



Hall of Fame



NATIONAL
Watermelon
ASSOCIATION

Hall of Fame



Inaugural Class of 2016

The National Watermelon Association has a long history of remarkable leaders from the watermelon industry that have contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the Association and its members.

The National Watermelon Association's Hall of Fame has been created to honor the lives and contributions of these members, both past and present.

Welcome to the inauguration of the first class of inductees into the National Watermelon Association Hall of Fame!

The First Class ~ 2016

B.G. Anderson
Eustis, Florida

Tom Ayoob
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Bob Bloebaum
Clermont, Florida

Percy Bunch
Murfreesboro, North Carolina

John Campbell
Lakeland, Florida

Nancy Childers
Morven, Georgia

Oren Childers
Cordele, Georgia

John Cooper
Centre, Alabama

F.H. Dicks, Jr.
Barnwell, South Carolina

Bob Deitz
Chicago, Illinois

J. B. Easterlin
Montezuma, Georgia

Gordon Etheridge
Raleigh, North Carolina

Gerald Funderburk
Jefferson, South Carolina

W.W. 'Coonbottom' Glenn
Marianna, Florida

Al Harrison
Nogales, Arizona

Vern Highley
Fresno, California

Josephine Hughes
Houston, Texas

Dallas Jones
Clermont, Florida

Bill Knowles
Leesburg, Florida

Harmon R. Lawson
Morven, Georgia

Buddy Leger
Cordele, Georgia

J.D. Lowe, Jr.
Henderson, Texas

Wallace Luffman
Salisbury, Maryland

Ralph Meitin
Zellwood, Florida

Howard Sorrells
Arcadia, Florida

Vincent 'Jim' Vitale
Detroit, Michigan

C.C. Winkler
Vincennes, Indiana

Ernie Zaferis
Los Angeles, California

B. G. Anderson

The B. G Anderson Company of Eustis, Florida was established in 1968. Mr. Anderson developed his own watermelon brand called 'Old Dobbin Watermelons', from a special select variety (51-27) that was expressly grown and packaged for B G Anderson by the Simpson Nursery Company of Monticello, Florida, the world's largest growers of watermelons for seed at that time.

According to historical records of Altoona, Florida, the Grand Island Packing House, built in the 1920s, became the property of B. G. Anderson. In the 1940s, it became known as the Grand Island Packing House. In the '60s, the packing operation was moved to Umatilla, Florida and became known as Golden Gem. B.G. Anderson was known to ship a lot of watermelons in boxcars.

Tom Ayook Jr (1933-2003)

Tom Ayook, Inc. was founded by H.K. Ayook (Tom's father) in 1902 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Tom was known for his integrity and willingness to help others. He never hesitated to donate his time or money to the industry. He was known as the Watermelon King of Pittsburgh, and coined the phrase, 'eats like sugar.' "No one ate more fruits and vegetables than Tom," said his wife, Doris. "He was his best customer."

Ayook was usually one of the top contributors at the Watermelon Association auctions. Tom served on the executive committee of the National Watermelon Association.

Graduated from Duquesne University in 1955, Tom spent two years in the Army where he coached a softball team. He attended law school at Georgetown University for 1 ½ years, until his father asked him to come and take over the family business. Shortly after doing so, he updated the company, improved technology, and expanded the product line. He was also the President of the Pittsburgh Wholesale Produce Association.

Bob Bloebaum (1946 - 2001)

Bob Bloebaum was born and raised in the Midwest. He moved from Vincennes, Indiana to Winter Garden, Florida in 1961. In 1968 Bob graduated from the University of Florida. He served several terms on the church council and was President of the congregation at the Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Clermont.

He was the co-owner of Dal-Don Produce Inc (brokerage and shipping) in Clermont, Florida which was founded in 1966 by Bob's father (Don Bloebaum) and Dallas Jones, and operated for over 40 years. The company shipped more than 3,000 truckloads of watermelon during its peak years. Dal-Don handled products from about 2,500 acres in several states in the South and the Midwest.

Bob served on the Executive Committee of the National Watermelon Association.

