The Improvement of Citrus Fruit Grades From the Standpoint of the Packing House

Harold Crews, Winter Haven

Too often the grading of fruit, when honestly done, is regarded by the packing house manager or the grower whose fruit is thus graded as a harm rather than a benefit. Too often grading standards are made only to be sidestepped or broken wherever possible by some houses in the mistaken belief that the few slightly greater returns obtained for the fruit on which the grade is misrepresented is a greater asset to the house and to the grower than the consistent acceptance at market price of a pack honestly and uniformly graded.

In the above statements, to my mind, is the general gist of the grading situation from the viewpoint of the packing house. When all growers and all house managers realize that Lincoln's well phrased statement that you can't fool all of the people all of the time applies just as well to the fruit trade, our inspection force would have a task of education as to how to apply grading standards rather than the compulsory job of making houses live up to the established standards. The days of the successful application of the principle "let the buyer beware" are past. The trade is extremely wary of the product from a packing house which practices grade juggling. It sharply discounts that product on the first appearance of false standards.

On the other hand, I find that grading standards are generally accepted by packing houses and growers at large as an asset when properly applied. It is a pleasure to be able to say here that there has been a tremendous improvement in grade and pack during the past two or three years. I do not infer that we are approaching real near that perfection of high standard and consistent uniformity which I believe we all hope will come, but rather I contrast the situation during the last few seasons to those of years ago. Florida this season has had more low grade fruit than ever before and yet the grades in general have been closer to uniformity than at any time in my experience. For this, both operators and growers share the credit.

I believe we all realize the difficulty in the establishment of a definite, uniform standard in Florida. A great variation in fruit qualities exists throughout the state. There is an equally great variation between groves in the same section because of more favorable natural conditions and the finer or more careful cultural methods practiced.
In view of this situation, it is natural to ask, "What is a Number One or a Number Two fruit when that standard must be applied state-wide?" Any definition of state-wide grading rules for Number One and Number Two fruit must recognize that there is a distinct variation in quality between and in various sections of the producing belt and must strike at some line of uniformity and some basis of segregation, just and constant, if we are to succeed in marketing to the greatest advantage.

Generally, I consider that Number One fruit is that of a very good texture, shape and color. It must not be measurably affected by disease or mechanical injuries. In other words, Number One fruit comes within a reasonable range of being perfect.

When fruit falls below these standards noticeably and yet retains the above desirable features to a recognizable degree, it is Number Two, or Choice, fruit. This is all on condition, of course, that the eating quality and presence of juice is high.

All fruit which is generally of poor appearance, heavily affected by the marks of disease, pests or mechanical injuries should be thrown into the cull class. Right here I want to emphasize that in my opinion the industry makes a grave mistake in considering the so-called Number Three, or cull, fruit as a merchantable grade, any lowering of grading standards to include fruit of this type will produce a positive reaction in the trade standing of the brands whose grades are thus tampered with.

Many growers, and some shippers, have sold themselves the idea that any fruit that has juice is merchantable. After making due allowance for the outlet to canners, I believe that this idea is wrong, and that is the cause of a lot of our marketing difficulty. True, very heavily russeted grapefruit can be marketed in a certain section to advantage, but this area and this demand are limited. I believe that generally the statement applies: Fruit below Number Two grade is not merchantable except to canning plants. The fact that we have no defined Number Three grade bears me out in this opinion. And the fact that there is no defined standard for a Number Three fruit makes it all the more difficult to establish a generally merchantable, plain, cull or Number Three grade.

With all the variation in fruit of a similar variety which we have in the state, some might doubt the possibility of a real degree of standardization and uniformity. It is our practice to consider that the first basis of grading is the avoidance of contrast in the same pack. Though we may clearly see that certain sections produce a Number One fruit of a certain variety which is considerably ahead in general appearance and quality than the Number One fruit of another section, we also bear in mind that this first grade fruit of the less favored section is valuable and worthy of receiving more than the return due the Number Two fruit of the same section. The trade recognizes this basis of grading and stipulates when it desires brands or packs from
certain sections of the state. Some shippers have capitalized on this fact and developed certain markets to the continual acceptance of fruit from certain sections of the state, thereby maintaining in those markets consistency and uniformity.

