over 50 farmers and gardeners about Surprise's superiority over all other varieties of melon.

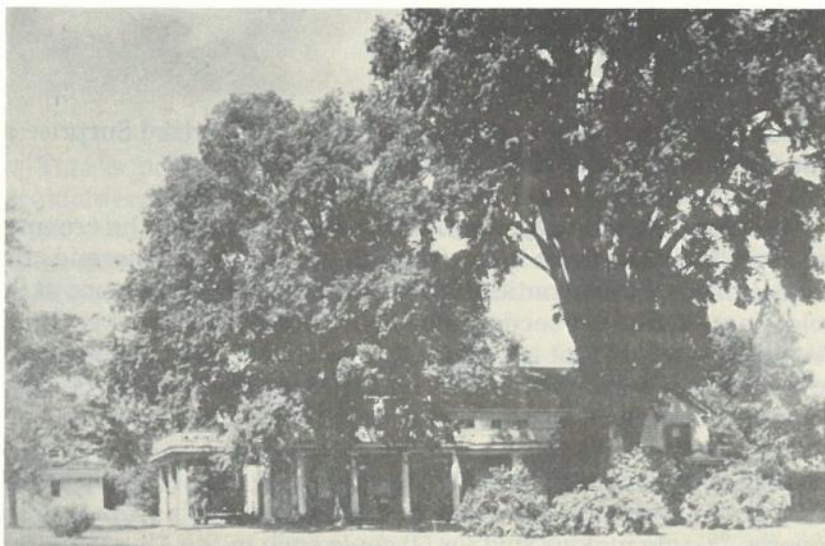
And, more importantly for the farmer eking out a living in a fairly short growing season, a blurb on the inside cover of this same edition reports, "Single melons sold for 50 cents each in the Albany market early in the season, and later for 35 cents when ordinary melons brought only 5 to 8 cents each."

If Bender's Golden Queens were of the highest quality, it was due in large part to the quality stock that served as their basis. But Bender, in his nearly two decades of experimentation, was to improve the general quality of Surprise in sweetness, aroma, flavor and size. Furthermore, Bender's version of Surprise could be eaten right down to the outer rind which was only a quarter of an inch thick.

As some students are known to surpass their teachers in knowledge and wisdom, so Bender's Surprise was to surpass the original Surprise. In 1917 the Joseph Harris Seed Company offered Bender's Surprise as a strain of melon superior not only to Surprise but to all other melons it offered at the time.

The Harris catalogue of 1917 reads, "We never raised finer muskmelons than Bender's Surprise." And Harris' wholesale price list for the following year says, "We never had a lot of melons that were uniformly as good as the Benders." Joseph Harris, retired president of the Harris Seed Company, said in 1986 that, "Bender did a remarkable job with this melon and it was the mainstay with us for many years; in fact until fusarium wilt began to be a problem in this area."

What made the Bender so very popular with truck farmers was



A view of the Bender farmhouse girded by magnificent elm trees.

that it could withstand longhaul shipping. The fruit was so hard and the flesh so firm, as Harris' 1918 price list pointed out, that it kept in good condition for a week after picking when ripe, and much longer if picked a little green. But what made the Benders even more exceptional was that they improved in quality after picking. It was said that Mr. Bender shipped the melons three days after picking so that they'd arrive in perfect condition, having improved in flavor from when they were picked off the vine.

We do not know what Bender did to improve his original seed but newspaper accounts of the Bender farm written in 1933 report that Bender began experimenting with two varieties, Surprise and Marblehead, the one noted for flavor, the other for shipping.

Clearly Surprise is the variety known for flavor, but Marblehead? A second look at The Vegetables of New York, Part IV: The Cucurbits shows a listing for Marblehead but in the squash not melon section. And true enough this Marblehead is known for its shipping qualities but squash and melons, coming from two different cucurbit families, cannot cross pollinate.

A closer look at the same reference work, however, enables us to conjecture that Bender crossed Surprise with one of the melons being

offered by the James Gregory Seed Company of Marblehead, Massachusetts. Gregory was experimenting with and selling the seeds of a number of different melons at the time and it was not uncommon to refer to a given variety by the name of the town in which it was first grown or in which its primary seed company was located. The variety Irondequoit is a good example, named because it was first grown by a gardener in Irondequoit, New York. Incidentally, this Irondequoit also had Surprise as its parent.

What Gregory was offering at his Marblehead Company at the time was a variety called Miller's Cream. This had an orange flesh and is similar enough to the Bender in other respects for us to surmise that this might have been the other variety which Bender used to develop his Golden Queens.

But there is a relatively unknown story that sheds light on the path we're travelling here, a story found in a family history of one of the earliest families of Slingerlands, the Colonel James Hendrick family of Font Grove (now called Slingerlands). The self-published volume of history Relations, Recollections and Reflections, was written by the Colonel's daughter Anne (Hendrick) Newhart toward the end of her life.

It is worth pointing out, before talking about the contents of the history, that the Hendrick Font Grove farm ran from present-day Font Grove Road to the Becker Farm, that is, where the Auberge-Suisse restaurant stands today, and abutted the Bender farm on its northeasterly side. And also, that Colonel James Hendrick himself was a well-known grower of the time, of flowers, fruit trees, nursery stock and vegetables, much of which he started in his twenty 15 feet x 100 feet greenhouses. The section of his farm under such cultivation extended over six acres.

