Peeling Back the Layers: Vidalia Onions and the Making of a Global Agribusiness

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In Depression-era South Georgia, truck farmers experimenting with onion planting found that their crop emerged unusually sweet, due to the region's climate and particular soil content. But what gave Vidalia onions a unique flavor—their low sulfur and high water content—also rendered them nearly impossible to market, as the vegetable spoiled much quicker than regular onions. In their seventy-year quest to overcome the onion's natural limitations, Georgia growers would transform their formerly insular region into a hub of global supermarket capitalism. As onion acreage skyrocketed with the advent of controlled atmosphere storage, growers recruited thousands of Latin American workers. Then, when storage techniques proved imperfect, industry leaders contracted with growers across Central and South America to produce sweet onions for sale during Georgia's off-season. In striking contrast to the Vidalia onion's branding as a "down-home" southern crop, the vegetable's history reveals the contradictions in our modern food system.

In January of 2004, southeast Georgia growers inspecting their sprouting crop of Vidalia onions grew increasingly panicked. Their onion seedlings, planted the previous October for a late spring harvest, were emerging from the soil with wilting and yellowed leaves. When

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growers nervously plucked young onion bulbs from the earth, they found them riddled with thrips, small insects that often plagued tomato and tobacco crops in the region. While growers had combated various insect pests in previous years, thrips had never affected Vidalia onions in the industry's seventy-year history. After hurried laboratory tests, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) researchers determined that the thrips were infecting the onion crop with iris yellow spot virus, a plant disease that slowly killed the maturing bulbs and was previously unknown to the region. With the characteristic fatalism of businessmen who depend upon nature for their livelihoods, the Vidalia onion growers predicted "doom and gloom" for their $80 million industry. After decades of aggressive marketing, trademark legislation, labor recruitment, and investment in storage and harvesting, it seemed that a tiny virus might bring down the impressive house of cards that Georgia agribusinessmen had built in this formerly blighted and underdeveloped corner of the American South. Would the region's most famous vegetable, whose "unique" characteristics had transformed it from a regional specialty into a household name in the United States, fall victim to the predations of nature?[1]

Growers' and journalists' effusive testimonies during the thrip crisis to the "unique" characteristics of the Vidalia onion and its production zone, limited to twenty Georgia counties, were not mere advertising or inflated rhetoric. In an era when American eaters were perhaps more disconnected and alienated from the sources of their food than at any other time in history, the Vidalia onion's marketing success was rather exceptional. In contrast to the anonymous, waxed, and placeless cucumbers and tomatoes filling the produce bins of American supermarkets, the key to the Vidalia onion's popularity was its successful marketing as a rooted product that came from a very specific place. In the Vidalia myth cultivated by advertisers, boosters, and aficionados since the 1970s, this uncommon sweet onion was not produced in a factory, as it seemed so much of American food was. It came from the "warm, sweet earth of Georgia," as one New York City retailer boasted in 1992, and was grown by people who lived close to that earth. More so than their management of land, labor, and machinery, the greatest success of the Vidalia onion's creators lay in their ability to exploit American culinary anxieties about the placelessness of global supermarket capitalism. Like Kentucky bourbon and Georgia peaches, the Vidalia onion branded a commodity with southern regionalism in its evocation of the rootedness of an earlier, pre-industrial era.[2]

1. "Pest May Bring Annoying Bite to the Vidalia Onion Business," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2004, A1.

2. "They're here! D'Agostino's fresh Vidalia onions," *New York Times*, May 13, 1992, C5.

Yet despite Georgia agribusinessmen's success in distinguishing their crop from the sea of anonymous produce that surrounded it, the Vidalia onion by the twenty-first century was itself very much a supermarket product. Indeed, the realities behind the Vidalia onion's production as its sale expanded beyond its native region directly contradicted the carefully constructed façade of local rootedness that had originally endowed it with mystique and fueled its popularity. The thrip crisis of early 2004 only reinforced that contradiction.

When USDA researchers began to investigate the insect invasion that winter, they quickly found that the crisis was not quite as "natural" as growers claimed. Several years earlier, the region's largest producers had begun contracting with Peruvian agribusinesses to grow sweet onions in coastal regions that bore resemblance to the climate and soil content of southeast Georgia—those factors which supposedly gave the Vidalia onion is unique flavor. With Peruvian onions flowing into south Georgia during the Vidalia off-season, the region's growers were successful in their goal of providing supermarket consumers with a year-round product. Those onions, however, also proved excellent hosts to the Peruvian thrips which infested that nation's onion production and accompanied the imported onions to the packing sheds, and then fields, of southeast Georgia. Coming under fire for sabotaging their own industry, Vidalia growers responded in the way they knew best: disguising their sophisticated global capitalism beneath platitudes of "down-home" wisdom. Delbert Bland, the region's largest and most successful grower, had a simple piece of advice for the industry as it battled the thrip and its virus: "make sure you're in church every Sunday."[3]

In tracing the unlikely path of the Vidalia onion from a roadside novelty to a global commodity, this essay explores the imbalance between how food is marketed and how it is actually produced under global supermarket capitalism. It examines how growers and advertisers relied on a mythical conception of place—in this case, that of the rural US South—to sell a crop whose production was itself eroding the last foundations of that regional stereotype, whether it was through the multi-million-dollar storage houses that came to dot southeast Georgia, the thousands of Mexican and Central American workers who arrived to the region to pick the crop, or the inflow of shipping containers of Peruvian onions. As such, the Vidalia onion provides us with an excellent vehicle for exploring the local impacts of globalization, a rather nebulous and

3. "Mystery disease hits some Vidalia onion plants," *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, January 12, 2004.

misunderstood concept whose consequences on the coastal plain of Georgia were neither smooth, predictable, nor unidirectional.[4]

At its core, the story of the Vidalia onion is also one of how humans attempted to force non-human biological and ecological systems to cooperate with the dictates of industrial production, with varying levels of success and unexpected results. In the early days of the industry, from the 1930s to the 1960s, what gave the Vidalia onion its mystical appeal was its seasonality, in that it was available only for a window of eight weeks in May and June. Unlike "hot" onions grown elsewhere, the sweet onions of southeastern Georgia were highly resistant to extended storage because of their high water and low sulfur content. If the ephemeral nature of the onion was a crucial ingredient in what first gave the Vidalia onion its identity and initial popularity, it would be the greatest obstacle that growers faced when they attempted to transcend regional markets and attain economies of scale. Likewise, the initial charm of seasonality proved fleeting when consumers demanded onions year-round. Vidalia growers' twenty-year quest to overcome the biological limitations of the onion and to transform it into a supermarket crop divorced from seasonality, only finally achieved with the South American offshore importation deals, would remake not only the onion itself but the entire producing region of southeastern Georgia.[5]

Place and History in the Vidalia Zone

"Straight, lonely roads, one-horse towns, sprawling farms, and tracts of planted pines. It's flat, monotonous, used-up, hotter than hell in the summer and cold enough in winter that orange trees won't grow." So did writer and environmentalist Janisse Ray remember the southeast Georgia of her 1950s childhood; Ray's hometown of Baxley lay just across the Altamaha River from Toombs and Tattnall counties, the two

