

Stahmann Farms Produce Pecans on Two Hemispheres

By Donald L. Stepp and Ruth Vise

Cabeza de Vaca, shipwrecked in an expedition to the Gulf of Mexico in 1529, lived with an Indian tribe and wrote that the natives ate nothing but pecans for two months a year and yet remained strong and healthy. Other tribes added pecans to corn cakes and used the nuts for seasoning and thickening. George Washington is said to have carried them in his pocket, and he planted several trees. Pecans are the only nut native to the United States, and they were the only fresh food taken to the moon as part of Apollo Missions 13 and 14. They are grown by many individuals in the El Paso-Las Cruces area, but one name is synonymous with pecan growing: Stahmann.

The hot and dry Southwest climate brought many people suffering from tuberculosis to this area in the early years of the 20th century when it was discovered that patients here often recovered from the lung disease instead of succumbing to the illness in wetter environments. And so it was with the Stahmann family. William John (W. J.) Stahmann, a carriage craftsman in Bruce, Wis., uprooted his family in 1909 to come west in hopes of saving his wife Hannah, who had been diagnosed with TB.

Building two barges, W. J., his wife and three children traveled down the Mississippi River, sold the barges in Arkansas and continued across Texas until they settled in Fabens, where they began raising tomatoes, onions, alfalfa, cotton and rabbits. An expert bee keeper, W. J. also set up a honey-making business with bees he brought from Wisconsin. However, because the water that irrigated their land was brackish and of low quality, W. J. feared that it might become too saline for their crops. So they packed up and moved further west to the Mesilla Valley in New Mexico, not far from the location of Elephant Butte Dam, which had been constructed in 1916, and offered better irrigation possibilities.

According to a 1982 *Las Cruces Sun* article, W. J. and his son Deane bought most of the Santo Tomás Land Grant, some 6,000 to 7,000 acres, in 1926 and began raising cotton on 200 of those acres. After his father died in 1929, Deane sold several parcels of land and kept about 2,900 acres, later acquiring the Snow Farm of 1,100 acres, for a total of 4,000 acres. When the Depression hit, farms began to fail. Mesilla Valley farmers saw cotton drop “from 29 cents a pound in 1923 to 6-1/2 cents in 1934, with some local farmers receiving as little as 4 cents a pound,” according to Linda G. Harris, author of *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*.

Much of the land the Stahmanns purchased consisted of sand dunes covered with mesquite bushes, hardly prime farming land. However, Deane prepared the land with a “hootenanny,” a large pumping unit that he built and used to pump river water through a fire hose that sent out a jet of water about 200 feet.

Using this water force, they leveled 3,800 acres between 1930 and 1939.

Deane and his wife Joyce, known as *abuelita* by her family, had three children: Deane Jr., William John II (Bill), and Mary. They were born in El Paso where the family lived while the Mesilla farm was being

southern end of the farm, the first large-scale attempt to establish pecan trees as a money crop in the Mesilla Valley. This would be the beginning of a nursery stock business that lasted more than 40 years. It also was the beginning of the largest family-owned pecan business in the country.