Toward the end of her family history Mrs. Newhart says in an aside that, before ending her account, she wishes to share an interesting story about Charles Bender, the now famous melon farmer. She tells how Colonel James Hendrick had a friend J. V. L. Pruyn of Albany (Mrs. Newhart's memory seems to fail her here for it was not J. V. L. but Robert Hewson Pruyn she had in mind) who during his service as Minister to Japan (1861-1865) used to send rather interesting gifts to the Colonel periodically.

Knowing the Colonel's interest in horticulture, on one such occasion Pruyne sent melon seeds which, "When planted and grown," Mrs. Newhart says, "proved to be a beautiful gold color inside, instead of the green melons we were familiar with."

When Mrs. Newhart refers to "green melons," she is describing the strain of melons most popular at the time and most widely known. Yellow or orange-fleshed melons were neither very popular nor very well known, coming to America's attention only about a decade before.

Mrs. Newhart goes on to say that these melons were so good that the family shared them with their friends and neighbors, one of whom was a young Charles Bender, at the time working as a grocery clerk at Coughtry's in Albany. Bender, Newhart says, asked the Colonel if he might have some of the seeds that were not being used by the family. For a year or two Bender tested these seeds, having made an arrangement with the Colonel to start his seedlings in the Colonel's Font Grove greenhouse, an arrangement that would continue for some time.

Here we have one of the more knowledgeable horticulturists in Albany County and its environs coming upon a new variety of melon in both color and taste. Certainly Hendrick would have been familiar with other yellow and orange varieties of the day (e. g. Christiana) and perhaps have grown them if they were thought to taste as good as the more familiar green-fleshed varieties such as Nutmeg and Citron.

It is here that we can return to our conjecture about the parentage of Surprise. Hendrick received the seeds from Pruyne during the latter's stay in Japan, sometime in the early 1860s. Price, the Albany seedsman who developed and introduced the variety Surprise, began growing his seed in 1868 (in a 1900 catalogue he says he began growing the seed 32 years earlier) and brought out Surprise eight years later.

The Price-Knickerbocker Seed Company was located at 80 State Street in Albany and Hendrick's law office at 36 North Pearl Street, just

around the corner. Because of the proximity of their offices and their mutual interest in growing and because Price-Knickerbocker was a major seed company in the city, Price and Hendrick must have been well known to each other. In fact it is quite likely that Hendrick gave Price one of his melons to taste, excited about his new find from Japan. And Price, equally excited about the new discovery, began to grow a crop of melons from the seed and initiated the development of Surprise from the seeds that came from Font Grove.

Conventional wisdom has Surprise coming from a Japanese variety, one called White Japan. This, also an orange-fleshed melon, was thought to have been brought to this country by a member of Admiral Perry's Japanese Expedition of 1853-1854. Did Price get this variety or something similar from Hendrick and cross it with Sill's Hybrid (Surprise's other parent and also sold by Gregory of Marblehead, Massachusetts) naming its offspring Surprise because of the great surprise it turned out to be, a melon that many would soon consider the best available anywhere.

Whatever the full story of the origin of the Bender and its lineage, after a time the name Bender became synonymous with muskmelon in the Albany area. Not the name Golden Queen but "Benders" became generic for melon in the same way Xerox has for copy machines and Kleenex for tissues. Before buying a melon, people would first ask the seller whether it was a Bender. Farmers who brought melons to market told how their melons might be every bit as good as the Benders in taste and flavor, indeed melons grown from Bender seed, but would lose a sale when they responded they were not Benders. It is said that farmers soon learned to say they too were selling Benders and sold out their trucks in no time.

To some extent the same holds true today. At roadside stands and local markets signs still read "Bender Melons" although no Benders are grown locally. Some look-alikes are grown in New Jersey and shipped upstate half ripe, often turning out to be Harris' Superstar, a variety that looks very much like the old Benders so that local farmers feel justified calling them by the familiar trademark.

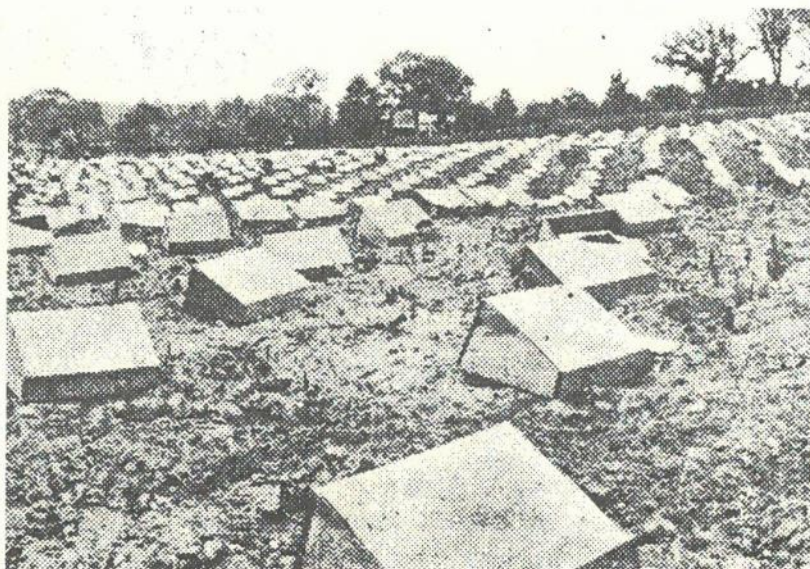
Many of the top hybrids offered by seed companies today look very

