TITAN OF THE BEAN PATCH

by CLARENCE WOODBURY

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The orange-red sun jumps out of the Gulf Stream and spotlights a scene of roaring activity on a vast tract of gray, sandy loam near the little town of Pompano, Florida.

An airplane, motor thundering, is swooping low over the green earth, laying down what appears to be a thick blanket of yellow gas... A gigantic tractor, equipped with a "treadozer," goes snorting into a swamp and, with a single mighty grunt, yanks a tall, two-foot-thick pine tree right out of the ground... Seven smaller tractors, growing like terriers, go tearing out of a great machine shop which is equipped with everything from electric welding apparatus to a 100-ton hydraulic press... A whole fleet of trucks rushes hundreds of still sleepless Negroes over gravel roads!

What is all this? Another Panama Canal under construction? Is a war in progress?

No, it is nothing like that. It's just Bud Lyons starting another day of growing beans.

Bud Lyons is probably the biggest individual string bean grower in America. Every winter, while most of the nation's farm land is bitten by frost and beaten by blizzards, Bud Lyons cultivates a tremendous Florida garden, which pours fresh string beans upon dinner tables in every state of the Union. The beans which he raises every season would, if planted in a single row, stretch in an unbroken line for more than 10,000 miles, and, every year for the last five, they have brought him a gross income of more than $400,000.

Twenty years ago, Bud Lyons was a hired hand without a dollar in his pocket. Today, solely through his own great toil and foresight, he is master of a vast 4,000-acre farm which he has ripped piece by piece from the miserable morasses of the Everglades. His story is a saga of great pioneering courage. He has battled not only the ordinary weather and insect hazards which every farmer faces, but he has encountered such enemies as floods, hurricanes, swamp fever, poisonous snakes, alligators, wildcats, yes, and fly-by-night real estate promoters. He has pitted himself against them all, succeeded in spite of them. And now, at the peak of his success, he remains what he has always been - a dirt farmer who spends the greater part of every day working in his fields. No scientist, Bud Lyons - no college man. He leaves the high-powered technical things up to the industrial specialists from whom he buys his seed, fertilizer, and implements. He tells them his needs; they fill his specifications. And he trusts them because he has made a profit every year since 1924.

I have just visited Bud Lyons in his gargantuan bean patch, and I am still amazed at the potentialities of a hill of beans, which used to be a symbol of utter worthlessness. And, after days of riding and walking with Mr. Lyons over his immense farm, I have come to the conclusion that raising beans, which I had always considered a somewhat prosaic occupation, can be just about as exciting as sitting in on a high-stakes poker game, flying the Atlantic, or leading an army to battle.
One of the most spectacular campaigns carried on by Bud Lyons in his everyday work is, in my opinion, the one which he conducts at intervals against his arch-enemy, Jack Frost. In fighting frost, he literally sets the river on fire - or, rather, sixty miles of man-made drainage canals which penetrate his bean kingdom. Along every ditch and channel are piled dry brush and old eucalyptus roots, placed there when the land was cleared. On cool, clear nights, Bud Lyons watches the thermometer and barometer like a skipper on the bridge of a liner. If a danger point is reached, he issues two orders to his overseers. One is to turn on fourteen gigantic pumps and bring the water up to flood stage. The other is to set fire to the brush beside the ditches. Immediately the pumps go into action, and, at the same time, scores of Negroes are tumbled out of their beds by Paul Revere in motorcars. The Negroes are paired off in teams of two men each. One is given a bucket of fuel oil and the other a box of matches. Setting out at a dog trot, the man with the bucket dashes oil into the ditch every few feet and the other man strikes matches. Within less than two hours, the water is up and the eye of the storm is past, they scoop water from the ditches and put out the fires, thus saving fuel for the next emergency.

One of the most thrilling fights Bud Lyons ever put up against the elements was on November 24, 1936.

On that morning, he told me, the newspapers carried warnings of a tropical disturbance in the Caribbean, but, since the hurricane season was past, he said he was not greatly worried. His early bean crop was almost ready for harvesting, and he went to his fields as usual, with his hundreds of Negro workers. The sky kept darkening, however, and shortly after 8 o'clock the radio in his car informed him that hurricane flags were flying in Miami and that a tropical storm of extreme intensity was heading straight for the Florida coast. It would hit soon and hit hard!

Instantly, Bud Lyons went into action. While the sky continued to darken and the wind rose steadily, he raced his life car over the great farm, warning his workers, "Knock off!" he shouted against the wind. "Get the mules and tractors in, and knock off!"

By 10:30, every mule was stalled, every piece of valuable machinery inside a shed, and every worker been rushed by truck to stormproof shelters in town. Then, having done all that any man could do, Bud Lyons went home.