Percy Bunch

Percy Bunch began growing watermelons as a hobby farmer in the late 1950s, little did he know at the time that his watermelon growing career would span over 50 years! His watermelon wholesale business, Murfreesboro Farms Inc., officially opened seasonally in 1973 on Union Market in Washington, DC. Percy and Frances moved the business back to their hometown, Murfreesboro, North Carolina, in 1984. Percy was president and general manager of the company until he retired in 2009 at which time his son, Michael Bunch, took over the operation and continues to do so today.

Throughout his career in the watermelon industry, Percy and the Bunch family have been active members of the National Watermelon Association. Percy served as President, started and led the North Carolina Watermelon Association, and presided over the National Watermelon Promotion Board. Percy and Frances Bunch never missed a convention throughout their watermelon years and were actively involved in the North Carolina Queen Program. Frances worked alongside her husband and served as the secretary of the North Carolina Watermelon Association for 20 years. Percy and Frances Bunch started the North Carolina Watermelon Festival 29 years ago and it has become an annual tradition in Murfreesboro every August drawing crowds of 10,000 visitors.

John Campbell (1893-1965)

John Campbell opened the Growers Marketing Service, originally based in Leesburg, Florida. He served in leadership with the National Watermelon Association, serving as President prior to 1947. He also served as Chairman of the Executive Committee and Chairman of the Executive Council.

In 1945, three counties of watermelon growers (Lake, Marion, and Sumter counties) organized and formed the Watermelon Growers Association. Mr. Campbell was the first President of the association. John was one of the ten (10) original committee members that established the original Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association in 1943.

Mr. Campbell was the second vice president of the Melon Distributors Association in 1937-38. He was known for his dedication to the Association, as well as his generosity.

Nancy Childers

Nancy Childers served as the executive secretary-treasurer of the National Watermelon Association from 1976-1991, when it was based in Morven, Georgia. She was always willing to go the extra mile with her support, hard work and selfless interest in the watermelon business. When she left, the association's membership stood at about 600, with great potential to pursue.

After leaving the Association, Nancy remained entrenched in her Georgia roots by helping growers from multiple crop industries to organize the Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association in August 1996, where she remained for a number of years as the organization's secretary-treasurer. To this day, the GFVGA serves its constituents in addressing common issues with and for the industry that it serves.

Oren Childers (1943-2001)

Oren Childers owner and operated Cedar Creek Melons in Crisp County, just outside of Cordele, Georgia. He served as the President of the National Watermelon Association from 1986-87, as well as a respected member of the Executive Council. Oren farmed over 3,000 acres and raised watermelon on about 1,000 of those acres in Crisp County.

Mr. Childers was known for his contributions of leadership, time, and money to support the national association and the Georgia Watermelon Association. He is a legend in the watermelon business in Georgia.

John Cooper (1923-2001)

John Cooper Produce, Inc. was founded in the early 1950's in Vincennes, Indiana. In 1971, John Cooper moved his operation to Centre, Alabama where he formed Hi C Transportation and Hi C Produce & Truck Brokers.

John served as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Watermelon Association. He was an active member in the 50s though the 70s – with over 30 years of involvement in the Association.

“John was the person responsible for the transition from transporting melons in boxcars to trucks” – Buddy Leger. Mr. Cooper was a pioneer in the transportation of watermelon to market.

F. Hamilton Dicks, Jr. (1901-1988)

The F.H. Dicks Company of Barnwell, South Carolina began growing and selling watermelon in 1935. During the same period, Mr. Dicks operated as the merchant of the General Store of Dunbarton, South Carolina, and was elected to serve as Mayor of the town in 1951.

F.H. Dicks, Jr. served as the President of the National Watermelon Association from 1962-3, and also served for several years on the Executive Committee. He was President of the South Carolina Watermelon Association.

His company stands today in Barnwell, South Carolina as one of the largest watermelon growers, shippers and greenhouse operators in South Carolina.

Bob Dietz (1927-2000)

The company known as R. H. Dietz and Sons, Inc. was established in 1967 in Chicago, Illinois.

Bob Dietz was known as the "Watermelon King of Chicago", largely for his promotions, exuberance and passion for watermelon. He displayed his generosity to the Association by being the Auction Watermelon King Buyer in 1976, 1977, and 1984. Bob proudly and deservedly held the world record for watermelon large seed spitting at 66 feet and 3 inches for many years! He served for 24 years on the Executive Committee and Council of the National Watermelon Association.