much like the Benders of old because Charles Bender's Golden Queens were used as the basis for their development. Bender seeds were used, for example, to develop the Deconinck Bender, a variety which Albert Deconinck developed about 1925 and which was later offered by the Harris Seed Company. Wilbur Scott, a retired seedsman from Harris said that the Deconinck was used by Harris to develop its Superstar which explains why farmers are able to sell this variety as Benders.

Often enough it has been suggested that the currently famed Hand melon of Saratoga County also traces its parentage back to the Bender. But the late Aaron Hand said such was not the case. Hand said that he and his father grew Benders in the late thirties and early forties before switching to Harris' Harvest Gold, a melon they both considered to be the greatest melon they ever grew. The Hands gave up growing Benders according to Aaron Hand because they lost their greatness, unable to withstand the onslaught of various wilts. Moreover, Hand noted that he and his father both thought the Benders were much overrated.

But to conclude that the Hand melon grown today is not related to the Bender is only half a truth. First of all, we need to point out that there is no such variety or strain as a Hand melon. The Hand family grows mainly Harris' Gold Star and Saticoy. What they deem to be the best of the crop they stamp with their little red trademark hand and sell at premium prices. But to what degree can both Gold Star and Saticoy trace their original parentage to the famed Golden Queens of Bender since Harris offered all three varieties? Harris' hybridizers could have taken those characteristics from the Bender which they wanted and crossed them into their more disease resistant varieties such as Gold Star and Saticoy.

That the Bender melon had seen better days was confirmed even by William Taylor who bought the Bender farm and grew the Golden Queens under the tutelage of Charles Bender. Taylor, who said he was so excited to be a part of the Bender tradition, suffered a severe blow when Cornell plantsmen told him there were much better melons on the market than the outdated Bender.



Miniature greenhouses called "lights" were used to cover plants in the fields when first set out so as to maintain original greenhouse conditions as long as possible.

There is one final story we can add here related to the development and marketing of the Bender melon. Charles Bender was not the only noted melon grower in the Albany area. Henry Meyer of Selkirk also grew fine melons as did his neighbor Charles Baker of Grand View Farm. In fact, Baker was Bender's arch rival at market, Bender reportedly saying that he always raced to get to market before Baker.

Charles Baker also sold melons in New York City and abroad at the same time that Bender did and offered a variety many say was every bit as good as the Bender. Understandably so, because Baker also developed his variety "Baker" from the much heralded Surprise.

Grant Thorn, Charles Baker's grandson who currently lives at Grand View Farm where Baker grew his melons, said he heard from an old-timer who stopped by one day that at one time Baker and Bender grew melons together but had a feud and went their separate ways. The old-timer informed Thorn he was told this by his father who had once worked on the Baker farm.

But, as Thorn said, it's no longer possible to validate any of these

stories. He added, however, that his great aunt, Jeanette Douglas, was wont to tell with an air of pride and without any evidence, that Bender got started after stealing his seeds from Baker.

Melon Cultivation And Farm Labor

It's not known what arrangements Charles Bender made with the Joseph Harris Seed Company to sell his melon seed but, beginning in 1917, the Harris Seed Company of Rochester began offering Bender's Surprise to its customers as a variety superior to any it had offered previously. Selah Harris, Joseph Harris' father, had made the deal with Bender who up to that time refused to sell his seed to anyone. Of course, any seed company might avail itself of open-pollinated varieties the way an individual might pirate seed but Joseph Harris said, "It was not considered good business or ethics to pick up another man's work so I am sure Father paid Mr. Bender for the use of the variety and probably also a royalty on subsequent sales."

Most likely Bender was able to part with his seed because he had developed such a mystique about the melons grown on his farm that he had few fears of losing his loyal clientele to others who might begin growing his melons. There were Benders grown by Bender and Benders grown by others. In fact Bender used to say that having the seed was only part of the story. He was referring to the special methods he used for growing the melons, methods that he kept to himself and considered to be a trade secret. Newspaper accounts of the time invariably put forth the question whether Bender would die taking his secret methods to the grave with him or would someday pass them on to someone else.

Were there secret methods? When William Taylor, who bought the farm from Bender and grew melons with Bender, hears this question, he chuckles. "Secrets?" Taylor muses, "There was only one secret. 'Baby them in every way possible.' Bender had no kids. These melons were like his kids."

If there was something more specific to the notion of secret methods other than "Baby them" it could be said to include the use of

hog manure as a fertilizer. Bender believed that hog manure was the best fertilizer for growing melons, in part he said, because hog manure did not burn the vines. It might be noted incidentally that hog manure was readily available, for hogs were bred for pork on the farm.