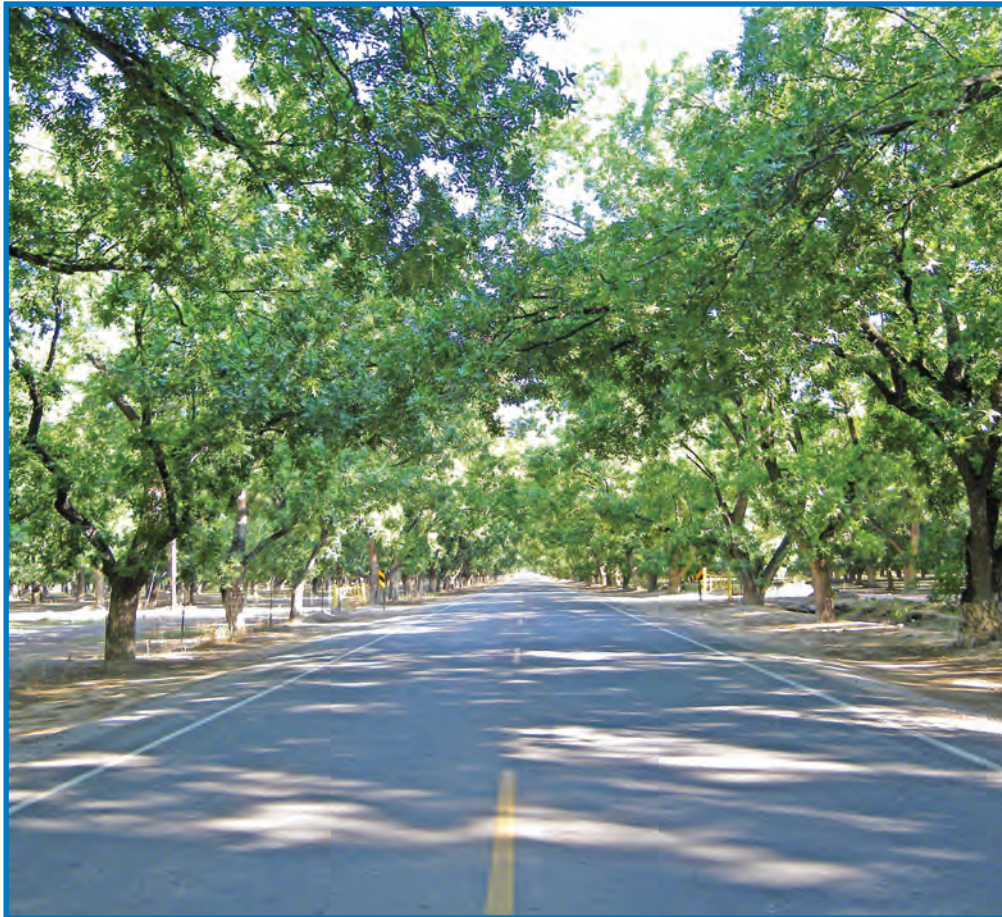
It takes five to seven years for pecan trees to produce nuts and about 25 years for a tree to mature. Therefore, the Stahmanns not only continued to grow cotton but alfalfa, lettuce and onions. Cantaloupes and cucumbers were grown between the trees. Cattle mingled in the fields to provide natural fertilizer, but when the family discovered that the cows had damaged the earth and caused drainage problems, they were no longer allowed to graze inside the orchard.

However, Deane still needed to provide a high nitrogen fertilizer. Moreover, the cotton needed to be hoed continuously to eliminate weeds and grass. Always an agricultural innovator, Deane introduced 25,000 white Chinese geese in 1953 that not only kept weeds under control but also provided the desired fertilizer. The number of geese increased when the Stahmanns noticed the birds did not damage the cotton, and the fields fed the geese. After harvesting the cotton, Deane sold up to 200,000 quick frozen adult geese yearly under the Armour Star label. He also leased geese as weeders all over the country. Later when pre-plant herbicides eliminated the need for geese, the Stahmanns replaced them with 30,000 chickens, which provided even better fertilizer and 50 cases of eggs per day sold under the Stahmann label.

Nothing went to waste at this farm. By-products became new business ventures. In 1957 a *New York Times* article wrote about the Stahmanns selling the branches and trunks of pruned pecan trees after being sorted by length and thickness for use in barbecue grills and pits. Grilling enthusiasts can still buy such tree prunings in Las Cruces.

Deane continued innovation and research on the farm both with the pecan orchards and cotton fields. He constantly tried to improve cotton strains and produced the Del Cerro (“of the hill or highlands”) strain, his “longest and strongest” cotton, which became a major crop in South Africa, according to a *Denver Post* article. Deane also established research farms in Mexico and Jamaica studying cotton strains which grew year round. Strains developed by Deane are still being grown all over the world.

By the 1950s Deane had built two shelling plants handling 8,000 pounds of pecans daily and marketed different sizes of nut kernels for ready consumption and cooking under the same Del Cerro brand. Until 1967, harvesting of the pecans was done by hand, resulting in as many as 1,000 workers at the farm. Besides the shelling plants, the business included a central office



Stahmann Farms' mature pecan trees arch over N.M. Highway 28, providing shade and a spectacular view for travelers on their way to Mesilla and Las Cruces. (Photo by Heather Coons)

established. The road to Mesilla was just a winding trail through mesquite and sand dunes, not the pleasant paved N.M. Highway 28 of today.

Although Deane kept growing cotton for more than 50 years, he did not begin planting pecan trees by design.