4. For other studies of the contrast between the marketing and production of food, see Belasco and Scranton, eds., *Food Nations*, Freidberg, *Fresh*, and Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty.* On "globalization" and the transformation of the rural US South in the last fifty years, see Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, Odem and Lacy, eds., *Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South*, and Peacock, Watson, and Matthews, eds., *The American South in a Global World*, and Striffler, *Chicken.*

5. On the industrialization of American agriculture in the twentieth century, see Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt*, Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory*, Hamilton, *Trucking Country*, and Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage.* On biological resistance to industrial production regimes, see Barndt, *Tangled Routes*, Boyd, "Making Meat," Kloppenburg, *First the Seed*, Olmstead and Rhode, *Creating Abundance*, and Soluri, *Banana Cultures.* For agricultural transformations within the American South, see especially Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost* and *Mockingbird Song*, Gisolfi, "From Crop Lien to Contract Farming," and Daniel, *Breaking the Land* and *Toxic Drift.*

counties that later emerged as the production cores of the Vidalia onion industry. Located almost directly between Savannah and Macon, a hundred miles from the coast and nearly a hundred and fifty from the Florida state line, Toombs County, with its cities of Lyons and Vidalia, and Tattnall County, enclosing Reidsville and Glennville, was at mid-century, as Ray recalled, a "land of few surprises." (See map in figure 1.)[6]

In the years following World War II, Tattnall and Toombs counties, like much of south Georgia, were economically marginal and plagued by rural poverty. With 1950 populations of 15,939 and 17,382, Tattnall and Toombs, respectively, were sparsely populated, overwhelmingly rural, and peripheral to virtually every large population center within the state. The two counties were not the poorest of the state's southern counties in 1950, but they were far from the wealthiest. Located inland of the heavily black coastal counties near Savannah, but south

Figure 1 "Map of Southeast Georgia."

6. Ray, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, 13, 3. Appling County, where Baxley is located, would later become one of the twenty coastal plain counties that could use the Vidalia trademark in marketing their onions.

of the cotton-heavy "black belt" that cut across central Georgia, the African-American population of Tattnall and Toombs remained steadily at around one-quarter of the counties' total between 1930 and 2000. The mid-century struggle for black equality in Georgia would make slow progress on the inland coastal plain, and violence occasionally erupted as the region's black minority demanded change. The 1960s and 1970s brought a formal end to segregation, but blacks, with few exceptions, remained poorer than most whites in the two counties.[7]

While the region's economy had been overwhelmingly agricultural since its European and African settlement in the eighteenth century, its dominant crops and the nature of farming had shifted dramatically over time; this was no "place without history." In the antebellum years and directly after the Civil War, this had been a land of pine forests and wiregrass, not sprawling plantations. The number of slaveholders and slaves in Tattnall County in 1860 (which included modern-day Toombs County as well—the latter was carved from Tattnall in 1905) was far lower than most counties in slave-heavy middle and southwestern Georgia. Likewise, in the years before the Civil War and directly after, this was no cotton kingdom: in 1860, 1880, and 1900, Tattnall County never produced more than a thousand bales of cotton, while the state's largest cotton-producing counties yielded upward of 30,000 bales.[8]

Rather than growing cotton, mid- and late-nineteenth century farmers on the inland coastal plain invested in livestock and the production of milk, meat, wool, and leather, which were all lucrative for the small-scale producers who made up most of the county's population. In 1880, Tattnall County was home to nearly 20,000 heads of cattle and 14,000 sheep, making it one of the state's largest livestock-holding counties. But in the first two decades of the twentieth century, as this system of smallholding and grazing was challenged by animal diseases like Texas fever, whose prevention demanded large capital expenditures, small farmers reluctantly turned to cotton in hopes of cashing in on its rising price in the

7. US Census of the Population statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1930–2000. The 1950 median family income of Tattnall and Toombs counties was $1,104 and $1,179, respectively. While certainly above some of the state's poorest counties, such as Hancock County ($750), both fell far below wealthier urban counties like Chatham (Savannah, $2,367) and Fulton (Atlanta, $2,787); US Census of Population statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1950.

8. In 1860, Tattnall County was home to 1,157 slaves and 177 slave owners—not an insignificant number, but far below the largest counties in the cotton belt (for example, Burke County, north of Tattnall in the state's central Black Belt, had 12,052 slaves and more than 700 slaveholders). US Census of the Population and US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Burke counties, Georgia, 1860, 1880, 1900. My usage of a "place without history" is derived from Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.

global markets of the 1910s. These hopes, however, were quickly dashed by the arrival of the boll weevil and a dramatic drop in cotton prices, yet planted cotton acreage in Tattnall and Toombs continued to rise until New Deal agricultural reforms subsidized the turn toward intensive crops that required less acreage. By 1950, cotton represented just over 5 percent of the two counties' total acreage in farms—not an insignificant number, but one far lower than many of Georgia's other counties that remained reliant upon cotton as their primary source of income.[9]

In the wake of cotton's rise and fall, the dominant crops in Tattnall and Toombs counties after World War II were corn, tobacco, timber, and by the 1970s, soybeans. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, the region's expansive long-leaf pine forests were decimated by the sawmill, as logging companies felled wide swaths of forest to clear land for farming and supply the demands of Savannah's booming paper industry. Lumber sales remained vital to local farmers for decades, but tobacco would become the most lucrative cash crop in the post-war years: by 1969, the first year where detailed agricultural revenue data are available, the value of the tobacco crop represented nearly 60 percent of the total crop value in Tattnall and Toombs, with a value of $4.2 million of a total $7.3 million. Field corn commanded the greatest sheer acreage until the 1970s, when it would lose its title to soybeans, an entirely new crop for southern farmers that was in high demand for use in industrial livestock feeding.[10]

Sweet Onions and "Something in the Soil"

Glaringly absent from this list, of course, were any sorts of vegetables, including onions. While it would not garner great profits until

9. US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1880, 1930, 1950. For information on animal diseases and their socioeconomic impact, see Strom, *Making Catfish Bait out of Government Boys*. In 1930, cotton production peaked in Tattnall and Toombs, as they together produced more than 15,000 bales of cotton, a number dramatically higher than 1880 or 1900. As for percentage of land devoted to cotton growing in 1950, Tattnall and Toombs were no centers of cotton production, certainly in contrast with large producers like Walton County (17.9%), Bartow County (14.2%), and Burke County (14.6%). Likewise, in 1950 Tattnall and Toombs produced 2,566 and 5,493 bales of cotton, respectively, while Walton, Bartow, and Burke produced 17,123, 12,163, and 17,845 bales, respectively.