Another of Bender's so-called secrets had to do with hand cultivation of the melon plants. Since melon vines grow close to the surface of the ground, Bender used to consider hand weeding a necessity, work that was known as stoop or squatting labor. In the beginning of the season, when the vines were young and the tendrils could be trained inward, a cultivator was used to go between the rows but, once the plants began to spread, all weeding was done on hands and knees.

Of course, this was an era when most farming in this country was still labor-intensive and the use of herbicides was not what it is today. Even so, Bender treated each plant and each melon with the utmost care. This is what he meant when he said that having the seed was only part of the story.

There are no records from the Bender farm to indicate how many people worked on the farm during its peak years or during the peak of a given season, but Bender did have a foreman to take charge of the workers in Michael Forester. Forester was a very efficient, quiet man who knew how to handle both workers and customers. William Taylor remarked that he hardly spoke but when he did, he manifested a very funny, dry, Irish wit.

With the tending of the crops, the sorting and shipping of the melons and the harvesting of other farm produce, Forester must have had a crew of at least a half dozen men. Some of those workers lived in rooms prepared for them in the rear of the Bender house and others lived in a small shack several hundred feet behind the main house.

In the early twentieth century it was possible for farmers to have relatively large crews because labor was cheap, particularly during the years of the Great Depression. Bender was once heard saying that he could "hire a worker for \$1. a day and his chewing tobacco."

But a dollar a day was not far off what farm hands were being paid generally at the time. A look at some of the extant wage records from the Charles Baker farm in Selkirk shows daily wages paid to workers to be about a dollar a day as well. Henry Meyer who worked on the Baker farm one summer said he was paid a dollar a day but quit and went to work at another farm that was paying \$1.50 a day.

For Bender at least, a good part of his summer labor force came from workers at General Electric which at the time closed down for the summer. It was a situation tailored to Bender's needs, workers needing seasonal work and Bender needing seasonal workers. It seems, however, that neighbors worked on the farm as well. Lois (Wands) Herrick, longtime resident of New Scotland, tells that her father, Randall, helped on the farm during the summer months as did her two brothers, all of whom enjoyed the work very much.

A story is told about Bender and his farmhands that bears repeating here. It has to do with the old hotel that stood across the road from the Bender farm on the Schoharie Turnpike (Route 85 or New Scotland Road). Some town residents such as Lois Herrick remember the hotel with great fondness, for upstairs there was a large auditorium in which square and round dances were held on Saturday nights.

But for Charles Bender, the hotel was a scourge because after the work day ended, his farmhands moseyed across the street to visit the bar inside. More times than Bender wished to hear, the workers got drunk and were unable to work the following day. New Scotland farmer Sam Youmans says the situation became so frustrating to Bender that the farmer finally bought the hotel and turned it into apartments. This might have helped the housing situation in New Scotland but it seems to have done little to alleviate Bender's woes. His workers simply moved their trade to a tavern up the road in New Salem.

When it came to the cultivation of his melons Bender had to be concerned not only with the elements above but also with soil conditions. With the clay and hardpan soil that is so characteristic of the fields below the Helderbergs, there were many spots in the fields that flooded after heavy rains so that a wagon or tractor would easily

get stuck trying to get through. Drainage on some parts of the fields was so poor that Bender had one man who did nothing else but drain water off the ditches after it rained. Pools of standing water were avoided thereby reducing the possibility that the plants would succumb to wilts and other diseases fostered by moist conditions.

On the other hand when drought conditions persisted, Bender had to bring water to the plants. He transported the water in a 300-gallon round tank that was pulled through the fields on a stone boat. This setup remained the standard piece of watering equipment on the farm for years. From the large tank workers dipped water by hand and watered the plants individually. After the tank was depleted, the water level was replenished with rain water. Bender had set up a rather elaborate system to catch water from the roofs of the various buildings on the property so little was wasted.

The care that Bender showered on his melons began in the very beginning of the growing season when the plants were set out in the fields. Over each plant was placed a small coldframe-like structure called a "light." Each of these frames or lights, measuring 18" x 12" x 16" had a pane of glass across the top that was slid off during the day when the sun beat down and put back later in the afternoon to capture heat for the night. During the chilly nights of spring these structures provided warmth for the plants as well as for the soil, vine crops requiring warm soil to grow well. Such a measure would increase a farmer's chances of getting an earlier crop thereby enhancing his chances of getting higher prices at both retail and wholesale markets.

Even though the Bender melon shipped extremely well, Charles Bender was constantly trying to devise ways to increase the lifespan of his product thereby making it more marketable. On the second floor of the barn across from the main farmhouse he built a huge refrigerator for keeping the melons fresher while awaiting shipment. The walls of the refrigerated part of the barn had been insulated with eight to ten inches of sawdust that was poured into the framing. There was also a 20-ton ice machine in the barn for making ice to ship the melons in.

Bender had hoped that the ice machine would enable him to ship

his melons chilled thereby maintaining their freshness during extremely warm periods, but this never proved feasible. Part of the reason might have been that ice can have an adverse effect on the sugar content of melons. As Aaron Hand said, with ice the life of a melon is prolonged but cooling inhibits the natural ripening of the melon thereby reducing its sugar content sometimes by 10 percent.