The great blow known now as the "Yankee Hurricane," because it came at a time when the Florida tourist season was just getting started - lasted for three hours. When it subsided, Bud Lyons went back to his farm, what he saw there, standing under a still wrathful sky, would have been enough to break the heart of many a man less stanch. The wind swept the sand from the bean beds and ground the plants to pieces just as thoroughly as if they had been put through a gristmill. In three hours he had lost $28,000.

But it takes more than a thing like that to stop a man like Bud Lyons. Within an hour's time he was in his storehouse checking up on the supply of seed and fertilizer he had on hand, figuring how he was going to get more in a hurry. That night he issued orders to his overseers. "In the morning," he said, "we start plowing."

Bud Lyons ended that year with a profit, as usual.

When I first met Bud Lyons, (his parents christened him Henry), he was out in the middle of a bean field showing a Negro hand how to operate a tractor-drawn bean planter. A big man, well over 200 pounds, and only forty-nine years old, he was wearing typical dirt-farmer garb - high leather boots, khaki pants, and a blue work shirt open at the throat. Above the shirt rose a massive, sun-tanned face in which twinkled shrewd but friendly blue eyes. But he quit smiling and looked embarrassed when I learned that I intended to write the story of his achievements.

"Paw," he said, "I've worked pretty hard. That's about all."

But that wasn't nearly all, as I soon discovered. Courage, foresight, faith, intelligence, and a lot of other virtues besides industry have made Bud Lyons a titan in American agriculture.

Bud Lyons' great bean patch lies six miles west of Pompano, halfway between Palm Beach and Miami, on the east coast of Florida. Only seven miles from the ocean, most of the 4,000 acres is flat as a floor and varies from eight to twelve feet above sea level. Practically all of this big, flat tract was reclaimed by Bud Lyons from virgin marshland, which he tackled, like a pioneer of old, while the old-timers slapped their thighs and wise-cracked. Without waiting for state and federal drainage commissions to allocate his own system of channels and ditches which cross and recross the land like the canals on Mars.

These sixty miles of waterways cut the whole giant tract into hundreds of three-acre blocks, each 900 feet long and 165 feet wide, and they both drain and irrigate the land. The water level of the network is controlled by mighty Diesel-driven pumps and an intricate system of locks. Bud Lyons at a mere word of

command can have as much or as little water as he wants.

There is no farmhouse on the land, for Bud Lyons and his wife live in Pompano — in a large, modern tile house, gay with bright blue shutters on the outside and streamlined furniture within. But at the center of the farm there is a veritable town — a cluster of buildings which includes hurricane-proof cabins for the 100 odd Negro workers who live on the farm the year round. The studding of these cabins is anchored in concrete foundations. Here are the stables, sheds, and the machine shop, which has just about every gadget imaginable for making home repairs to the fleet of tractors, trucks, plows, listers, planters, cultivators, ground dusters, and countless other machines which the bean king uses to produce his bumper crops.

When Bud Lyons first started clearing the land twenty years ago, he told me, it was backbreaking and heart-breaking labor, because he had to rely principally upon the muscle of man and beast. Today, while he still employs upward of 600 human pickers in harvesting season, and maintains 100 head of mules, he performs every possible operation by machinery.

Upon deciding to clear a new block of land, Mr. Lyons sends his big tree snooper into action. The tree snooper — there are only five of them in the United States, Mr. Lyons told me — is, as its name implies, a big bully of a machine which knocks down trees and roots them out of the ground. It can match a two-foot thick pine tree out of the ground quicker than you or I could pull it up a sapling. Working in a foot of water and muck, this amazing machine can clear three acres a day.

But machinery hasn’t put Bud Lyons in a rocking chair, and he doesn’t want it to. He’s still a hard-working hired hand, as he was twenty years ago, except that now he’s hired by himself. From October 1, when he starts his staggered schedule of planting, aimed at hitting the markets at the right time, until the middle of April, when he makes his last crop, Mr. Lyons is in his fields every day from 5 a.m. until sunset, and often all night. And he raises two crops off the same land each winter.

Never a season passes that he is not confronted with as many crises as the captain of a leaky ship or the mother of sixteen children.

When heavy rains threaten to wash his precious beans right out of their sandy beds, Bud Lyons dons rubber boots and slicker and, day or night, drives and plows afoot through his fields like a general on a battlefield. He looks first to his big guns, the fourteen mighty pumps, and, when he has them all pounding away full blast like so many batteries of artillery, he turns his attention to the infantry, his colored field hands who, meanwhile, have charged to the fray armed with hoses and shovels. While the great pumps suck torrents of muddy water toward the sea, the Negroes use their tools to keep the small ditches and laterals open all over the kingdom of beans.

