

History of the Parson Brown Orange

E. L. Carney, Ocala

In the spring of 1874 Captain J. L. Carney located at Lake Weir, Marion County, Fla., and bought lands, as it then appeared suited to the culture of the sweet orange. In this land there were several islands with thousands of wild sour and bitter sweet orange trees, varying from old bearing stock to small switches.

Up to this date there were no large commercial bearing orange groves in the State and the small home groves were all sweet seedling trees, therefore the land was not considered particularly valuable on account of the wild trees growing on it, but they indicated that the soil was suited to the growth of the orange tree.

A year or two earlier, a few venturesome men, Messrs. Harris, Dunn, Sampson, Bishop, Stevens and others, had thought that the wild groves around Orange Lake might be utilized for stock upon which the sweet orange could be budded and grafted, and had started to clearing away the large forest timbers and cutting back sour trees preparatory to inserting sweet buds. Captain Carney, having faith in what the Orange Lake amateur fruit men were trying to do with their wild trees, decided to try the experiment with the sour trees at Lake Weir.

After deciding that the soil and surrounding at Lake Weir were suited to

citrus culture and that the wild groves might be used as budding stock, Captain Carney's next problem was to locate an orange that might have merit for commercial propagation.

No budded citrus nursery was then known in the State, all stock offered for sale was sweet seedling so no recognized variety was then known. Every neighborhood where oranges were grown had certain trees that were claimed by the owners to be of particular merit, and the fruit from these was sought by the neighbors for seed to be planted for setting their groves and not the wood to be used for propagation.

After examining many seedling trees of claimed merit over several counties, Captain Carney heard of a Parson Brown in Sumter County who was said to have some good oranges, so a trip of inspection was made to Parson Brown's in the neighborhood of where Webster now stands. Parson Brown had five old seedling trees in fair bearing condition and other younger seedling trees just coming into bearing around his premises. Captain Carney, after testing the fruit from these five old bearing trees, decided on that from one particular tree as preferred to any fruit yet examined over the country. First, this particular tree was prolific, and second it was of

fine flavor and ripened its fruit earlier than any tree he had yet seen. A second tree of the five lot was not far behind the first selection, this one being a little later in ripening its fruit, was also prolific, and a larger tree, standing out more in the sunshine.

After supper it was found that Parson Brown and Captain Carney were originally from the same state—Tennessee, and naturally discussed incidents and matters of mutual interest. Among other matters discussed was the sheep industry, Parson Brown having lived in the foothills of East Tennessee where sheep did extra well.

The probable outcome of the new venture in the orange industry and best possible way to get bud wood from this selected tree were discussed, but nothing definite decided on before retiring for the night. It seems that during the night Parson Brown had his recollections of younger days refreshed and also remembered that a certain man, living not so very far from him then, had approached him a short time before, wanting to sell him a small flock of sheep for \$80.00, but the old Parson didn't have the ready cash to invest, though he did want the sheep. Now was his opportunity to get the sheep, thought the Parson, so next morning he ventured to suggest that he would part with this particular tree for \$80.00 in order to get the flock of sheep priced to him for \$80.00. The Parson got the sheep. The tree trade was closed for amount specified, with the understanding that the tree should be left standing and bud wood cut as needed.

Mrs. Brown was to look after the tree,

to keep any one from molesting the fruit or bud wood. Mrs. Brown's wash tub was under this tree and she did not want to see the tree removed, though she did not understand the bud wood idea and only thought of the tree as being valuable from the standpoint of fruit for seed purposes.

When this matter of a good orange to propagate was settled, the work of cutting off tops of wild groves on islands at Lake Weir was hastened. Trees were cut off three to four feet from the ground, and in the fall and winter of 1874 and spring of 1875 they threw out numerous shoots. All of these shoots were cut off except a few thrifty ones near the top of the stumps, which were left to bud into in the spring and summer of 1875. The eye buds put into this new growth and spring buds just under the new growth, were the only ideas then, the grafting of trees near the ground had not yet developed with the orange. In fact, the whole idea of utilizing these wild trees for sweet groves was of a doubtful nature.

At this point of the orange venture, I, the writer of this article, and brother of Captain Carney, became financially interested in the Lake Weir proposition, and as a young man entered into the work with much enthusiasm.