Stahmann's Country Store offers pecans and related treats. (Photo by Heather Coons)

In 1932, a man selling seedlings that the original buyer in El Paso could not pay for came up the valley and Deane bought the 2,000 trees. He planted them at the

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tanning. Colonists cultivated grapes, apples, pears, apricots and peaches, as well as artichokes and asparagus, some of which was taken by thieving neighbors.

But the climate was no friend to the farmers. Heat warped irrigation pipes. Floods washed away new crops. Fires destroyed farm equipment. Soon, the huge farming enterprise was overrun with debt.

The colonists also had an extensive herd of dairy cattle to provide milk for the children. High-quality cattle that filled barns and corrals gradually decreased in number as neighboring families also made off with the colony's animals.

While the external complications were plenty, it was the internal strife that brought about the colony's demise.

During Shalam's conception in 1884, Newbrough was still married to his first wife, Rachel. He was granted a divorce on Oct. 6, 1886. Newbrough and Frances Sweet were married in 1887, causing dissension amongst the colonists, as well as rumors of free-love and easy character.

The well publicized trial of Ellis vs. Howland and Newbrough over ownership of the land and delay of agricultural plans also played a major role in the demise of the colony. Cutting remakes made by the presiding judge, Justice A. A. Freeman, caused derogatory publicity, and recruitment of potential colonists came to a halt.

Ultimate disaster befell the colony in 1891 when Newbrough died of influenza. Frances Newbrough and Andrew Howland attempted to revive the faded dream. In 1893 they were married to quiet sordid rumors. For almost a decade, they struggled to keep the colony going.

By 1900, Shalam was destitute. The school closed, children rebelled and colonists squabbled. They officially disbanded in 1901, with the remaining children sent to orphanages in Texas and Colorado.

Andrew Howland sold Shalam in 1907 for \$60,000. He and Frances settled in El Paso, selling vegetarian snacks.

The Newbroughs' daughter, Justine, changed her name to Jone Howland, and wrote for an El Paso newspaper.

Never reaching the hundreds predicted, the 50 children of Shalam grew up, most abandoning their Faithist training. Some found relatives, others wandered.

The Faithists of Shalam scattered throughout the West. Some started their own colonies, all to be short-lived. In 1942, Faithists led by Wing Anderson bought property in Utah and Colorado for orphanages and agriculture. Today, there are about 1,500 Faithists in the United States, and the *Oahspe* is still in print and available online, but very little of Shalam can be seen. Amidst cottonwood trees stands the studio, the sole surviving building, where Newbrough painted religious art while children colored at his feet.

The history of this short-lived utopian society, laced with fact and fiction, is attracting new attention. The Shalam Colony & Oahspe Museum in Las Cruces is located at 1910 Calle de Niños. T. Robin Riley, a former NMSU professor now teaching in Minnesota, has recently produced a documentary film on the colony and curated an exhibit in 2009 at the Farm and Ranch Museum in Las Cruces. Can Hollywood be far behind? 🍿

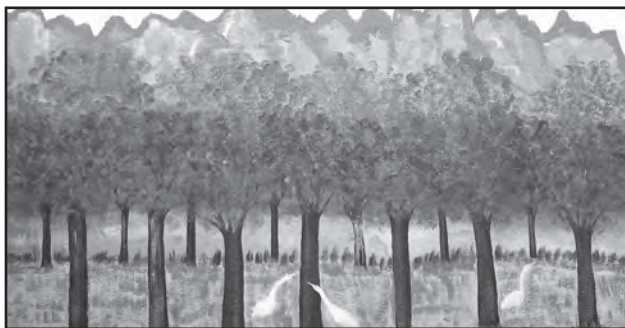
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building, the slaughtering and freezing plants for the geese, a blacksmith shop, a machine shop, a store and a clinic with a nurse, producing the atmosphere of a little town.

Employees lived in company housing and in early days bought their food and other necessities in a commissary which became the Stahmann Country Store, the retail outlet for pecans and related products. Later a modern three-story processing plant replaced the other two plants, and mechanical shakers greatly reduced the number of employees. By 1989, the Stahmanns halted processing activities, but they worked with the New Mexico Department of Labor to retrain and find their former employees other jobs.