The warfare which Bud Lyons wages upon insect pests, principal of which is the so-called leaf hopper or green fly, is even more exciting. On one corner of the farm he has an airport where, every growing season, you will see dusting planes, some of them gyroplanes, which he charters from a Texas company. Just at dawn, when the dew is still on the bean vines and will retain the dust, these planes sweep low over the fields laying down smoke screens of sulphur dust, which spell death for leaf hoppers. However, Bud Lyons is now gradually giving up this method of insect control in favor of modern ground dusting machines. These machines, hitched to light tractors equipped with headlights, roar through the bean fields at night, dusting five double rows of beans a time, and looking for all the world like bright-eyed legendary dragons exhaling clouds of fire and brimstone.

Bud Lyons is a terrific worker. His friends say he is made of iron, and he drives no man hard as he drives himself. Since he has been a laborer he knows what can be expected of the average worker, and he asks no more, no less. Because of this and because he always pays his help promptly, “Mister Bud,” as he is known to darkies all the way from the Florida Keys to the Carolinas, is famous as a good boss. He pays his regular field hands $1.50 a day for nine hours of work and provides them with living quarters, fuel and vegetables. He also provides quarters and fuel for the hundreds of itinerant workers — men, women and children — who work for him during the harvesting season, but pays them by the bushels of beans picked. On the first picking he pays them 20 cents a bushel, on the second picking 25 cents, and on the third picking 35 cents. A good adult worker will bring in 100 and twelve bushels a day on first picking.

Scarcely less impressive than Bud Lyons’ mammoth farm is his packing plant in Pompano where his beans are cleaned, graded, packed and loaded into refrigerator cars the same day they are picked. Here, electric conveyor belts first carry the beans under a powerful blower, which removes any dust or soil from them, then on between rows of quick-
fingered women, who throw out any broken, bruised or blighted beans, and sort them into two qualities. At the end of each belt, the graded beans are dumped into bushel hampers. Men nail on lids, paste on labels, and place the hampers on an electric conveyor which takes them to waiting refrigerator cars or to trucks. This season, Bud Lyons expects to ship between 500 and 600 carloads of beans northward, each containing 600 bushels.

In addition, he will ship thousands of bushels by truck, and others by boat from Port Everglades.

All the beans which Bud Lyons sends to market are of three varieties, the Bountiful, the Tender Green, and the Black Valentine Stringless to suit the taste of beans in the Northeast, South and West, respectively. Mr. Lyons himself likes all varieties equally well, he says, provided they are cooked as Mrs. Lyons prepares them, seasoned with a bit of pork.

Now, how did he do it? How, in this age when we are told that there are no more frontiers, did this former hired hand, a man of little education, build this great agricultural enterprise?

Bud Lyons was born of poor, farming parents in Lowndes County, Georgia. His mother died when he was a small child. When he was eleven years old, he moved...
with his father and brother, Clinton, to Pompano, then merely a tiny one-store settlement lost in the almost impassable Everglades. The senior Lyons’ worldly goods consisted of one mule, a wagon and a few tools. For years he and his two sons struggled to make a bare living on a five-acre patch of tomatoes, making pinch money by working for neighbors. When the United States went to war, Bud went too.

When he returned to his father’s patch of land, two important things happened to him. He started raising winter beans instead of tomatoes, on the advice of a visiting vegetable buyer, and he married pretty, brinette Lena Fisher, a Fort Lauderdale girl. That did a lot for him, he told me, because before he was married, he was never able to save a dollar.

By the end of 1919, by working a bean patch and by doing contract plowing for neighbors, he had accumulated $2,000. He sank his money into a piece of land near Fort Lauderdale, and that turned out to be one of the best investments he ever made. With the profit from its sale, he bought 99 acres of marshy wilderness west of Pompano, and started clearing and draining it himself. “If the state reclaims the land for me,” he argued, “I’ll pay for it in taxes. I’ll do my own reclaiming!”

Much of the land was under water. It was grown up with scrub pine, cypress, myrtle, myrtle hammock, wild willow and sawgrass. It was a matted jungle infested with malarial mosquitoes, deadly rattlesnakes and cottonmouth moccasins, alligators which might break a man’s leg with a swish of their tails if he happened to step on one of them uneasiers, and wildcats which made the nights hideous with their screeching.