J. B. Easterlin (1890-1970)

J.B. Easterlin of Montezuma, Georgia was a watermelon broker and pecan grower. Founder of the Easterlin Pecan Co., Inc. (which still operates today), he was known as a trustworthy man that did what he said - - an honest man of his word. Mr. Easterlin was one of three founders of Southern Frozen Foods, Inc.

According to historical records, J.B. Easterlin was one of the oldest members of the National Watermelon Association and served as its President.

He served on the Executive Committee and Executive Council of the National Watermelon Association.

Gordon Etheridge

Lifetime Council member, Gordon Etheridge, has been a member of the National Watermelon Association for over 40 years. He has served on many committees in that time as well as President. He also served as the President of the North Carolina Watermelon Association at its onset.

Owner of Etheridge Produce LLC, Gordon began in 1958 as a watermelon broker, he worked his way up the east coast and is now 'at home' in Raleigh, North Carolina. Gordon is still in business today and is a faithful member of the Association. Known for being honest, hard working, and 'hands-on' has given Gordon a reputation that precedes him. Michael Bunch has known him most of his life and describes Gordon as, 'the Grandfather of the watermelon business.' Michael goes on to say, "Gordon is a good friend of ours; he's always honest."

Gerald Funderburk (1929-2014)

Mr. Funderburk took the reins of his father's cotton gin company, called F.A. Funderburk Company, upon his father's death. He then expanded the company's product offerings to include lawn and garden supplies, sprinklers, and a new division - - wholesale watermelon sales.

With the company based in his home town of Jefferson, South Carolina, it was re-established as the G.A. Funderburk Company in 1950.

Gerald served as the President of the National Watermelon Association from 1982-83. He was passionate about promoting watermelons, once purchasing a display and watermelons to cut and serve at a United Fresh convention to the huge crowd on the trade show floor.

Mr. Funderburk was honored posthumously with the NWA's Outstanding Service Award in 2012.



Woodrow 'Coon Bottom' Glenn (1918-2007)

Coon Bottom Glenn of Marianna, Florida was a co-founder of the Florida Watermelon Association, and also served as its secretary and treasurer for many years.

He was an active member of the National Watermelon Association for over 31 years. He was elected to the NWA's Lifetime Council in 1973.

Mr. Glenn attended and graduated from the University of Florida with a Masters in Agriculture, and took a job in Jackson County, Florida as a county extension agent, eventually rising up to become the County Extension Director. He worked there for 30 years, and retired in 1991.

Al Harrison (1911-1984)

The Harrison Brothers Company was established in Los Angeles, California in the early 1930s as a wholesale produce company by brothers Al and Robert Harrison. Al Harrison bought out his brother, moved the company to Nogales, Arizona and renamed the operation - Al Harrison Produce Co. Distributor, Inc. He handled melon and hard squash production, packaging and established an internal transportation department.

In the 1970's, Harrison had captured nearly 90% of the watermelon market in the region and soon became known as the 'Watermelon King'.

Al Harrison was also a promoter. He created the Mile Long Railroad Freight of Watermelons as a promotion for a Canadian chain store that was met by a large amount of fanfare in the early seventies.

That was the largest single commodity train load in the history of the country at the time.

Vernon Highley (1933-2006)

Vern Highley began his career in agriculture marketing and later joined the USDA where he became the Special Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, and later served as the Deputy Chief of Staff.

He returned to the private sector in 1975 to join the Plains Cotton Cooperative Association in Lubbock, Texas. In 1982, Vern was persuaded to return to Washington to serve as Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service. He went on to become Executive Director of the Farmers and Ranchers organization for the Reagan-Bush and Bush-Quayle Presidential campaigns.

Vern went on to head USDA operations in the Western states and the Pacific Trust Territories before opening his own firm, Highley Associates. He represented various organizations including the Cotton Growers Warehouse Association, National Watermelon Association, Imperial County California, and the Imperial Valley Conservation Research Center. Highley Associates, a federal relations firm founded in 1985, relocated from Washington to Fresno, CA in 2000. Vern was honored twice with the National Watermelon Association's Outstanding Service Award.



Josephine Hughes (1926-2012)

Josephine Hughes was instrumental in starting the Canino Produce Company in 1958 on Airline Drive in Houston, Texas. She worked tirelessly as the co-founder and co-owner of the company for over 25 years.