As bud wood had to be cut before sap ran in the parent tree, and stored away to await the rising of the sap in the sour trees in spring, and bud wood cut for budding all through the early summer, it fell to my lot to go after this first bud wood. I went thereafter every few weeks for a period of several years until

we disposed of this original Carney tree. More of this later.

The purchase of an orange tree for \$80.00 by two fool men at Lake Weir, who expected to put out a 25-acre grove soon became generally talked of in lower Marion County and all of Sumter. Opinions were prevalent that nothing better could be expected of men who would pay \$80.00 for an orange tree, than that they would have no more sense than to attempt a 25-acre orange grove budded on sour stock, which was expected to peter out in less than five years.

As stated above, all available orange nursery stock was sweet seedlings from somebody's good seedling trees in the neighborhood. It began to look as if these nursery trees would soon become exhausted, and I thought I saw an opportunity to make some money from a sweet seedling nursery. As spoken of above, Parson Brown had at this time five large bearing sweet seedling trees, and one of these trees that was little later in maturing its fruit than the Carney tree was a fine orange. In the spring of 1875, I traded with Parson Brown for the oranges on this tree, to be gotten in the fall of 1875, and used the seed from this fruit to grow a nursery. In the fall, I took pickers and teams from Lake Weir, and picked from this one tree, known by the Browns as the Gary tree, over 5,200 oranges, for which I paid one cent an orange. The paying out fifty odd dollars for fruit from one tree almost set me wild thinking of the possibilities of the orange industry. I thought that almost any of us could manage to eke out an existence on even 100 such trees, in fact,

the old Parson stated upon many occasions, the five bearing trees, a few cattle and a small cane patch, had been his only sources of revenue for several years.

Now as to the history of the five trees referred to—one of these trees being the Carney tree. This history was referred to and reiterated by Mr. Brown in the many visits during the several years when we were securing bud wood from the Carney tree. These five trees were fourteen years old in the spring of 1875. The Parson stated that fourteen years before, a man and family who were moving drove up to his place and wanted to stop with him for the night, saying they were from near Savannah, Ga., and en route to Peace Creek. When the traveler got ready to leave the next morning he asked for his bill. The Parson replied that he would make no bill, as he had been a circuit rider in days past, of the Methodist ministry in a mountain circuit of East Tennessee and had never had a bill presented to him for such courtesies, and he wished as far as he could to repay some of these favors to his fellow man. After thanking the Parson, the traveler went to his wagon and selected a small bunch of small orange seedlings about eighteen inches long, which he gave to Parson Brown. He said he had been on the road about two weeks and didn't know when he would get to his destination and the little trees might spoil before he located.

In presenting these trees to Parson Brown, the traveler stated, that about a year previous he had made a trip to Savannah, and at a dock had gotten an orange from a ship just in from some

foreign port. I believe from China. He had taken this orange home and planted the seed as he contemplated then his Florida journey. He said also that the small trees were from one and same orange. Parson Brown accepted the little bunch of trees and set them out at once.

When, years later, friends of Parson Brown stopped with him and sampled his oranges, one would prefer the fruit of a certain tree and another that of a different tree. Among these friends visiting Parson Brown was Col. S. M. G. Gary of Ocala, who liked best the fruit from a tree a little more acid than the Carney. Then Mr. McGruder from the neighborhood of Yalaha, and Col. Haynes from near Lake Harris preferred other trees still a little more acid. The fifth of these trees was so very acid until late in the season and for that reason I never heard of any one who was especially pleased with it. The fruit of this tree was eaten only when all other oranges were gone. Parson and Mrs. Brown had four of these trees named—Haynes, McGruder, Gary and Carney. Each of these men had at times gotten bud wood from his preferred tree. None of the trees, however, were ever sold outright except the Carney. As stated elsewhere I bought the fruit of 1875 from the Gary tree for seed purposes. The Carney tree had very little fruit that year, owing to its having been cut so close for budwood. From the seed of the Gary tree I sold over five thousand small trees, most of them directly from the seed bed. The larger part of these small trees was sold around Lake Weir. No Carney tree seedlings

were ever sold so long as we owned the tree.

When the big freeze of 1894-95 came, there were very few Carney Parson Brown budded trees saved with budding wood for 1895-1896, yet much Parson Brown budding wood was offered for sale. The Haynes, McGruder, Gary and many of the seedling trees, spoken of above, furnished Parson Brown bud wood. The public, not knowing that there were several strains of the Parson Brown orange, and not counting the many seedlings of any value whatever, was later unable to recognize the claimed merits of the Carney Parson Brown.