10. The destruction of old-growth pine forests in southeast Georgia would have massive ecological consequences; see Ray, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, for the most compelling account. US Census of Agriculture for Tattnall and Toombs counties, 1950, 1954, 1959, 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978. For a discussion of soybeans and the poultry industry, see Boyd, "Making Meat."

much later, the sweet onion did have a long history in the two counties. According to local legend, the first sweet onion was planted by Vidalia farmer Mose Coleman, who, on a whim, purchased onion seed from Texas in 1930. "I wondered why people in Georgia didn't grow them," Coleman recalled years later. The Crystal Wax Bermuda onion that Coleman purchased, along with the yellow Granex variety that eventually took its place, was a winter crop, planted in October and harvested in May. An intensive crop like the onion, with its high yields and high profit potential per acre, was undoubtedly attractive in the years of the Great Depression, especially after the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Act reimbursed farmers for cutting their total planted acreage. When Coleman sampled the fruits of his labor in the spring of 1931, he found that his onions were surprisingly sweet in flavor, lacking the usual pungency or "hotness" that characterized western-grown onions. While farmers did not discover why until later—"it's something in the soil," one early grower ventured—the onion's unique characteristics were the result of environmental factors, most notably the low sulfur content of the region's sandy soils, mild winter temperatures, and adequate precipitation. The early sweet onion industry, therefore, was inextricably bound to a place, rooted in the particular environment of the inland coastal plain.[11]

While it seemed that the region's growers were "sitting on a gold mine," as one journalist later reflected, it would in fact be several decades before the sweet onion had any serious impact on the area's economy. The Depression ensured that local demand for high-priced luxury crops was virtually non-existent, and farmers too ran into a crucial dilemma in growing sweet onions: the greatest strengths of the onion, its sweetness and juiciness, also ensured that the crop was highly susceptible to rough handling and tended to

11. Interview with Mose Coleman, along with information on the industry's early days, is from the "That First Vidalia Onion," *Vidalia Advance*, May 17, 1979, 14A. It's rather unlikely, however, that Coleman truly was the first onion grower, as the 1930 Census of Agriculture recorded 14 acres of dry onion production in neighboring Tattnall County. "Something in the soil" quote is from the "The Onion You Could Fall in Love With," *Atlanta Constitution Magazine*, June 27, 1976, 23. The turn toward southern truck farming during the early years of the twentieth century was an important movement, though it was not necessarily a challenge to the dominant system of cotton culture; often vegetables and tree crops were offshoots of the cotton system and growers relied upon cotton profits to sustain these efforts in diversification. For a contemporary account of this transition, see Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 225–236. For recent scholarly accounts, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, and McCorkle's three essays "Moving Perishables to Market," "Agricultural Experiment Stations and Southern Truck Farming," and "Southern Truck Growers' Associations."

spoil quickly. The onion's high water content invited rotting, and sulfur, a natural preservative that allowed "hot" onions to be stored for several months, was too low in the sweet onion to grant such abilities. In the spring of 1935, a bumper crop oversaturated local markets. Coleman, along with the handful of farmers he had turned on to onion production, watched hundreds of full bags rot in their fields, discouraging many others who were considering turning to vegetable production as an alternative to traditional row crops. The post-war years brought little change, as potential growers then faced stiff competition from Texas and California, where large-scale growers who mechanized production and imported Mexican labor grew a much cheaper "hot" onion that, unfortunately for southeast Georgia farmers, looked exactly like their sweet onion. Though a handful of Georgia growers would find a market in the Memphis-based Piggly Wiggly grocery chain, whose Vidalia-headquartered division agreed to sell local onions in its south Georgia stores beginning in the 1950s, the onion nevertheless remained a highly local and seasonal crop. The few outsiders who tasted Georgia's sweet onions were most likely Florida-bound tourists, stopping at roadside stands for a quick sample of the rural South before getting back into their air-conditioned cars.[12]

Science and Myth

After a long period of stagnation and decline, interest in sweet onion production revived in the late 1970s, not as a result of shifting market forces, but through federally funded research into onion growing and marketing. Working through the USDA's Cooperative Extension Service, the public outreach arm of land-grant universities across the nation, researchers at the University of Georgia turned their attention to the sweet onion as a potentially lucrative crop for struggling southeast Georgia farmers. In June of 1978, two horticulturalists working at the state's Coastal Plain experiment station in Tifton, Doyle Smittle and R.E. Williamson, published a research report five years in the making that laid out precisely why onions grown in southeast

12. "Gold mine" quote is from the "The Onion You Could Fall in Love With," *Atlanta Constitution Magazine*, June 27, 1976, 21; details of 1935 harvest are from "That First Vidalia Onion," *Vidalia Advance*, May 17, 1979, 14A. In 1978, the first year that county-specific onion acreage data are available through the US census, the total dry onion acreage of Tattnall and Toombs counties was 41 and 226, respectively, with a total value of less than a million dollars. US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1978. For a brief history of Piggly Wiggly in southern Georgia, see Presley, *Piggly Wiggly Southern Style*.

Georgia tasted as they did, highlighting soil content, water and fertilizer needs, climate, and harvesting methods. With a much fuller understanding of what made the sweet onion tick, county Extension agents in Tattnall, Toombs, and a number of surrounding counties began to promote onion growing to their local constituents, many of whom were tobacco farmers anxious about declining prices and the uncertain future of American tobacco markets. The Extension Service efforts were undeniably successful: in the five years between 1978 and 1982, the total onion acreage in Tattnall and Toombs counties grew more than four-fold, from 267 acres to 1,071—still a small number, but far greater than previous years.[13]

One young farmer who would make the transition to sweet onion planting was Delbert Bland, a man who decades later would become the largest Vidalia onion grower in the world. Born outside of Glennville, a Tattnall County town thirty-five miles southeast of Vidalia, Bland had grown up watching his father raise everything from row crops to tomatoes, and upon graduating high school in the late 1970s, Delbert joined his father Raymond on the farm, with some new ideas of what to plant. "Me and my father then planted 5 acres of onions [in 1982]; up until that point, we had a real small operation," recalled Bland of the farm he returned to. "We just did some livestock, a little bit of tobacco, corn, soybeans, row crop stuff." But in his shift to onion production, Bland didn't have any early delusions of grandeur. "I was just tired of runnin' pigs. I was huntin' a way out. I wanted to live on the farm, but I didn't want to be a dirt farmer neither." Bland's case was not atypical, as dozens of other farms would grow onions for the first time in the early 1980s. Between 1978 and 1982, the number of Tattnall and Toombs farms growing sweet onions increased from 23 to 66.[14]

As production logistics were rendered more transparent and farmers began to invest acres in onions, a number of ambitious growers also began the important work of cultivating external markets for their product. In so doing, they began to construct the myth that would prove most lasting in their industry's success: the pairing of Georgia sweet onions with romantic images of the rooted rural South, consciously aimed at northern urban consumers who came to see in the vegetable a relic of a simpler time. A generation earlier, the northern imaginary of the rural South was dominated by unpleasant

13. Smittle and Williamson, "Onion Production and Curing in Georgia," and US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1978, 1982.