Thus, a standard at best is only a minimum line or limit which we can draw to meet on one hand the desires of the trade, and on the other to obtain the most for the grower and operator. With this in mind, it should not be difficult to establish general standards or to maintain a reasonable extent of uniformity throughout the fruit belt.

This variation, as I have said, is not confined to sections, but appears to a large degree between the fruit of different groves in the same section. This should not necessarily mean that the less attractive fruit from one grove should be thrown into a lower grade. The fact a standard for a grade is the minimum limit allows some leeway. Also, general similarity of the somewhat less attractive fruit is in its favor. If the fruit of the two varying groves were thrown together in the pack, I would say the inferior probably would be reduced in grade, but regarded separately and handled separately as is usual except with the smallest groves, the less attractive fruit should make a good Number One pack and be accepted as such by the trade, if it conforms to the Number One limits.

In actual inspection in a house, we take 100 fruit from each grade from the bins. We classify this as Number One or Number Two according to the texture, shape, color, defects such as caused by lemon scab, melanose, thrip marks, mechanical injuries and so on. Therefore, we see this fruit by itself, and not in contrast with the fruit of a more favored grove and are able to see it from the viewpoint of the standard alone and whether or not it meets the minimum requirements of the grade.

This does, I believe, tend toward maintaining uniformity of grade considering the state as a whole. It does not penalize the producer of the less favored section or grove. It meets the requirements of the trade. The trade automatically will adjust the difference that exists in quality between two Number Ones. The trade knows of the variation that exists. It will pay the base price for both Number Ones and give the better Number One the margin it deserves.

Conditions affecting the quality of fruit probably have been worse this season than in any past-year. There has been all the more reason and necessity for close adherence to the standards. This is exampled forcibly by the reactions in a certain section which I will cite. This section has fine fruit ordinarily. It won a high trade preference in the past. It was affected considerably by the abnormal conditions of last year. Its management relaxed from the fairly regular grade and pack which built up the preference accorded it in the past. Today, the trade has swung away from the brands of this section. It has lost a large part of the markets it formerly enjoyed and has been heavily penalized in price in com-
parison with other sections. It now is rated by the trade among the less favored sections of the state, even though it does not deserve such rating when its normal crop is considered.

It has been a general inclination on the part of the grower and operator to vary the grade from one season to another as the volume of the different grades varied. In fact, in the past, in an unfavorable year, the grade has been run so low as to incur drastic penalties from the trade. Because of the heavier volume of lower grade fruit this season, the main difficulty in inspection has been the fear of many growers and operators that grading was to close. However, there has been no change in the standards adopted. The standard we are holding to is the same that several of the operators have followed for the past five years.

Previous to this year, there has been no concerted effort among the operators toward a standard pack. This season there is a large number of operators, who, through their affiliation with the Clearing House, have made a sincere effort to improve grading, attain more uniformity and make a more attractive package. While cupidity may have been a factor in the past, I believe past conditions in grade largely have been the result of a lack of knowledge of what really constitutes minimum standards. Much has been gained by education this season. There is still room for more, even among those who have advanced.

When any considerable number of operators disrupt the minimum standard they not only attract a penalty upon their own brands, but they bring all the fruit of the state into disrepute. Recognition of this fact will go far toward meeting some of our marketing difficulties.

Despite the great improvement made by the principal group of operators, we still have too large a percentage of operators and therefore too large a volume of fruit without regular inspection to maintain standards within necessary limits and attain more than a minimum degree of uniformity. This counter-balances the better work of the others. The improved practice of the majority can withstand the competition and unfavorable effects of the other only to a limited extent.

Like the poor, we probably will have the individually acting operators with us always. I believe it is best to look the facts in the face. It appears more and more to me that we will eventually have to invoke the power and authority of the state. Unless we can bring 90 per cent of the fruit of the state under one control for the standardization of grades, I believe we should have a state law compelling the listing of brands and standardization of grades enforced by efficient inspection.