Often, during those early years, when he worked on his land burning it over, ripping roots from the earth with mule power and dynamite, and digging ditches, Bud Lyons was sick and sallow from the chills and fever. Often, to protect himself and his mules from snakes, he carried a revolver on his hip. He is a dead shot, and once, he told me, he used up an entire box of cartridges, killing fifty moccasins, before he could get a team of mules through a low place in a new road.

Inch by inch at first, then much faster as he was able to afford more labor and machinery, Bud Lyons cleared and drained his 99 acres. As fast as he reclaimed it, he planted beans. He prospered, bought another 70 acres and, in a year when leaf hoppers destroyed the whole crop on his original farm, this 70 acres of new, uninfested land saved him from going deeply into the red.

In 1925, Bud Lyons was confronted with an entirely different kind of menace – the great Florida real estate boom. That year, when land prices all over the state soared sky-high, it was almost impossible to farm profitably because common labor was not available even at $5 a day. Bud Lyons raised only a small crop and, like everybody else, did some real estate speculating, but although he was offered up to $1,000 an acre he did not part with a single square foot of his bean land. He had worked too hard for it. It would have been like selling part of himself. When the great bubble burst, many other farmers who had sold their land for bumper prices and reinvested the money in other real estate were left high and dry, but Bud Lyons, while he had lost money in other speculations, still had his farm.

In 1931, when the depression was really biting down on industry and agriculture all over the nation, he saw fit to expand. He had $25,000 by then, and he put it all in a 1,000-acre tract of virgin Everglades. His friends advised him against this step. “You can never afford to clear it and bring it into bearing,” they told him, but Bud had had some experience in clearing land and, too, he was really beginning to appreciate what modern machinery could do. He bought the land, cleared it, and since that time he has gradually sunk his profits into more and more land. Today besides being outright owner of his own 4,000-acre bean patch, he is half owner of another tract equally large.

The bean king’s greatest recent farming triumph is in the field of marketing, and this accomplishment alone, I was told by J.D. Camp, president of the Broward Bank and Trust Company of Fort Lauderdale, is enough to distinguish him as an agricultural pioneer. Until a few years ago, Lyons sold all of his produce F.O.B. Pompano, as did other neighboring truck growers, to buyers who came south to bid for it. In 1932, dissatisfied with this arrangement, which often delayed shipments or left surpluses on his hands, Bud Lyons and his brother-in-law, Louis Fisher, set out on a nation-wide motor tour. They made personal contacts with commission merchants in every state of the Union and in Canada. “I’ll ship beans to you in carload lots when you want them,” Mr. Lyons told the commission men. “Furthermore, my beans will always be of as good or better quality than the label says they are.” Commission men everywhere welcomed this arrangement, and now Mr. Lyons disposes of 99 per cent of his crop by this method of delivering his own beans.

As an astute businessman, this dirt-farmer bean king. Even now he is hedging against the day when possibly he may find himself with too many beans in one basket. He is experimenting with new strains of cattle, hoping to develop a breed which can successfully withstand both the heat and insects of his particular section of the Everglades. Then if the demand for winter beans ever declines, he will simply sow sections of his land to grass and raise beef.

As I bid Bud Lyons good-bye, he made two requests of me. “Please don’t write too much about wildcats and malaria and all that,” he said. “We don’t have much of that kind of thing down here any more, and I don’t want you to scare tourists away from Florida. And don’t let your readers think that any small farmer can come down here with a small stake and do what I have done. There is plenty of room for pioneers in lots of places in the United States, but the Everglades truck business is a highly competitive one. I don’t want any little fellows to come down here and lose their money on account of me.”

This last remark is typical of the bean king. He is a kind king. When his employees, white or colored, are ill or in trouble, he takes care of them. As a result they are almost fanatically loyal to him. Dr. George S. McCleland [sic], a Pompano physician, who for many years has cared for the medical needs of the Lyons family and their employees, gave me a striking illustration of this loyalty.

Not long ago, Dr. McCleland [sic] said, a Negro boy about fifteen years old limped into his office and announced that he had just been bitten by a cottonmouth moccasin. While the doctor quickly gave him emergency treatment to prevent the spread of the lethal poison through his system, the boy explained that he had been bitten while picking beans beside one of the ditches on Bud Lyons’ farm. After he was bitten, he said, he sneaked aboard one of the bean trucks bound for town and came straight to the doctor’s office without telling anyone of his wound.

“Why didn’t you tell any of the other darkies?” asked Dr. McCleland [sic].

“If I’d a did that,” said the boy, “a lot of them black folks would have started ayellin’ and jabberin’ and awastin’ Mister Bud’s time. That wouldn’t a been right by Mister Bud, no, suh!”

A lot of people around Pompano, Florida, feel that way about Bud Lyons. He does right by them and they want to do right by him.