14. Bland interview; US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1978, 1982.

visions of fire hoses and police dogs, but by the late 1970s there began to emerge a whitewashed picture of the South that championed rural values and folk wisdom, much fostered by then-President and fellow south Georgian Jimmy Carter. Sweet onion growers came to realize that they could benefit by selling a place as much as a product.[15]

Early advertising in non-southern newspapers reflected the growers' new-found marketing strategy. In May of 1979, Hastings, an Atlanta retailing firm, placed the first major advertisement for Vidalia onions outside of the South in the *Wall Street Journal*. Under the words "My Sweet Vidalia," the advertisement mimicked the famous imagery of the film *Gone with the Wind* with an image of Clark Gable leaning in to kiss a massive sweet onion rather than actress Vivien Leigh. Highlighting Toombs County, the ad boasted that "only there [do] soil, sun, moisture and temperature combine to produce this special garden treat" (figure 2). Another early advertisement, offering canned Vidalia onion relish, claimed its product to be a "favorite from the Old South," disregarding the fact that sweet onions had not been grown in southeast Georgia before the 1930s. Likewise, when northern grocery chains advertised Vidalia onions during their brief window of availability, they were certain to mark them as Georgia-grown, even as the rest of their advertised produce was described only by its price.[16]

Branding and Copyrighting "Vidalia"

As the number of onion growers, planted acreage, and demand all began to increase, however, producers faced enormous problems. First, the onion went through an identity crisis that revealed a distressing lack of unity among southeast Georgia growers. Since sweet onion growing had first taken hold during the 1930s, there was little regional consensus on what growers would call their remarkable product. Most Toombs County growers called theirs the "Vidalia" onion, as did Piggly Wiggly, who purchased their onions from

15. Since even before the Civil War, northerners imagined the American South as an antithesis to their industrial modernity, in either positive or negative terms. For early examples of this romantic imagery, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, and Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*; for studies of that imaginary into the twentieth century see Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, and Hale, *Making Whiteness*.

16. "My Sweet Vidalia," *Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 1979, 4; "Southern sampler, fresh from Georgia," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 3, 1988, 24; one example, among many, of regional descriptions of Vidalia onions in grocery ads is from "Today's Safeway," *Washington Post*, May 15, 1983, H3.

Figure 2 "My Sweet Vidalia."

growers in this Toombs city, but a minority advertised theirs as the "Toombs" onion. Tattnall County growers, meanwhile, labeled theirs the "Glennville Sweet" onion, while growers to the west sold "Montgomery" onions. Such definitional murkiness was not only confusing, but would lead to bitter conflict when ambitious growers across the coastal plain, realizing that some sort of definition was necessary when selling outside of the immediate region, mounted independent campaigns to geographically define their product. Eston Daniels, the Toombs County Extension agent in this period, lamented in 1980 that "here we have this tremendous gift, where a Texas Granex onion turns into a sweet onion . . . but we are not taking

full advantage of it because of bickering, brother against brother, and neighbor against neighbor."[17]

Only when faced with outside pressures that threatened to destroy the entire industry did Georgia growers seek common ground. Due in large part to their marketing success outside of the South, the boost in the sweet onion's popularity also brought fierce and often underhanded competition from outside of the state. Texas growers, eyeing the higher prices that Georgia's sweet onions would fetch, turned to the lucrative practice of "onionlegging": bagging and labeling their more pungent crop as "Vidalia" or "Glennville Sweet" onions. To southeast Georgia growers, this was the ultimate offense, for not only did bootleggers rob them of profits, they also damaged the onion's precious reputation for sweetness. Likewise, growers became increasingly nervous when onion farmers in Hawaii and Washington State began producing sweet onions that were essentially indistinguishable from their product, undermining the much touted myth that the soil and climate had converged to make Georgia's coastal plain entirely unique in its ability to grow sweet onions.[18]

In an effort coordinated by Reid Torrance, who in 1982 became Tattnall County's Cooperative Extension agent, the largest onion growers in the region came together, decided upon the "Vidalia" name, and aggressively lobbied for state and federal intervention. Organization and unity brought undeniable successes: first, the Vidalia Onion Act of 1986, passed by the Georgia legislature, established the Vidalia name as a trademark owned by the Georgia Department of Agriculture and limited production to twenty counties on the inland coastal plain. Second, a federal marketing order through the USDA extended this law beyond Georgia's state lines, threatening to impose heavy fines on violators. The law was not toothless, either. In 1988, the Georgia Department of Agriculture fined several growers in Texas for misusing the Vidalia name. No longer were growers just selling onions: they were selling a brand that reflected a "unique" place, regulated by the laws of intellectual property. As business historian Mira Wilkins has demonstrated, trademarks "made the very emergence, existence, and continuance of giant corporations a reality." The Vidalia brand,

17. Divisions over naming were first mentioned in "The Onion You Could Fall in Love With," *Atlanta Constitution Magazine*, June 27, 1976, 21; the feud became nationally known when the *Wall Street Journal* publicized the "pungent Georgia fight over origins of the species." "Know Your Onions? Then You Know All About 'Vidalias,'" *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 1980, 1, 31; Daniels quote is from "A Matter of Taste," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 14, 1980, C4.

18. "Onion-legging" quote is from "A Matter of Taste," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 14, 1980, C1; information on non-Georgia growers and their competition is from "Stage is Set for Annual Onion Feud," *Macon Telegraph*, February 20, 1983, 1A.

likewise, would be the first step in the metamorphosis of a regional industry into a national, then international, one.[19]

Labor and Migration

Establishing a name and an enforceable trademark, while important, did not cure the industry's ills. In their 1978 report that had spawned much of the industry's second growth, Smittle and Williamson had presciently warned that the expansion of production would be limited by the "high labor requirement, high production cost, and poor storage characteristics of the onions produced." Unlike tomatoes and cotton, whose planting and picking was, by the 1970s, done by machine, the sweet onion's susceptibility to bruising made mechanization prohibitively expensive, as long as labor remained available at a low price. Growers required access to a large labor pool twice in their season: first at planting in October and then at harvest in April and May. Until the late 1970s, this labor was obtained locally, through poor blacks and whites. But as onion acreage steadily climbed in the early 1980s, local labor quickly became insufficient. Richard Collins, a Candler County grower that had used local workers up until 1982, was forced to turn to migrant labor after "the local labor supply [was] increasingly sapped by growing numbers of his neighbors who are riding the rising onion market," reported the *Atlanta Constitution* in September of 1984. Collins was not the first or last grower to make this transition: "when we started," recalled Delbert Bland, "we tried to use the local people, who picked the tobacco for us, and that was a joke. There wasn't enough of 'em, number one, and they wouldn't want to do it anyways." The migrant labor stream in those years was predominantly made up of black American and West Indian workers who traversed the Atlantic seaboard in the search for work, though by the early 1980s a Spanish-speaking minority was noticeable as well.[20]

Southeast Georgia's link to migrant labor was nothing new in the 1980s. Since the late nineteenth century, the region had been entwined in an extensive stream of migrant workers that circulated

19. On the passage of the copyright and trademark laws, see "New Vidalia Onion Law Defines Product and Stiffens Penalties," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1986, D1; Vidalia Onion Act of 1986. For a test case of the labeling law, see "Georgia Levis Fine on Bagger of Non-Vidalias," *Macon Telegraph*, August 6, 1988. Wilkins, "The Neglected Intangible Asset," 88.

