

Mountain of melons moves to market

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN

BLUE BALL — A mountain of melons has moved out of Eastern Lancaster County to big-city markets this year.

By the time the season ends in a week or so, approximately 450,000 cantaloupes and watermelons will have been direct marketed by the Conestoga Valley Growers to Acme and other supermarket chains in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Scranton.

It marks the first time that local growers have banded together to market their melon crop directly to central metropolitan markets without involving a "middle man."

"It's taken three years to put this program together," explains Lester W. Martin, R2 East Earl, on whose property along Rt. 322 east of Blue Ball is located a new distribution shed in which the melons are received from growers and loaded into trailers for the hauls to the city markets.

"Being our first year, we've had some problems with the growers understanding the market situation and the markets understanding the grower's situation.

"But the fresh fruit and vegetable market is unique. You must work with what you have."

The Conestoga Valley Growers is comprised of about 40 growers raising cantaloupes, eight with cauliflower and about five with watermelons.

The Board of Directors includes 10 growers and seven representatives of the markets they serve. A single price for the produce is set by the board and then held for the entire season.

"Previously, you had farmers getting one price at the beginning of the season and then throwing a couple thousand over the back fence at the peak of the season," Martin explained.

Some fall greens may also be marketed through the Growers' group.

Last weekend was the peak of the cantaloupe season when 15 tractor trailer loads were shipped from the Blue Ball distribution shed. Each trailer holds 7600 to 8000 melons.

On Wednesday, the 50th trailer load was loaded at the shed.

Melons picked in the early morning arrive at the shed in many ways — smaller truck, tractor and wagon and horse and wagon.

Entire families, from young children on up, help unload the fragile fruit into palletted bulk melon crates. These are loaded into the refrigerated trailers by forklift.

The direct marketing effort, according to Martin, is an attempt to help area farmers keep abreast of changing agricultural economics.

"We must be able to get the most income off each acre," Martin said.

"We need a cash crop, such as melons, because the income is just no longer there from red meat alone.

"This was our first time and we were able to keep our heads above water,

"We'll grow with the situation and learn each year from our mistakes.

"We're learning what we can and can't do in working with central markets."

Eventually, in a few years, the group may work toward a hydro-cool facility, which would prepare fruit and vegetables and provide time for shipment. But such a facility would cost about \$100,000.

As with many crops in 1981, this was a unique season for the cantaloupes.

"I was talking to one grower," Martin said, "and this is the first time he's seen such a season in the past 15 or so."

The melon season after transplant started off dry in June. Then, the big July 4 holiday rains arrived.

The melons exploded into growth and were really pushed. Then, they entered a starvation stage. The larger melons on the vine started robbing what moisture there was from the smaller.

The ends got soft and fruit turned yellow in the field. And then, growers couldn't keep up with the ripening.

"In my own field," Martin explained, "production is down about one-third. They peaked so quickly we couldn't pick them fast enough."

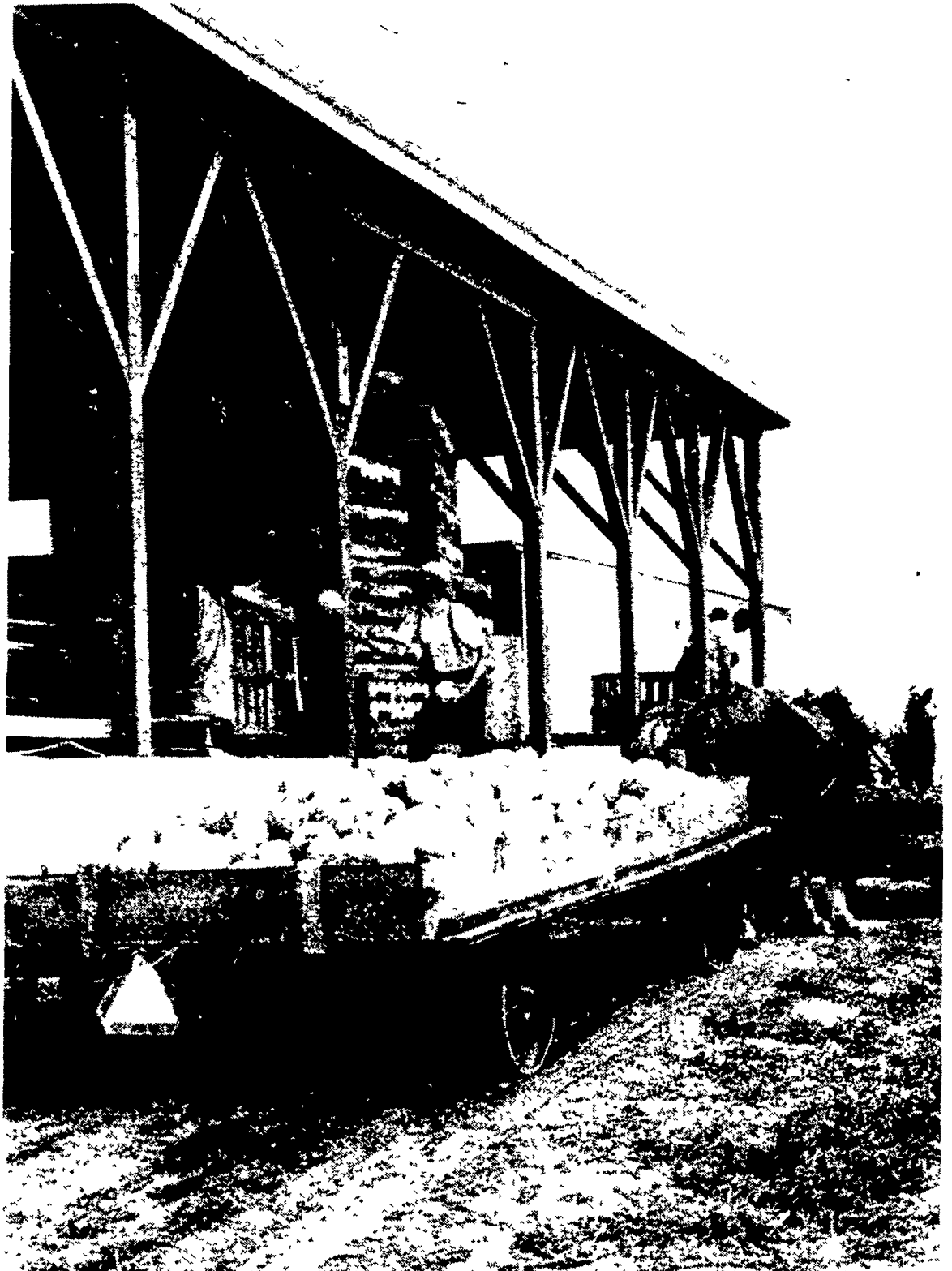
Average yield of cantaloupes is about 7,000 to the acre. Martin

estimates he got about 3500. Some growers got worse and some better than that.

In this first year, donated labor has played a large role in the marketing program. The shed was constructed with volunteer labor

and the processing of the melons is done in much the same way.

And if this marketing trend continues, as it is expected to, Acme will need to expand its "Lancaster Brand" from its meats to the produce section.



Load of cantaloupes arrives by horse-drawn wagon at distribution shed along Rt. 322 east of Blue Ball and unloading into melon crates begins. Cantaloupes are transferred to tractor trailers, in background, for trip to big-city supermarkets.



Children of Amos Martin, Blue Ball, help unload another load of cantaloupes for shipment to metropolitan supermarkets.



Lester W. Martin, foreground, checks in crate load of cantaloupes; while Nevin Martin on forklift prepares to move it to waiting tractor trailer truck.