Other Celebrities

While Bender's Golden Queens were the most notable celebrity on his New Scotland farm, they were not the only one nor were they the only crop cultivated for market. Bender also grew and sold a small white turnip that became renowned for its delicate flavor, decidedly more delicate than that of the larger purple varieties. These turnips which were marketed as Bender's Famous Turnips were sold in fancy grocery stores in the city of Albany and even in some New York City hotels and restaurants where Bender sold his melons.

It's interesting how tastes change over time for, when William Taylor took over the farm in 1939, he also began growing the white turnips that Bender had such great success with over the years. But Taylor relates that he couldn't sell them anywhere. He went to all the places where Bender had sold them only a decade earlier but the buyers wanted only the newer varieties of blue top turnips.

Bender also grew fancy watermelons on the farm which he marketed as Bender's Ivory Queen Watermelons. The Ivory Queens had a white flesh that many believed to be much sweeter than the more familiar red-fleshed varieties.

Aaron Hand was surprised to hear that Bender grew such melons because, on his Saratoga County farm, he grew a similar melon but with a yellow flesh. Hand said his workers were always recounting how much sweeter the yellow-fleshed melons were than their red-fleshed counterparts. But Hand added that such was not the case because periodically he gave some of the workers a blindfold test and four out of five times the red melons were picked as sweeter. Despite

such evidence, Hand said the myth persisted that the yellow melons were better tasting than the red.

On the Bender farm wheat and corn and hay were also grown as field crops. Surprising to some is that wheat was one of the finest crops grown on the farm even during the tenure of William Taylor. And, as already mentioned, hogs were raised for pork and slaughtered on the farm. Bender raised beautiful pork, his brood sows fed on a strict corn diet. Bender himself would dress the hogs whose butchered halves were often enough seen hanging in windows of some of Albany's finest markets.

There was also a large flock of chickens on the farm so eggs were sold as well. Bender's care for the whole of his work could be seen even in the hen house he built for his chickens. On the south side of the coop was a large, beautifully cut, wooden overhang that enabled the chickens to remain outside when it rained or snowed or when the sun was particularly hot. The coop was not only functional but an artistic piece of work as well.

Bees were also an integral part of the farm's life. They were raised not only for their honey but to insure good pollination among the melon plants. They were said to be brought into the greenhouse even in the early part of the season. Early in his farming career Bender started his seedlings in Colonel Hendrick's greenhouses later Goldring's on Font Grove Road, but after he built his own greenhouse on his farm he started his plants there.

These were the days before mass-produced peat pots and jiffy pellets so Bender, as most melon farmers of the time, started his seed in small clods of grass measuring 10 to 15 cm square. The seed was sown in the soil that clung to the dead roots of the clump. The clump was placed grass-side down on the greenhouse bench and watered. When it came time to transplant the melon plants in the field, the whole clod was transplanted.

Bender's earliest crop of the year was geraniums. These were begun in the greenhouse in February so they'd be ready for market in

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BENDER MELON FARM

MR. *Della Relyea*

SLINGERLANDS, R. D., N. Y.

May 20 1925

BOUGHT OF **CHARLES BENDER**
ORIGINATOR AND GROWER OF

**BENDER'S GOLDEN QUEEN MUSKMELONS, IVORY QUEEN WATERMELONS
FAMOUS BENDER TURNIPS**

SOLD ONLY DIRECT
FROM THE FARM

ORDER NO.

W. U. TELEGRAPH
SLINGERLANDS, N. Y.

<i>2 bu wheat</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>—</i>
<i>20 bu Pork @ 17¢</i>	<i>340</i>	
<i>Rec'd Payment</i>	<i>6110</i>	
<i>C. Bender</i>		

A bill of sale marking a transaction between Charles Bender and his across-the-road neighbor Della Relyea.

time for Decoration Day. There was a large furnace and heating system in the greenhouse to keep the plants warm even on the coldest nights of late winter. When the geranium plants were ready and brought outside for market, the melon seeds were begun. About 6,000 seeds were started, enough to plant five or six acres, about eleven or twelve hundred plants to the acre. Once the plants were set out in the field they were sprayed every ten days until harvest with a water-based insecticide to protect them from predator insects. The large water tank spoken of earlier had spray booms at the bottom through which the liquids were released.

During an extended period of damp weather, each melon was lifted up and placed on a wooden plate to protect it from the ground. On occasion three cobblestones, that are so common in the fields below the Helderbergs, were placed together and the melon set on top of these. The melons were made less susceptible to various wilts and did not develop a "white side" which would make them ineligible for the higher-priced hotel and restaurant trade.

Not enough can be said then about the quality of care Charles Bender gave his plants. His secret method was care, whether it manifested itself in the beautiful market wagon he used to cart his produce to market or in the produce itself. Some farmers were known for a tendency to "top off" their baskets of produce, putting the best melons or turnips or tomatoes toward the top of a basket to mask the lesser quality goods underneath. But such was never the practice of Charles Bender; everything was top quality whether visible to the eye or not.