20. Smittle and Williamson, "Onion Production and Curing in Georgia," 3; Richard Collins quote is from "Housing for migrants gets fixed," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 18, 1984, A14; Bland interview.

from the citrus groves of Florida to the truck farms of New Jersey. Until the last decades of the twentieth century, however, south Georgia was on the supplying end of this stream, rather than the receiving end, as rural poverty and mechanization forced southern farmworkers off of the land in search of seasonal temporary employment. Hiring migrant labor in southeast Georgia was not commonplace, as an abundance of cheap local labor and lack of serious demand meant that migrant labor remained a Florida, not a Georgia, phenomenon. But as the post-war southern economic boom presented better opportunities to former farmworkers, and as growers turned to labor-intensive crops like sweet onions, southeast Georgia would quickly become a destination rather than source of seasonal workers.[21]

As "dark, dirty strangers," as one journalist called them, entered Toombs, Tattnall, and surrounding counties, local residents accustomed to a formerly insular society quickly grew uncomfortable with their presence. "Every year around onion season nowadays, the town gets uneasy," lamented one Glennville businessman to reporters in June of 1985. That same year, Delbert Bland hired 300 migrant workers to harvest his 400-acre onion crop, though he freely admitted that "to the old ladies, these people are outlaws. When you get two, three hundred head of wino [sic] together, pretty soon you got a mess," stated Bland, relying upon an old (and often incorrect) stereotype of migrant farmworkers as drug addicts and alcoholics. But resistance from local residents was the least of growers' problems, as many failed to provide adequate housing for migrants and received fines from federal investigators. After discovering migrant workers living in converted chicken coops at Tattnall and Toombs labor camps, in addition to sixty-one counts of child labor violations, the state Department of Labor levied fines in 1984 against a number of leading growers. This was only the first of many such infractions, however, and migrant labor in southeast Georgia quickly gained a reputation for its sordid and exploitative nature.[22]

21. On migrant labor in agriculture on the Atlantic Coast, see Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of their Labor* and *No Man's Land*, and Wilkinson, *Big Sugar*. Popular perceptions of migrant labor grew increasingly negative during this period as well, especially in the wake of CBS journalist Edward Murrow's 1960 exposé of black migrant labors in central Florida; see Murrow, "Harvest of Shame."

22. "Dark, dirty strangers" quote, Glennville businessman and Delbert Bland quote are all from "Migrant Workers in State Reap a Harvest of Troubles," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 16, 1985, A1, A16; child labor and housing infractions are from "Ga. Farms Cited for Migrants' Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 17, 1984, A1, A4. Further indictments against Bland would come in August of 1987; see "Lawsuit Charges Onion Growers Mistreat Labor," *Tattnall Journal*, August 13, 1987, 3.

Growing and Selling an Industrialized Onion

The search for labor, along with its social consequences, presented challenges to growers, not to mention workers and local residents. But the greatest obstacle that producers faced in expanding their industry was the Vidalia onion itself, as its biological limitations complicated its extended storage and use within a large-scale industrial growing regime. Just as Mose Coleman had discovered in the 1930s, a bumper crop that did not quickly find its way to market was doomed to rot in the fields. No matter how successful growers' national marketing campaigns were, as more and more of the region's farmers turned to onions, spoilage continued to plague growers both large and small. "Last year, everybody who owned an acre of land planted onions," despaired Toombs County grower Jim Taylor in May of 1984, "and the market was flooded with them. Everywhere you looked, you saw onions." As the onion harvest came in for sale during mid- and late-May, the price per bag plunged: with a greater supply and constant demand, prices naturally fell. Some growers desperately hoped to circumvent these punishing laws of supply and demand by planting and harvesting earlier, in hopes of packing their onions for sale before the bulk of the harvest arrived in mid-May, but these efforts were again stymied by the onion itself. Onions planted and harvested early exhibited seed stem growth, which left "hard cores in the Vidalia Sweets, making them undesirable for the onion market," reported the *Tattnall Journal* in 1987. Yet farmers seemed unable to learn from their mistakes, and year after year, with each bumper crop came bankruptcies and failures across the industry, forcing many smaller producers out of the business.[23]

No one paid closer attention to onion growers' woes than Doyle Smittle, professor of horticulture at the USDA Experiment Station in nearby Tifton, Georgia. Looking to the example of apple growers in the Pacific Northwest, who had devised controlled-atmosphere storage facilities in response to similar problems, Smittle hoped to shatter the onion industry's biological deadlock. In 1983, after a season of tremendous onion crop losses due to spoilage, Smittle began to gather samples from a number of Tattnall and Toombs growers and stored them in 5-gallon buckets, experimenting with different temperature and atmosphere controls. At the time, few growers expected much to come of Smittle's experiments, and Bland even recalled that Smittle

23. Taylor quote is from "Those Sweet Vidalia Onions Give Growers Something to Cry About," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 9, 1984, A13; seed stem quote is from "Seed Stem Problems Will Mean More Vidalias for Salad Market," *Tattnall Journal*, April 2, 1987, 13.

"was kind of quacky, in farmer terms, and every time you looked up he's wanting onions to do tests with. He'd get them from us, and sometimes, I swear, I'd get to thinking that the joker must be selling them or something." But in June of 1987, Smittle submitted the results of his research to the *Journal of the American Society of Horticultural Scientists*, who published his piece a year later. Smittle's report found that onion storage at low temperatures in an atmosphere of 92 percent nitrogen, 5 percent carbon dioxide, and 3 percent oxygen "maintains the freshness and eating quality of a product for a longer period" than traditional cooler storage. However, Smittle warned that the "gains probably would not justify commercial application," as 5-gallon buckets might not provide the same test conditions that a large warehouse would.[24]

Tattnall and Toombs onion growers, however, eager for any advantage they could gain against their competitors, paid far more attention to Smittle's findings than his disclaimers. In the wake of a disastrous 1988 harvest, where an oversaturated market ensured that more than 40 percent of the onion crop, some 500,000 fifty-pound bags, rotted in the fields, growers understood their industry to be at a crossroads. "I don't think we can market our whole crop effectively in six to eight weeks," admitted W.J. Grimes, one of the largest onion growers in the region, in June of 1989, as news of Smittle's discovery spread. "There's two things we can do," mused Grimes: "we can either cut production, or we can find a way to sell them for a longer time. To me, cutting back is not a good answer." For the price of more than $100,000, in spring of 1989 Grimes became the first Vidalia onion grower to invest in controlled atmosphere (CA) storage, constructing a 64,000-bag capacity warehouse in outlying Wheeler County. Anxious growers across the region waited for the results of Grimes's gamble. On November 2, 1989, nearly six months after Grimes had filled his warehouse, more than 200 growers, reporters, and public officials gathered at Grimes Farm to sample the preserved crop. After one bite, it was pronounced a massive success. "The onions look better today than when W.J. put them in storage," gushed Delbert Bland at the event. "CA has potential. It's going to work."[25]

24. Bland interview; Smittle, "Evaluation of Storage Methods for 'Granex' Onions," 877.

25. Details of 1988 harvest are from "Onion Growers Eye Dividends of New CA Storage System," *Tattnall Journal*, November 9, 1989, 16, and "Banking Vidalias," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 11, 1990, B6; Grimes quote is from "Nap Time for Vidalias," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 6, 1989, C3; Bland quote is from "Onion Growers Eye Dividends of New CA Storage System," *Tattnall Journal*, November 9, 1989, 11.