Deane also built an airstrip high atop a mesa on his property and acquired several aircraft, including B-26 bombers used in World War II and small jets, that he used for various activities, such as crow patrol (the birds love pecans), spraying of herbicides and fertilizer and freight and charter passenger service. At one time, he even provided commuter airline service in southern New Mexico.

In the 1960s, Deane's son, Deane Jr., worked for Barry Goldwater and announced he would leave the country if Lyndon Johnson became president. Johnson did—and so did Deane Jr. He convinced his father to buy 1,800 acres in New South Wales, Australia, to establish a branch of Stahmann Farms, and in 1965



This mural on the side of the Country Store depicts Stahmann Farms' young trees. (Photo by Heather Coons)

planted the first pecan trees at his farm named Las Piedras ("the rocks" or "the stones" in Spanish) at Gatton in Queensland. Soon after, he did the same at the much larger farm named Trawalla (Aboriginal for "flood waters") near Moree in New South Wales. In 1979, Deane Jr. sold 250,000 pounds of the nuts in the shell to China, opening an important market.

Deane Sr. died in 1970, and many changes occurred at the Mesilla Valley farm over the next few years. Cotton ceased to be planted, and the tree nursery was phased out. The chickens were sold and the facilities leased to a Mississippi firm with the agreement that the Stahmanns would still get the manure from the chickens. While Bill Stahmann was in charge of the American operations, Deane Jr. managed the Australian farms.

The Australian branch of Stahmann Farms funded research to find alternate ways to rid the trees of two main pests, the green vegetable bug and the Maroga or stem girdler, and introduced a native wasp and a South American parasite which all but eliminated these threats to the trees. Biological solutions are still an important part of Stahmann's operations both in Australia and New Mexico, the latter farm using ladybugs and lacewing flies, among other natural controls. The Australian farm employs a full time entomologist. In 2010, the first fully certified organic pecans are being produced at the farm near Gatton in Australia.

Stahmann trees provide a beautiful canopy of shade for travelers and tourists who take the slow rural road to Las Cruces from El Paso. Today, Stahmann's in the Mesilla Valley is still operated by the family and the 128,000 trees produce some 8,000,000 pounds of Western Schley and Bradley varieties of pecans per year. A large variety of candies, snacks and gift items are available at the Stahmann Country Store and also may be ordered online. One hundred years after the Stahmann family came to the Southwest for health reasons, the name still stands for quality pecans and innovative farming methods. 🌳

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made, Robles is the Trustee for District 3 of El Paso Community College.

When Jessica Oracio asked Robles, "What do you foresee for the Latina community?" she responded quickly, "There is no limit nowadays. It's wide open when you have Justice Sotomayor in the Supreme Court, when you see Latina women in aerospace, the military, boards of major corporations. I am a strong proponent of educating the women because you educate the family."

The senior class of Bowie High School knew what they were doing when they selected Belen Robles "Most Likely to Succeed" all those many years ago! ☺

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June Davidson, an actor with the Upstairs Theater, stated in an *El Paso Times* article written by Pat Henry entitled "Spooked Actors Insist 'Stage Fright' is No Act," that stage lights would mysteriously change colors or explode and props would fall for no reason.

Bill Logan, another thespian with the Upstairs Theater, stated in that same article that he and two others saw the image of Pancho Villa across the street and heard the jangling of his spurs on the first floor.

I had to know if the building was really haunted. Playing a hunch, I went downtown and ended up having a conversation with the law office's receptionist, Natalie Castillo, mentioned at the beginning of this story.

Not only did Castillo admit to seeing things out of the corner of her eye and feeling as if someone else were in the room, she also recalled hearing from housekeeping staff that doors rattled for no reason. Castillo was adamant that the activity was in no way negative. "It's not bad. I just know something's there."

Just a little over 100 years ago, El Paso's social elite gathered together to form an alliance in an effort to build a better city for future generations. Because of their commitment, the borderland prospered. The Toltec Building was the home for these progressive-minded individuals, and its members left us with more than the buildings and improvements they made for our area, like Elephant Butte Dam, the electric and water companies, banks, schools and the university. They left us with a legacy: working together for the prosperity of the community.

Too many important people walked the halls of the Toltec Building, and too many important events took place inside its sacred walls for it not to have left an indelible mark. Whether it's haunted or not, the building's unique shape and history make it one of El Paso's major landmarks. 🏢