For example, in their rush to get their melons to market early, some farmers used to stamp down the vines with their feet. While such a practice might save time, it caused the melons to drop off two to three days early. The melons would look ripe but would still be green inside. Bender never allowed this practice, waiting the extra two to three days until the melons were at their peak of ripeness. He'd then cut each vine with a knife five or six inches above where it joined the melon. He did not want the vine torn off at the melon because the melon would then exude a juice which he believed diminished the quality of the melon. The piece of vine that remained

was tied in a knot to prevent disease from spreading down the vine to the melon.

William Taylor tells the story that while he and Bender were working in the barn one day sorting melons, Bender was putting melons into the culls pile that looked too good to Taylor to be discarded. He suggested to Bender that they take some of these melons and sell them to one of the A&Ps in the area. Taylor says Bender responded excitedly, "Nothing leaves this farm that isn't first class!"

Taylor adds that it was about this time that knotty-pine wood became fashionable for decorating the interior of homes. When the topic of this style of wood was brought up in conversation, Bender was quick to respond that none of the boards in his house had any knots and none ever would.

"The Great Melon Eat"

Anyone who has worked on a farm knows how unrelenting the work can be at times and how the daily routine can test one's endurance. Oftentimes a yearning develops for a diversion, any diversion, to break the monotony of the day or season. Sometimes a broken fence or a flat tire on a vehicle will do. In the summer of 1917 the Bender farm had such a diversion, a happening unequalled in the annals of Albany County agriculture, what was referred to in the newspapers as "the great melon eat."

This happening occurred during World War I when Mrs. Elizabeth Bender was one of the leaders of the Red Cross chapter in the Town of New Scotland. All Red Cross chapters were asked to raise funds for supplies in Europe. The Albany County Chapter was in the midst of such a drive and the local chapters were asked to follow suit. Mrs. Bender suggested that the New Scotland chapter raise money by selling slices of the famed Bender melons topped with ice cream. Her suggestion was received without qualification.

The melon eat was scheduled to take place on the grounds of the

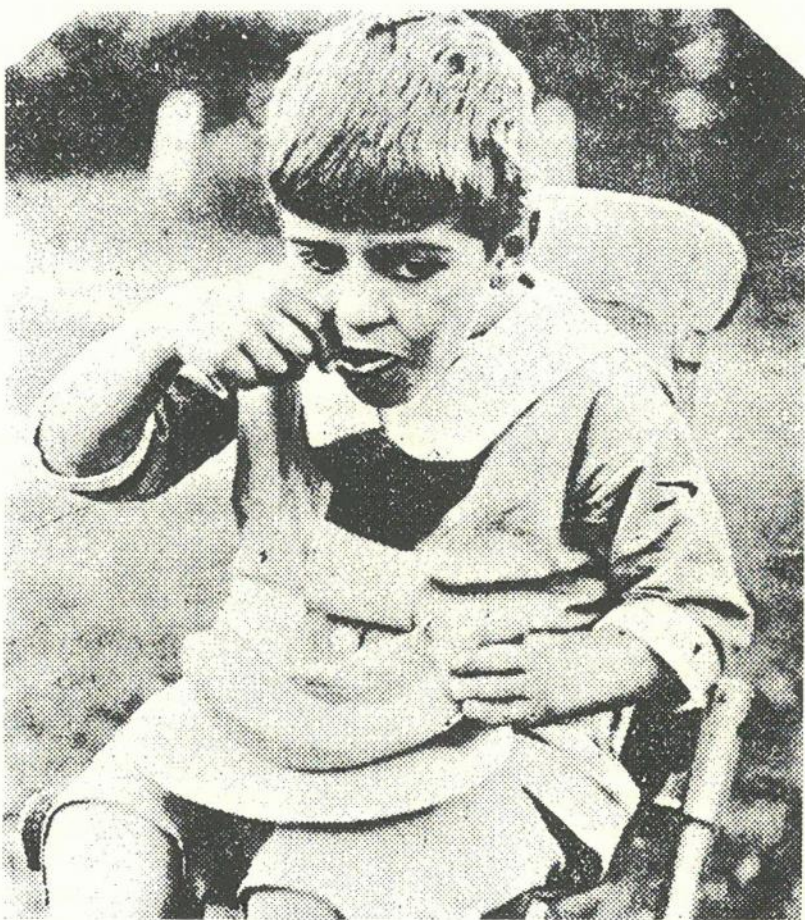
Bender farm on Wednesday September 26, 1917 from three o'clock in the afternoon to nine at night. When the day arrived two thousand people showed up from every corner of the tri-city area to eat melons by the slice topped off with a scoop of ice cream or to buy a crate of the famed Benders to take home.

All afternoon a steady stream of cars filed down the dusty road that leads to the farm and were parked in the fields near the house. For many of these visitors, this was a rare opportunity not only to see and visit the much heralded farm but to purchase melons that at the time were said to be sold retail in only one store in Albany.

During the afternoon, scores of people entered the large packing house where the melons were brought in from the fields, sorted, graded and scrubbed. They got a chance to see the large refrigerator boxes where the melons were stored before being shipped, as well as the homemade elevator that Bender himself built to raise the melon crates from the first to the second floor where the refrigerator was located.