It seemed a revolution was at hand. "The Vidalia onion farmer is now in control of his destiny," boasted Smittle, "because he can stabilize the market." Another grower proclaimed that "if this is an example of what all Vidalia farmers can do, then we've got a five-to-eight month possibility and that will mean big business in southeast Georgia." Yet clearly not "all Vidalia farmers" could afford warehouses ranging in cost from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars, and the CA breakthrough would dramatically concentrate the industry's wealth in fewer hands. One after one, the largest growers in Tattnall and Toombs invested a massive amount of capital into CA technology (see production data in Table 1). In April of 1990, G&R Farms opened their $750,000 storage facility in Glennville, and in August of the same year, Bland Farms followed suit. But rather than hosting a public ceremony for the unveiling of his $1.5 million warehouse, Bland told the press that "instead of calling the politicians, my preacher ate dinner with us and we had a prayer. We're just ol' country folks, and we enjoy what we are doing," said Bland with no hint of irony.[26]

The turn to CA brought a staggering increase in planted acreage, especially for the region's largest growers who came to dominate the industry. In the five years between 1987 and 1992, onion acreage in Tattnall and Toombs counties jumped more than four-fold from 1,308 to 5,557. The value of the counties' vegetable crop in the same period leaped from just under $5 million to nearly $20 million. Rural south Georgia, which had for so long been maligned by the urban boosters in Atlanta as a backward and stagnant region, could now boast that it had developed a technologically sophisticated, capital-intensive, and highly lucrative industry. Industry leaders even took first steps

Table 1 Onion production in Tattnall and Toombs counties, before and after CA

	1978	1982	1987	1992	1997
Harvested onion acreage	267	1,071	1,308	5,557	12,447
Value of vegetable crop	$907,000	$2.68 million	$4.75 million	$19.82 million	$56.46 million
Dollars spent on contract labor	$359,000	$708,000	$1.10 million	$3.23 million	$7.07 million

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture, Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1978–1997.

26. Smittle quote is from "Banking Vidalias," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1990, B6; "what all Vidalia farmers can do" quote is from "Way to Store Vidalias May Bring Growers New Slice of Market," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 3, 1989, A18; details on G&R opening are from "State's Largest Vidalia Onion Grower Opens Storage Facility," *Tattnall Journal*, April 26, 1990, 1; Bland quote is from "Vidalia Grower Opens Warehouse," *Atlanta Journal*, August 31, 1990.

toward exporting to Canada, which began in 1993, and then Western Europe, later in that decade.[27]

If CA storage led onion production toward an industrial ethos based on vast monocultures and economies of scale, it had little impact on the way that the product was being marketed across the United States. Throughout the 1990s, growers expanded their advertising campaign and only amplified earlier claims that their product was grown by small traditional farmers in a forgotten, slow-paced corner of the rural South. "In a very small area near Vidalia, Georgia," claimed one supermarket in the pages of the *New York Times*, "the warm, sweet earth meets an improbable combination of Southern sun and humidity." A 1996 cookbook compiled by Bland Farms, Delbert Bland's company and the region's largest agribusiness, traced the Vidalia onion's genesis to local farmers' "love for the rich Southern land." The Bland Farms story, they wrote, began down "a winding dirt road" on "a run-down place that possessed few creature comforts but was beautifully draped with large pecan trees." Most amusing, however, was the New York supermarket that likened the arrival of a new crop of onions to "an old-fashioned Georgia hoe-down." Despite the hollowness of growers' and supermarkets' claims, the advertising formula was wildly successful, and by the mid-1990s shoppers could find Vidalia onions in Boston supermarkets or on restaurant menus in Los Angeles.[28]

Latin American Workers

Just as hulking CA warehouses and USDA researchers were conveniently absent in popular and press representations of the Vidalia onion and its producing region, equally invisible were the thousands of workers who planted, picked, and packed the crop for low wages. Alongside the astronomical rise in planted and harvested onion acreage, the labor demands of the Vidalia onion kept close pace. Yet when growers turned to crew leaders and labor contractors in the early 1990s seeking a seasonal labor force far larger than any previous years, they encountered a changed migrant labor stream, now composed almost entirely of undocumented migrants from rural regions in Mexico. Those workers, who settled in southeast Georgia both seasonally and permanently, would decisively transform that previously insular society.

27. US Census of Agriculture statistics for Tattnall and Toombs Counties, Georgia, 1987, 1992. On foreign exports, see "Sweet Taste of Vidalias Going Abroad," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 22, 1993, B1.

28. "They're here! The fabulous Vidalias," *New York Times*, May 12, 1993, C5; Bland Farms, "The Vidalia Sweet Onion Lovers Cookbook;" "They're here! D'Agostino's fresh Vidalia Onions," *New York Times*, May 13, 1992, C5.

The Vidalia industry's boom occurred at a crucial transitional moment in American immigration history. In 1986, Congress had passed a dramatic immigration reform bill, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which would go into operation during 1988. The IRCA tightened security on the US–Mexico border while simultaneously granting amnesty to undocumented residents who had entered the United States prior to 1982. To placate agribusiness lobbyists, who feared that amnesty would threaten the availability of farmworkers, the IRCA created the H-2A program, which was in practice an updated version of the *bracero* program of the 1940s through 1960s that granted temporary visas to seasonal workers. But while designed to combat undocumented migration, the IRCA would have the opposite effect, as militarizing the border encouraged permanent settlement in the United States rather than the frequent temporary visits that had characterized migration in earlier years. But of even greater importance for the case of the Vidalia onion industry, the IRCA came hand-in-hand with two economic recessions: one in Mexico, and another in the American Southwest, which was previously the destination of most Latino immigrants to the United States. For the first time ever, the booming American South became a key destination of Mexican and Central American workers. As black workers found more lucrative employment, or left the region for opportunities in urban areas, the migrant labor stream in southeast Georgia became thoroughly Latinized.[29]

In the eyes of Vidalia growers, however, the federal H-2A system was seen as too expensive, over-regulated, and prone to bureaucratic mismanagement. After all, they could recruit undocumented workers and pay them far lower wages with no government oversight. Therefore, as the industry ballooned in the early and mid-1990s, growers, crew leaders, and labor contractors in the Vidalia onion zone aggressively recruited Mexican and Central Americans to plant and harvest their crop (see migration data in Table 2). In May of 1990, as large growers were harvesting their first major crop bound for CA storage, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) arrested 110 undocumented Mexican, Salvadoran, and Honduran immigrants in Glennville. Local police also arrested Sergio Tavera and Bernardo Villaseñor, two Glennville labor contractors hired by growers to "provide large numbers of workers for the six-week spring harvest

29. For the best overview of IRCA and its many unintended effects, see Durand, Massey, and Parrado, "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States." On the *bracero* program and its consequences, see Calavita, *Inside the State*, Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, and Cohen, *Braceros*. For details of the changing place of black southerners in the post-Civil Rights years, see Bartley, *The New South,* especially Chapter 12.

Table 2 Resident population of Tattnall and Toombs counties, by race[a]

	1970	1980	1990	2000
Total population	35,708	40,726	41,794	48,372
White population	25,442	29,564	29,837	31,318
Black population	10,241	10,987	10,800	13,073
Latino population	144	311	1,179	4,263

Source: US Census of Population, Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1970–2000.