A prominent orange grower of Marion County, who also had large grove interests in Marion and South Florida counties, stated to me that his Parson Brown budding after the big freeze had been very unsatisfactory, some of the fruit was very insipid and other very acid on the same type of soil. Upon sifting out the matter I found that two parties had furnished him buds to re-work his groves. The bud wood from one party was very angular, with long thorns, and this gave me a clue to work upon, tracing the source of these buds. I found they came from a Parson Brown seedling of no value whatever. The other buds came from a neighborhood where bud wood of the Haynes and McGruder Parson Brown was known to exist.

Being connected with the Exchange packing house in Ocala for several seasons, I found that fruit came in to be packed which was claimed to be Parson Brown and so it may have been, but it

in no way resembled the Carney Parson Brown in looks, shape or flavor. So you can understand why so much confusion now exists throughout the State as to what is a Parson Brown orange.

Can the State nomenclature committee straighten this matter out?

As stated before in this article, the orange industry of the State, forty to fifty years ago, was dependent entirely upon the sweet seedlings. After we had bought the Carney tree from Parson Brown, some of the oranges would drop from the tree. Mrs. Brown was given permission to use these oranges for seed purposes, and she planted these seed in tin cans and other small vessels.

In the spring of 1876, I bought from Mrs. Brown 250 of these small trees, from 15 to 18 inches high, at ten cents per tree, and put them out in grove form, adding enough seedlings later on from my own seed bed of Gary tree seedlings to make 500 trees, expecting these trees to give me early ripening fruit. At the same time, I set out 500 sweet seedlings from a very fine late orange. These trees were kept until they fruited, six to eight years later, but not a decent orange was produced in the whole lot of 1,000 trees. Most of these reversed the records of their parent trees; the early were late, and the late were early in ripening. Out of the 250 trees bought from Mrs. Brown not a desirable orange was found. Two hundred of these trees had to be cut off and budded, as they were a lot of mongrels, hybrids and crosses of sour oranges, grapefruit, Florida lemon and what not; the other fifty trees produced

fruit which would pass as oranges, but of very poor quality.

Several hundred budded Carney Parson Brown oranges on small sour stock had been set out soon after these seedling trees were planted and these budded trees all came true to type and paid for themselves several times over before the sweet seedlings began to fruit.

Now, back to the old parent Carney Parson Brown tree. This tree was kept by us for about eight years, till it was thoroughly demonstrated that the buds from this tree on sour stock made as good fruit as the parent tree. The wood on the budded trees was less thorny and the trees more desirable in every particular. At about this time Mr. Ed. Foster, on South Lake Weir, had started a small nursery of sour trees, mostly for his own use, and wanted bud wood from the original Carney Parson Brown tree. As we had no further use for the tree, we sold it to him for one hundred dollars.

Mr. Foster used the tree for budding wood for several years and then sold it to a third person for one hundred dollars. The tree, I think, was owned by this third person at the time of our 1894-95 freeze, when I lost track of it. All the owners of the tree up to this time had paid Mrs. Brown ten dollars each year for such care and attention as she was pleased to give. Mrs. Brown did not ask for these contributions. They were given to her simply as a matter of justice and courtesy.

Orange growing was the main subject discussed in 1874-75-76 by those interested in this new industry, and the people

from the Orange Lake section claimed at that time that they had a superior orange, which they used to bud their sour groves. This orange was known as the Owens orange and grew about two miles west of what is now the Sparr territory. When we met these Orange Lake parties, fruit was frequently presented for testing. The Orange Lake people always preferred the Owens orange, while we from the Lake Weir section preferred the Carney Parson Brown. We contended that our orange had a pineapple flavor and aroma and we thought seriously of calling it the pineapple orange.

Parson Brown, from the day of the

sale of tree to us, always called it the Carney orange and did not want it called the Parson Brown. Had this idea been carried out, it would have saved much of the confusion of today in regard to this orange. We thought that the credit of producing so fine a fruit was due more to Parson Brown than to us for discovering and introducing it, so we decided not to change the name.

Later, the Orange Lake people named their favorite orange the Pineapple. These two oranges still rank among the best of the State.

COMMITTEE ON HISTORY,
Paper No. 13.