For the occasion the whole farm was set out in a festive atmosphere. The yard was decorated with banners and streamers of red, white and blue. A big red cross lighted by electric globes at night stood at the entrance to the private road leading to the farm and another stood at the turn of the road near the house. Along the buildings and in the trees and outlining fences were strung thousands of small red, white and blue incandescent lights that became a brilliant sight after dark. The Municipal Gas Company had come the day before to make special arrangements for this light show.

At one end of the lawn was a large serving table with a big mound of the farm's ripest melons which Mr. Bender had sorted personally. Across from these tables on the lawn were crates of melons stacked high and wide which visitors could buy and take home. Throughout the rest of the lawn were situated other tables shaped in the form of the Red Cross emblem covered with white linen tablecloths that were embossed with the familiar red cross. Grouped around the tables



A youthful Bob Wiley enjoys a sizeable slice of Bender melon at the "great melon eat."

were dozens of camp chairs filled with visitors busily eating big juicy portions of the famed melons.

As visitors arrived, a mixture of Bender and Red Cross hospitality awaited them. More than a dozen Red Cross workers helped serve the melon slices while farm hands helped customers load crates of melons into their parked cars.

The younger Red Cross workers were young girls from the neighborhood whom Mrs. Bender had asked to help serve. Lois Herrick, who was ten at the time, remembers the event with great clarity, stating that the affair was one of the most exciting days of her childhood. These young helpers, as well as the adult workers, were dressed in the striking Red Cross uniform of white set off by a single scarlet cross.

Part of the festivities included a speech at eight o'clock that night by Dr. John Finley, the State Commissioner of Education and chairman of the Albany County Chapter of the Red Cross. Finley spoke to a crowd of about 500 who had gathered around the speaker's platform that was lit up in small red and white lights.

After the Commissioner's remarks, in accordance with a suggestion made by Mr. Finley and Mr. Peter Ten Eyck, Mr. Bender announced to the audience that he would send some of the famous melons to President Wilson who was the president of the American Red Cross Society. Three cheers rose up from the audience gathered around the platform for Mrs. and Mr. Bender.

Even those who were not present got into the act by asking neighbors of the Benders to buy melons for them and bring them into the city the following day. Two townspeople who came to work on machines said they had already been asked to bring in sixteen bushels.

The event was considered a great success not only socially but financially as well. Six hundred dollars was raised which went toward the purchase of a Red Cross ambulance which was sent to France the following spring.

From The Bender To The Taylor Farm

Charles Bender was a quiet, self-confident man who stayed mostly to himself. On the farm he was a tireless worker who never lost interest in growing melons. Except for winter vacations in Florida later in life, Bender spent most of his days on the farm.

But with the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1931 and old age fast approaching (he was then 70 years old) Charles Bender sought retirement from the grueling daily schedule of farming. And since there were no Bender children to carry on the tradition, his retirement saw the fields and buildings begin to fall into decay.

In the mid-1930s, William Taylor, a dairyman in Glenmont and owner of the Glendale Farm Dairy, approached Charles Bender with a proposition to buy his farm. At the time Taylor was interested in getting out of the dairy business in order to devote his full attention to raising cows. But Bender was reluctant to sell to Taylor as he had been reluctant to sell to others despite several handsome offers. For Bender, the farm and he were one. Plus, if he ever were to sell, he hoped to find someone who would be willing to carry on the melon-growing tradition.

In 1939 Taylor approached Bender again, this time receiving a favorable response. Taylor and his wife Caroline bought the near 180-acre farm which had been in the Bender family for over a century. But, because the farm hadn't been worked in nearly a decade, the soil and buildings had become somewhat run down. The first thing Taylor did, therefore, was to put new roofs on all the buildings. Taylor says, "A lot of people thought I was crazy to buy his farm because of its condition but I thought I could bring it back."

The soil had become so depleted Taylor says that, "You couldn't raise an umbrella!" He added that not even alfalfa or clover would grow. Consequently he had the soil tested by Cornell agents only to find it sorely needed lime. The soil analysis also revealed that there were 57 different kinds of soil on the farm ranging from hardpan to an extremely fine black sand akin to silt.

THE DEANERY
29th CHESTNUT STREET
BOSTON MASSACHUSETTS

My dear Mr Taylor

Can you send
me a dozen Pruden melons
to reach Boston by Sept 14?

Maybe you will remember
that I have visited you
several times in other
years while Mr Pruden
was still alive. Please
send melons and give
to my office address
26 Temple Place.

Aug 30 1946

Edwin J van Etten

A 1945 letter from the Episcopal Bishop of Boston Edwin J. van Etten requesting that crates of melons be sent to his residence.