[a] Does not figure in seasonal, temporary workers.

of Vidalia onions," according to Neil Jacobs of the Atlanta INS. But while even Jacobs admitted that "we have no doubt there are more [undocumented workers] out there," federal enforcement would be a rare exception on the inland coastal plain. Local and state politicians, mindful of the growing clout of large onion growers and the industry's crucial role in the region's rural economy, kept the INS at arm's length throughout the 1990s, but nevertheless railed against immigration to win votes from uneasy local residents. By 1990, Tattnall and Toombs together had a settled Latino population of 1,179, up almost 400 percent from 1980, and this number would grow further to 4,263 by 2000.[30]

Latin American Onions

By 1992, when the value of the onion crop in Tattnall and Toombs counties had grown to record heights and its largest producers had become full-scale agribusinessmen, it seemed to many observers that the industry's expansion had reached a logical end. With CA storage, growers had overcome most of the biological limitations that onion producers had faced since the 1930s. CA also ensured that prices would remain steady throughout the six-month season, as a staggered release of onions meant that supply remained relatively constant between May and November. But to sell this much larger volume of

30. INS bust details and first Jacobs quote are from "Tip From Texas Led INS to Detain 110 Harvesting Vidalias," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 8, 1990, D6; "there are more out there" quote is from "Suspects Waiting to Answer Charges of Smuggling Aliens," *Tattnall Journal*, May 10, 1990, 1. This alliance between local politicians and onion growers to prevent intensive INS enforcement was made explicitly clear in 1998, when congressmen and lobbyists are able to stall an INS raid during the peak weeks of the 1998 harvest. For more information, see "Vidalia Growers, INS Near Deal," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 20, 1998, B1, and "Coverdell to Push Change in Law on Migrant Workers," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 21, 1998, E8. US Census of Population for Tattnall and Toombs counties, Georgia, 1980, 1990, 2000.

product, many of the largest Vidalia growers had established direct relationships with the massive supermarket chains that had come to dominate American food retailing and distribution in the late twentieth century. In doing so, however, growers found themselves in an uncertain position. Supermarkets and food brokers, following the demands of American consumers, sought a year-round supply of fresh produce, and would make the best deals with those able to fill this need. The limited availability of onions "breeds hesitancy at the broker level," argued Robin Raiford, the general manager of the Vidalia Onion Committee, a marketing group organized by the largest growers to promote the vegetable nationally and internationally. "They don't know that we can get it to them." Vidalia growers came to realize that six months out of twelve was simply not sufficient for dominating the sweet onion market. "We had these visions," remembered Tattnall county agent Reid Torrance, "where we could sell Vidalia onions at Christmas, and we realized—we're gonna make a killing."[31]

But CA storage technology, despite the limitless praise it received from growers, boosters, and journalists, was unable to fill such a demand. Onions did decrease in quality and sweetness with lengthy storage, and were especially vulnerable during the post-storage load-out period where they were returned to normal temperatures and a high-oxygen atmosphere. It was simply biologically impossible to produce a Georgia-grown sweet onion that would last long enough to be sold past early December. But when biology dictated inflexible restrictions, the industry sought instead to shift its geography, and it was none other than Doyle Smittle, the Tifton-based USDA researcher who had pioneered controlled-atmosphere storage technology, who initiated the campaign to globalize the production of the Vidalia onion.

In late March of 1992, Smittle, with funding from the US Agency for International Development's Regional Office for Central American Programs, traveled to Nicaragua's Sebaco Valley, approximately seventy-five miles north of Managua, to meet local landlords interested in growing sweet onions for export to the United States. As "growers in Georgia and Texas cannot presently grow or market their onions during January-March," argued Smittle, "sales of 'Sebaco Sweets' [brand] onions could produce a NET income of $3,000,000 to $3,500,000 to onion growers." As he spoke with large landowners in the Sebaco region who were eager to enter the market for high-priced export crops, Smittle quickly aroused interest with his evocative claims that with

31. Robin Raiford quotes are from "Sweet Taste of Vidalias Going Abroad," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 22, 1993, B1; Torrance interview.

> the present inability to supply these December-to-March demands from present production areas, even with CA storage, some area of the tropics will develop a sweet onion industry. THE AREA THAT DOES IT FIRST AND BEST WILL PREVAIL AND PROFIT.

By the end of the week, Smittle had accomplished his primary goal: arranging a "farmer-to-farmer" visit to southeast Georgia, where Fernando Mansell of Manprosa, Nicaragua's largest agricultural export firm, was scheduled to accompany Smittle on a tour that would "provide Fernando with information that would have been extremely difficult to understand from words alone."[32]

On May 4, 1993, Mansell and a group of fellow Nicaraguan growers flew to Atlanta, where they traveled by van to Tifton and then Vidalia. The following day, the group toured the Plantation Sweets onion packing house in Vidalia. That evening, after a busy day of observing the onion harvest and its grading and packaging, Mansell, Smittle, and dozens of major Vidalia growers, including Delbert Bland and W.J. Grimes, met for dinner at a Shoney's restaurant in Vidalia. As the Vidalia growers "compare[d] production, marketing, etc. with onion growers from Central America," Smittle spoke to the crowd of the benefits that international cooperation could bring. Smittle later deemed the evening successful: "communication among Georgia and Central American participants in the tour was outstanding," though "only a few import-export deals were made." On May 7, Mansell and his compatriots returned to Central America.[33]

In the following months, Smittle shuttled back and forth between northern Nicaragua and southeast Georgia, as the project began to take on massive proportions. With a $1 million grant from USAID, Manprosa began "converting an obsolete, Bulgarian-built canned-tomato factory into a modern onion sorting and packing facility for the entire Sebaco Valley region," which would employ seventy workers for wages of less than $3 per day. And though the projects' planners framed their work in the language of altruistic "development"—Smittle expressed that "one of the reasons for doing this is to provide jobs for people, and also a way for small farmers to make some money and better themselves"—it is highly doubtful that the profits reaped in export-driven farming would have trickled down to anyone but the wealthy Mansell family, who firmly controlled Manprosa and its vast landholdings.[34]

32. Smittle, "Onion Production in Nicaragua," 1, 3, 4, 9.

33. Smittle, "Observational Tour of Georgia's Vidalia Onion Production Areas," 1, 2.

34. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 30, 1994, C1. On the myth and rhetoric of development in the Global South, see Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

Yet despite Smittle's efforts and enthusiasm for the project in both Georgia and Nicaragua, considerable obstacles precluded the establishment of a large-scale sweet onion industry in northern Nicaragua. Sebaco was chosen primarily for its unique environmental factors: "fertile, flat, inexpensive and low in sulfur," reported a journalist in 1994, the land around Sebaco was "believed to be among the world's best for cultivating sweet onions." But the town of Sebaco itself "[wasn't] much more than an impoverished truck stop along the desolate Pan American Highway," and the long decades of political unrest and violence in Nicaragua had taken a deep toll on the region's infrastructure, economy, and population. While Delbert Bland and Reid Torrance each remembered that the Nicaraguan deal failed because of environmental setbacks—"it was too rainy," recalled Bland—the political and social instability of Nicaragua in the early 1990s undoubtedly played a great role in forestalling onion growers' attempts to outsource production, and news of the project quickly vanished from the US press.[35]