She was chairwoman of Vegetable Day Celebrations that the Farmers Market held for many years. Josephine was an active member (and later was honored as a lifetime member) of the Texas Watermelon Association, and the National Watermelon Association.

She was the first female leader in the history of the National Watermelon Association.

Josephine won many first place ribbons for pecans that she and her husband Charlie harvested on their property in the Texas hill country.

“She was one of the hardest working women that God ever put on this earth,” said her daughter.

Dallas Jones (1924-2010)

Dallas Jones (and Don Bloebaum) co-founded and co-owned Dal-Don Produce of Clermont, Florida. Mr. Jones was a member of the National Watermelon Association throughout his career. Generous and honest, his son said, “Everybody loved him.” – Danny Jones

Dallas moved to Clermont, Florida where he partnered with long-time friend Don Bloebaum. Over more than 40 years, Dal-Don Produce grew into a substantial fruit-distribution venture nationwide. Dallas was a pioneer in the produce industry and a man of unwavering character. He was first to implement a watermelon grader of his own design. Dallas embodied the most beautiful and enduring qualities of his generation; achievement through hard work, service to those in need, and a deep commitment to provide for, love and cherish his family.

Bill Knowles (1907-1988)

Bill Knowles was one of the original eighteen (18) members that met in Atlanta, Georgia in March 1914 and created what we now call the 'National Watermelon Association.' He operated Knowles and Co., for many years in Leesburg, Florida.

Bill also owned the Foremost Fertilizer Company, which was established in 1947.

Mr. Knowles served as the Sergeant At Arms of the Melon Distributors Association (the original name of the National Watermelon Association from 1937-1938).

“He was a registering agent for the National Watermelon Association – until the Association changed its name” – Buddy Leger.

Harmon Roy Lawson (1916-2011)

Mr. H.R. Lawson served in numerous leadership roles in the National Watermelon Association for over 40 years. He operated the H. R. Lawson Farm Supply Company in Morven, Georgia for many years, as his commitment to the association grew.

He serves as President of the National Watermelon Association from 1966-1967 and was a member of the Executive Committee for 25 years.

H.R. Lawson served as Executive Secretary-Treasurer for the Association from 1968-1991, and was bestowed the title of Executive Secretary Emeritus upon his retirement.

C. M. Buddy Leger

Charles M. 'Buddy' Leger of Leger & Son, Inc. is a renowned member of the National Watermelon Association.

Buddy's career began in the early 1950's when he worked for the Federal State Inspection Service grading fruits and vegetables. In 1964, he set foot in the watermelon business for himself. In the late 1970s, Buddy recognized the need for watermelon producers and shippers to come together to support watermelon promotion and research. It was this forward-thinking that made Buddy the perfect person to lead the newly formed National Watermelon Promotion Board.

His 60+ years in the produce industry has given Buddy the background he draws from in his current capacity as consultant for Leger & Son, Inc. He has held leadership positions in Georgia's Watermelon Association as well as serving as President and Chairman of the National Association. Today Mr. Leger serves on the National Watermelon Association's Lifetime Council.

J. D. 'Johnny' Lowe, Jr. (1928-1998)

Johnny Lowe owned and operated the J.D. Lowe Jr. Co, Inc. of Henderson, Texas - a wholesale distributor of fresh fruit and vegetables. He trade-marked the HIGH – LOWE brand of watermelon.

Mr. Lowe helped to found the Texas Watermelon Growers and Shippers Association (known today as the Texas Watermelon Association), and served as its President.

He served as President of the National Watermelon Association from 1970-71, and as Chairman of the Executive Committee in 1971.

He was recognized at the 1971 Convention for outstanding contributions and devotion to the National Watermelon Growers and Distributors Association.

"Very well respected in the industry, he started trucking his own watermelons in old tin wheel trucks to the Dallas and Kansas City Markets. He only sold quality watermelons to establish a great brand." – Jimmy Henderson

Wallace Luffman (1925-2010)

Wallace Luffman of Salisbury, Maryland was a lifelong farmer and innovator, adopting new farm practices influential in the agricultural industry in Delmarva. In 1972 he was awarded the Certificate of Merit by the Governor for agricultural achievements. In 1990, he represented the U.S. Dept of Agriculture in Armenia to assess that country's ability to grow and distribute vegetables.

