Worms for Sale

For one young entrepreneur from Texas, worm wrangling really paid off.

By Boyce Freitag

I was raised in a farming and ranching community called Bee Cave about 17 miles west of Austin, Texas. Mama and Daddy would go into town to shop for staples, fruit and meat, but they rarely bought a vegetable. We raised every vegetable you can imagine in a half-acre garden next to our house.

It was really enjoyable having a garden, but it was a lot of work, too. Mama would put kerosene oil in a coffee can and send me out to pick bugs off the plants and drop them into the can. Of course, we could have bought insecticide to kill the bugs, but my labor was a lot cheaper. Besides, we had more important things to spend our money on.

Digging potatoes was my favorite chore. I liked the excitement of not knowing what was down there until I turned the pitchfork. A big, healthy plant might have the littlest potatoes or even no potatoes at all. On the other hand, a scrawny plant might have four or five huge potatoes on it.

Another exciting thing about digging potatoes was finding earthworms for my worm bed. The worm bed was a simple wooden box filled with soil, which had to be kept moist. I fed them coffee grounds and table scraps, which cost nothing. We recycled before it became popular! We used the worms when we went fishing, which was quite often, because fish was one of our main foods.

Every February, we had to prepare the garden for planting. Daddy didn't have a plow, so he hired someone to do it. He usually hired our neighbor, Bunky Grumbles, who had two horses and a turning plow. He plowed gardens and fields for several of our neighbors. Plowing was hard work. You really had to know how to handle a team of horses. It took Bunky about half a day to plow our garden, but when he was finished, the rows were nice and straight.

I liked to walk barefoot behind the plow and feel the soil crumble between my toes. As I followed along, I would pick up earthworms and put them in a tin can. Later I would add them to my worm bed.

Bunky Grumbles plows the family garden. Behind him is the author's father, George Freitag.

We lived on Bee Creek Road, and fishermen came by our house on their way to Bee Creek or the Pedernales River to fish. One day in 1948, I had a great idea: Why not sell my earthworms to those fishermen? When I mentioned my idea to Mama and Daddy, they agreed that I could try it. Daddy did warn me not sell *all* the worms because we needed some for ourselves.

I found some old boards and made a sign. I painted "WORMS FOR SALE" on it and set it out beside the road. I asked 25 cents for 100 average

worms, about 3 inches. A few were 5–6 inches long, and they sold for a penny each. That was a lot of money for an 8-year-old boy in those days.

One day, two men stopped and asked to see my worms. They were planning to spend a week on the river, and they wanted to be sure they had plenty of bait.

When I showed them the bed, they wanted to know how many worms were in it. I said I didn't know. One of the gentlemen dug around in the box and said he figured it would be hard to count them all. He asked if I would take $3 for the whole box.

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I had never seen that much money in my life. I was about to say yes when I remembered that my daddy had said not to sell all of the worms.

"Mister, I sure want to take your offer, but I have to keep some worms so I can start a new bed."

He said that sounded like a good business plan. I ran and got a bucket, and we put enough worms and soil in it to make a new start. Then the gentlemen took my worm bed and were on their way.

I ran to the road and took my sign down because I was temporarily out of business. As I said, it was a *terrific* idea! ❖

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