Though the Nicaraguan deal foundered, this first attempt at globalizing sweet onion production made a deep impression upon Vidalia growers who dreamt of controlling a twelve-month industry. Delbert Bland, who was by then the largest grower of Vidalia onions in the United States, had himself traveled to Nicaragua in late 1993 to observe Smittle's progress, though Bland did not sign a long-term agreement importing onions from the region. But where Nicaragua failed, new opportunities arose for the globally minded growers of the Vidalia zone. In 1994, Bland met Carlos Lozada, a Peruvian agronomy student studying at the University of California who had come to know Doyle Smittle and was visiting him in the onion zone. "During that same time [as the Nicaraguan project]," recalled Bland,

> a little feller named Carlos . . . . something, came over visitin'. He spent the day with my father. And my father was the type who'd just ride people around in the truck with him when he was working and all, since nobody else took up no time with him; we always had plenty to do. And at the end of the day, Daddy gave [Lozada] a handful of onion seed, and he actually put them in a plastic bag and snuck them back to Peru in his luggage. And he planted 'em. And they did great. That's how the sweet onions started in Peru.[36]

35. Descriptions of Sebaco are from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 30, 1994, C1; Bland interview.

36. Details of Bland's visit to Nicaragua are from *Direct Marketing*, January 1994, 33; Bland interview. According to Reid Torrance, Carlos Lozada was from Arequipa, Peru, who was studying at UC Berkeley and had met Smittle through a research program. Torrance interview.

While such a story sounds fantastic—and may be, as no other sources document the initial contact between Bland Farms and Peruvian growers—by 2004, Bland Farms was contracting with forty-five Peruvian farmers who cultivated a total of 600 acres, supplied annually with Bland Farms seed and Bland Farms agronomists. Grown on the Pacific coastal plain in an environment similar to that of southeast Georgia, the onions were virtually indistinguishable from those grown in the Vidalia zone. Of course, such a fact did not force a revision of continuing marketing campaigns that boasted the twenty southeast Georgia counties as uniquely "gifted" in soil and environment. Each year the Peruvian harvest was shipped to Tattnall County to be packed, by predominantly Mexican workers, in the same packing sheds that processed the Georgia harvest. While they could clearly not be called "Vidalia" onions, as such mislabeling would violate the 1986 trademarking law, they were sold under the Bland Farms logo in boxes and bags nearly identical to those containing Bland's Georgia-grown produce. Supermarket consumers rarely noticed the difference. "It can be almost as big as the Vidalia deal some times; we usually do about 2.2 million boxes of Vidalias and 1 or 1.2 million boxes of Peru," explained Bland in 2008. "It's worldwide now."[37]

Conclusion

By the turn of the twenty-first century, urban shoppers in New York, California, and even parts of Canada and Western Europe could bag Georgia-grown or -packed sweet onions from supermarket coolers twelve months of the year. Tattnall and Toombs counties, former backwaters of the rural US South, found themselves increasingly in the global spotlight. Yet in their triumph over the limitations of geography and seasonality, Vidalia growers abandoned the very characteristics that had first given the Vidalia onion its identity and mystique, and paradoxically remained at the core of the industry's marketing and advertising campaigns. Once, the Vidalia onion had been a seasonal delicacy, sold during a slender eight-week window at local markets or roadside stands, treasured by connoisseurs as a regional specialty. To the first outsiders who bit into it—often Florida-bound motorists—the onion conjured flavors and sentiments of a bygone era. By the new century, however, it could be bought on Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, in either its Vidalia or Peruvian form. The Georgia sweet onion, like the cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers it sat next to at the supermarket, was no longer constrained by the natural ebb and flow of the seasons.

37. On the details of Bland's Peruvian operations, see "Going global in Vidalia," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 30, 2004, 1A; Bland interview.

Likewise, in the industry's early years growers and consumers believed together that the coastal plain of southeast Georgia offered a unique environment for growing sweet onions, and that no other region, nationally or internationally, could produce a similar product. This myth did more than anything else to sell Vidalia onions in an era when Americans were becoming increasingly disconnected from the food that they ate, and were seeking to recapture the essence of place in their diet. Growers, however, soon came to realize that agribusinesses outside of Georgia were also able to produce sweet onions that rivaled the Vidalia in taste, and responded by calling copyright law and trademark protection in their defense. By the time that Bland Farms had contracted nearly half of their annual production to South American farmers, it was abundantly clear that the Vidalia zone of south Georgia was no more "gifted" in its ability to produce onions than Nicaragua, Peru, or a host of other locations. The Vidalia growers' true gift, though, was their ability to maintain this illusion in the face of a worldwide production system.

The global traffic initiated by the Vidalia onion's commercialization did not travel down a one-way street. As onion seeds and agronomists flowed outward from southeast Georgia across the hemisphere, Latin American workers and their families flowed inward to the Vidalia producing zone. As they arrived to a black and white society that had seen few immigrants in the previous century, they came to occupy a tenuous position in communities where race continued to play a profound role in structuring social and economic interactions. For many years, the newest immigrants prospered, finding similarities between their new home and former lives in rural, agriculturally oriented communities of Mexico and Central America. Their active presence within this section of the rural South thus served to erode long-standing myths about the insular and static nature of that region.

The history of the Vidalia onion also serves as a powerful corrective to popular myths about "globalization." In contrast to contemporary pundits who claimed that globalization (or "progress," "modernization," or any other hot-button word for the same process) was an inevitable, predetermined, or unstoppable phenomenon, nothing was foreordained about the onion's path to global commodification. Rarely acknowledged by growers or boosters, government assistance was instrumental in setting the stage for the onion's dramatic transformation, as federal agents financed and directed scientific research, enforced intellectual property and trademark law, and aided in the establishment of relationships between landed elites in the American South and Central America. The "free market," so often credited for the global expansion of entrepreneurs, ultimately played a minor role in the success of Vidalia growers. Likewise, the story of the industry's

growth reveals that the globalization of production was not characterized by all-encompassing "flows," but was inextricably bound to *specific* places, environments, and landscapes. Georgia sweet onion seeds were not planted everywhere around the planet, but in zones whose climate replicated that of Tattnall and Toombs counties, where labor was cheap and private investment protected by local government and law. Before Peru succeeded, Nicaragua had failed. The Vidalia onion's unpredictable path across the Western hemisphere thus revealed not "a seamless world without borders, but a patchwork of discontinuous and hierarchically ranked spaces, whose edges are carefully delimited, guarded, and enforced," as anthropologist James Ferguson has written of neoliberal investment in Africa.[38]

The Vidalia onion's success, too, remained tenuous and unstable at the turn of the twenty-first century, as demonstrated by the 2004 thrip crisis. While iris yellow spot virus did not cripple the industry to the extent first imagined by anxious growers, it served as a lesson in the unpredictable consequences of transgressing biological and geographic boundaries, and of things yet to come. Yet Delbert Bland, for one, was optimistic about the industry's future, and paid little heed to the Peruvian insects and viruses that threatened his crop. "Here in Georgia, I think we're about last in education; we can't even talk plain," he told reporters in February of 2004. "But we can grow onions."[39]

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38. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 49.

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