He served as the president of the Mar-Del Watermelon Growers (precursor to the Association), and was a member of the executive committee of the National Watermelon Association.

Mr. Luffman served as a board member of the National Watermelon Promotion Board.

He was a recipient of the lifetime achievement award from the National Watermelon Growers and Distributors Association.

Ralph Meitin (1914-2004)

Ralph Meitin was the President of Zellwood Fruit Distributors in Zellwood, Florida, established December 1943. Ralph served on the Executive Council of the Executive Council in 1969. He eventually became a Lifetime Council member of the NWA after being actively engaged for over 30 years.

Mr. Meitin helped to found the Tangerine Bowl, an annual college football tradition in Orlando, which supported the Elk's Harry-Anna Crippled Children's Hospital in Umatilla. Meitin's children said they were inspired by their father's involvement in philanthropy. "Because of the example he set, we followed in a direction that made him proud. You follow by example, and you couldn't want for a better example," Judy Cope said.

With Meitin's long history of involvement in the community, he knew many people around town and was well respected. "He was a great guy – he was a lawyer – he was big into box cars." – Buddy Leger

Howard Sorrells (1926-2014)

Born in Hiram, Georgia, Howard Sorrells moved to Arcadia Florida in his childhood years. He would later graduate from the University of Florida with a B.A. in business administration in 1951. He moved to Atlanta, Georgia to open and operate Sorrells & Chapman (a wholesale business that sold citrus and watermelon in the off-season) for six (6) years; returning to the family packing house in Arcadia, Florida in 1957.

Howard Sorrells served in leadership positions in both the Florida Watermelon Association and the National Watermelon Association. From 1968-1980. Howard also served on the School Board of DeSoto County, and its chairman from 1971-1973.

He was appointed to the Florida Citrus Commission from 1991-1998, and was inducted into the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame in 2010.

Vincent 'Jim' Vitale (1926-2007)

Faro Vitale established his company, Faro Vitale and Sons, with his sons in the 1940s. Jim joined his father's business after World War II.

Later called Vitale Terminal Sales, the company was moved to the Eastern Market of Detroit, Michigan and transitioned to produce.

Jim Vitale soon became known as the 'Watermelon Man' of the Eastern Market by the 1980s for selling over 24 million pounds of watermelon each year.

Mr. Vitale served as President of the National Watermelon Association from 1980-81.

He was honored as an inductee to the Lifetime Council member of the National Watermelon Association.

C. C. Winkler (1871-1962)

C.C. Winkler, at the 7th annual meeting of the National Watermelon Association in 1921, was recognized among the Executive Committee members in attendance of the Melon Distributors Association in Vincennes, Indiana. In April of 1926 at the 12th annual meeting, CC Winkler was Chairman of the Executive Committee and was elected President of the Association.

At the opening of one of the earliest Knox County Watermelon Festivals, C.C. Winkler - aka "Mr. Watermelon" - gave away slices of watermelon with the Mayor. He also acted as the Grand Marshall of the watermelon festival parade. (The Knox County Watermelon Festival was inaugurated in 1957, ceased for a short time in 1961, and began again in 1963. It continues to this day as an annual tradition.)

Ernie Zaferis (1921-1990)

Ernie Zaferis got his start in the produce business with Zaferis Brothers Produce, where he initially sold produce door to door. He later became a produce wholesaler and established United Melon Distributors in Los Angeles, California, which operates today under the leadership of his son, Jim.

Ernie was an active member of the Association from 1965-1990. He was an active participant in the auctions and was devoted to the watermelon association.

Ernie was known and loved by many. There was standing room only at St Sophia's, where more than 1500 people gathered to remember Ernie Zaferis.

"He was a unique guy, loved life and loved people." – Jim Zaferis



NATIONAL
Watermelon
A S S O C I A T I O N



The National Watermelon Association has stood the test of time for 102 years. With its beginning in March of 1914, eighteen (18) people assembled in Atlanta, Georgia with an idea to come together to expand watermelon's horizons. Today, we assemble to honor twenty-eight (28) individuals who have led, supported and taken great care of the Association across its first century of service.

We all stand at this convention to congratulate the first class of inductees. They have all played a huge roll in the success of the Association, and for that commitment we place their names into the highest honor that we can bestow. The honorees will forever be honored and earned members in the National Watermelon Association Hall of Fame.