



'Blue Rose' rice and the man who made it possible

By MARY ALICE FONTENOT

Sol Wright was considered an eccentric by his peers. They called him a crank and a dreamer.

That was before the world of agriculture acclaimed him the "Wizard of Rice" and compared his achievements with those of Luther Burbank.

Wright's contribution to the rice farming interests of the United States dominates the entire history of the industry, overshadowing whatever had already happened and whatever was to happen. His awesome genius in breeding new rice varieties — a work which reversed the direction of a major food industry — has few parallels in the history of agriculture.

Sol Wright was one of the thousands of Yankee farmers lured to southwest Louisiana by advertisements of cheap land.

The former Indiana wheat farmer liked Louisiana from the start. His first rice crop brought in \$1,900 — \$400 more than he had paid for his 320-acre farm near Crowley. Within a few years he was recognized as one of the leading rice producers of Acadia Parish.

From the start Wright was interested in improving the quality of the rice he raised. He put into practice methods of cultivation that he had learned from his own experimentation: improved techniques of selecting seed, irrigation, levee construction and controlling red rice and other undesirable grasses.

The years that Wright spent testing out his own farming improvement procedures led him into another experimental quest: the development of an American rice seed.

At that time there were only two varieties of seed rice, Japan and Honduras, both imported. The available seeds, mostly hybrids, after two genera-

tions would break up in the milling process. Other factors were adversely affecting the industry: yields were decreasing at an alarming rate; the intrusion of salt water into the irrigating streams and a bad market had seriously crippled the rice business. The industry, which had begun so auspiciously, had all the symptoms of a terminal illness.

Sol Wright was no scientist. Chances are he had never heard of Charles Darwin, but he did know nature and its working from personal observation. He set about improving the quality of seed rice.

Night after night, no matter how wearisome the day had been, he sat, in bathrobe and slippers, examining grains of rice by the light of a kerosene lamp. He opened the hulls of thousands of grains and carefully examined each. The least chalky grains, the ones that were more crystalline, he put aside for planting.

As soon as the selected seeds matured and produced new grain, he went through the same process, selecting, rejecting, planting again; examining, selecting, planting, again and again.

Finally, in 1907, the breakthrough came. One historic night Wright opened the hull of a grain of rice, and there was the perfect grain — fully formed, hard, crystalline clear.

That one grain of rice was to become the parent of the seed that determined the destiny of the industry.

Wright named his newly developed variety of rice "Blue Rose." It was five years before there was enough of it to supply the commercial market, but when it did become available it brought new life to the Louisiana rice belt and thence to the world.



Sol Wright

Had Wright been able to patent his rice seed he would have become an instant millionaire.

The program of breeding better seed rices was continued. Night after night, year after year, except for special occasions Wright spent his evenings examining grains of rice under a magnifying glass, scrutinizing each from every angle, measuring, taking notes. Blue Rose, and the other varieties he bred successfully, are the basis for the strong, disease-resistant American rice seed being used today.

The human interest in the Sol Wright story was recognized by one of America's top novelists, Frances Parkinson Keyes. Her Louisiana novel, "Blue Camellia," is based on his life and experiments. Blue Rose Museum, on the site of his experimental farm near Crowley, was established as a memorial to him. His contribution to Louisiana agriculture is noted in the Louisiana history books now in use in Louisiana schools.