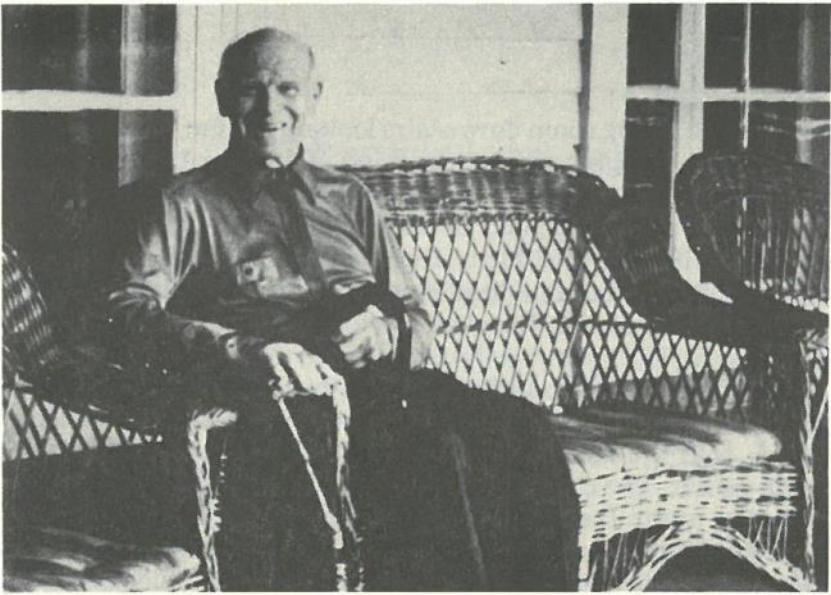
Taylor began to spread 500 tons of lime on the fields to re-balance the pH. He relates that, whereas usually two to five tons are applied to an acre, in some cases he had to spread as much as seven tons the acre. As he was completing this process, Taylor says he could hear Bender and Mike Forester laughing in the background about his methods. Bender had never done this before and could not understand why it needed to be done now.

Once the lime was spread Taylor began to grow hay for his cows and melons in the Charles Bender tradition, under the supervision of the grandmaster himself. He also began to grow the famous white turnips. For three seasons Taylor followed in the footsteps of Charles Bender but finally gave up the ghost, turning his attention solely to herding cows.

Taylor admits that the reasons he gave up the farm are complex, having more to do with the times than anything else. He says topping the list were two sons who disliked truck farming. They simply knew and liked cows better. Then there was the economics of the farm. The melons were selling fine, Taylor says, he was shipping to thirteen states and the once-familiar lines of visitors down the road to the melon house had reappeared. But at the end of the season there was no cash in the box.

Labor also became a problem. With World War II in full swing, Taylor says there was mostly "riff-raff" to work the fields, the better workers having gone into the service. And when it came to wages, it was no longer possible to pay someone a dollar a day as Bender had once done. Moreover, those who were unemployed no longer headed to the farms for work but collected the newly-instituted unemployment insurance. And for those who wanted to work, the back-breaking work of the farm was not enticing. A short jaunt into the city offered greater opportunities for less straining work and higher wages.

The war also made it difficult to get some of the materials needed to run the farm successfully, insecticides, for example. Taylor says he was not able to get the rotenone he needed to spray the crops, since



William Taylor sitting on the porch of his farmhouse at the age of 86 years.

most of it was produced in the South Sea Islands. While one-percent rotenone was available, the five-percent needed to insure disease-free crops was not. Taylor recalls how painful it was to walk out onto the front porch of his house one summer and see his fields turning black from the wilts running through the plants.

For these reasons then, William Taylor gave up growing melons and turned his undivided attention to his cows. He was not without success here, raising some of the finest cows in New York State. One of his bulls "Leo" was sold to the New York State Artificial Insemination Laboratory which, for its purposes, selected only one of 57,000 cows.

When William Taylor, his wife, two sons and daughter first moved to the farm, Charles Bender continued to live with them in a private room upstairs in the back of the house. The Taylors also created a separate dining room for Bender close to the side of the house where the Foresters lived. Mike Forester's daughter Alice continued to serve Bender meals and do his housework.

In his declining days Bender spent most of his time alone in his

room or in the sitting room downstairs looking out the window. One wonders what thoughts crossed the mind of this great farmer as he watched the snow fly across the fields he tilled for over half a century. Taylor says even then Bender never lost his self-confident, almost aristocratic self-assurance. But on December 18, 1945, at the age of 80, Charles Bender died after a brief illness. He was buried in the town cemetery next to his wife Elizabeth.

In 1976 William Taylor, after tending cows for 60 years in various parts of Albany County and raising melons for several in New Scotland, sold the farm he had bought from Bender over three decades earlier. The era of the Bender melon was done; the Bender farm was no more. Today the only clue to the farm's former vitality is an historic marker along the roadside letting passers-by know that Charles Bender developed his Golden Queens in the fields beyond.

While the future status of the property remains uncertain, it is the hope of those townspeople who have a keen sense of New Scotland's past that those who seek to develop the farm will keep green and open the spaces that made the Bender farm an American agricultural landmark.

Acknowledgements

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About The Author

Dennis Sullivan currently serves as Village Historian in Voorheesville and Chairman of the Town of New Scotland Historic Preservation Commission. He has recently had published a history of Voorheesville titled *Voorheesville New York: A Sketch of the Beginnings of a Nineteenth Century Railroad Town*.

He has also recently completed a local history curriculum for the Voorheesville elementary school which includes a 45-minute video. Other recent projects include papers on the New Scotland Law and Order League and the Van Bael Patent.

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