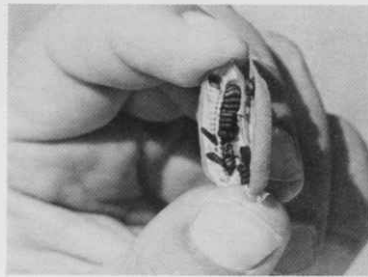


THE BOTTOM LINE IS PRIDE



A. FERTIG

The Leffels pioneered sesame harvesting
in the Yuma area.

by Lorraine B. Kingdon

First, it was a challenge to survive. Now the Leffels are challenged to find ways to machine-harvest the specialty crops becoming increasingly important in Yuma County.

Leon Leffel started custom harvesting in 1947 in Maricopa County, carrying on a tradition begun by his wife's family. Leon jokes that his son, Rick, started in the business at birth; actually, Rick was driving a harvester when he was in the sixth grade. He's been a full-time custom harvester for 22 years.

When Leon moved to Yuma in 1949, survival was a challenge. "Three big custom harvesters had the area sewed up. Times were harder, and we had to get work other people didn't get — or want," he says. Cotton harvesting was still a mainstay, but the competition was fierce. So, Leon started harvesting small acreages of special crops.

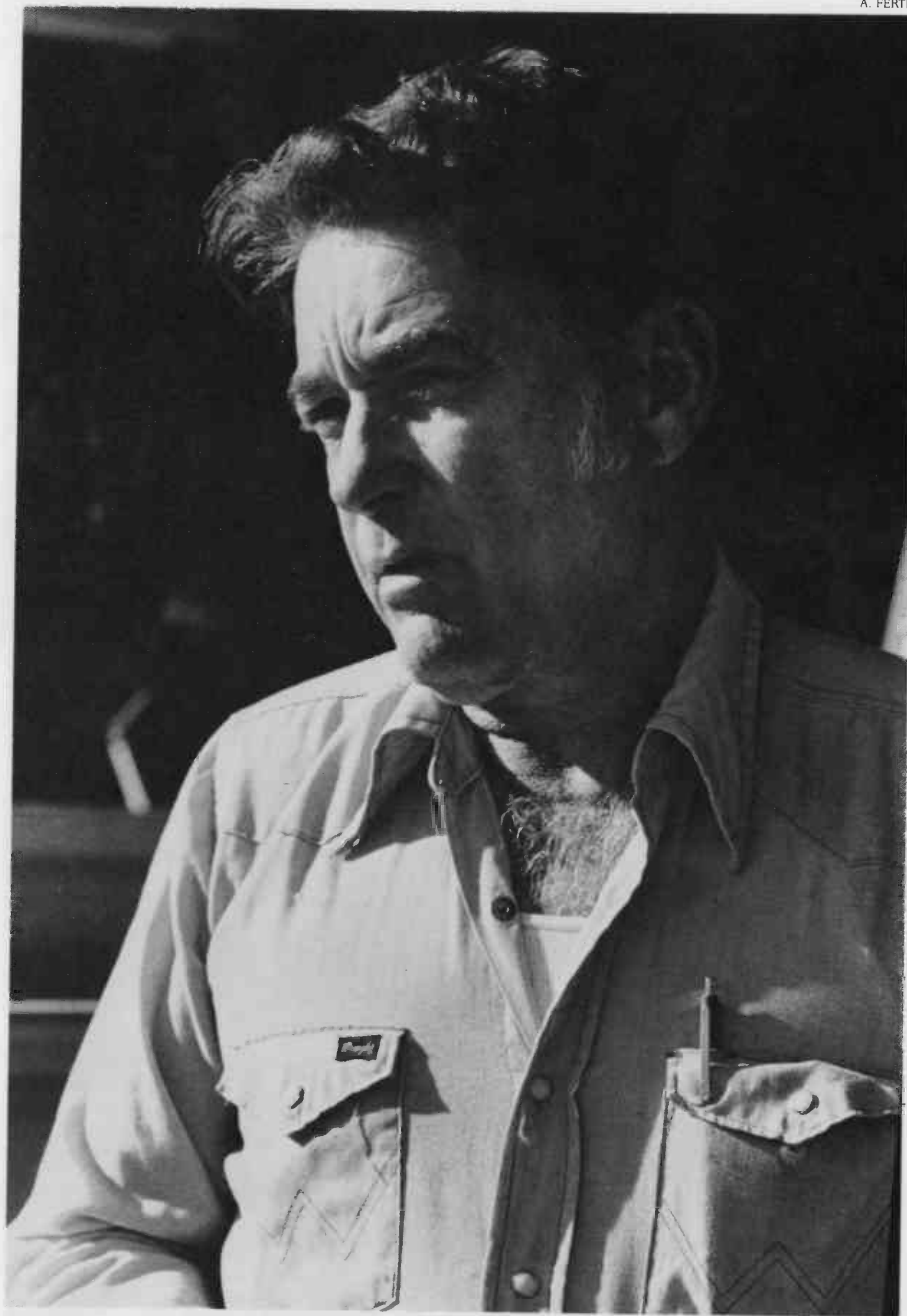
Nobody else wanted to harvest 25 acres of vegetable seed. "They were just a nuisance to the big boys," Leon says. Now, he adds proudly, "I do more special crops than anyone else."

In addition to harvesting 20,000 acres of wheat every year and most of the sesame seed grown in the county, the Leffels have the machinery and crews to take care of an astounding number of crops.

The list is a long one: alfalfa, artichoke, barley, Bermuda grass, beets, bok choy, broccoli, cantalope, carrots, celery, chard, Chinese cabbage, edible chrysanthemums for the Japanese market, guar, lettuce, maize (milo), millet, mung beans, mustard, okra, onion, safflower, soybeans, turnips, white radish, and rapeseed. Oh yes, don't forget sunflower seed, a new crop this year.

Harvesting seed crops is a painstaking job requiring a team of detail-conscious experts. Rick points out that machines are responsible for only the final harvest step. "The crop is hand-cut, hand-stacked, even hand-pitched into the harvester. The seed's worth \$50 to \$60 a pound; we can't damage it. We have to meet seed certification standards."

The Leffels must keep their machinery extremely well-tuned. It has to be cleaned completely between



Leon Leffel started custom harvesting in 1947.

seed crops. They're willing to take the kind of care that farmers ask for.

Leslie Kammann, Yuma area vegetable seed grower, says, "The Leffels are the best. Perfectionists. Any type of equipment that's needed, they bring — whether it's a small combine, a large combine or a rotary machine for radish seed."

Kammann says the Leffels record every combine setting they use, a

practice that gives the harvesters a head start on the next year's crop. "My father started using their services when he left off combining 30 years ago."

Crops grown to provide seeds don't take up large acreages. Kammann has 40 acres of cauliflower that's harvested for seed; he says it's the world's largest field.

If harvesting takes a perfectionist,



Sesame is just one of many specialty crops the Leffels harvest in the Yuma area.

so does growing seed. It takes careful attention to preparing the ground for planting, fertilizers, and herbicides. No vegetable grower wants to buy weed-contaminated seed.

UA Yuma County Cooperative Extension is helping out with one major problem seed growers face. Now that raising seed has become an important industry in the county, growers are increasingly concerned with keeping their crops isolated for genetic purity.

Seeds have to germinate true to their specific variety. If they don't meet seed company specifications, the seeds are tossed out.

Don Howell, Yuma UA Extension agricultural agent, says fields of seed broccoli must be at least 1.5 miles apart; a two-mile separation is required between broccoli and cauliflower. These are only two examples.

To help different growers keep track of what is planted where, Howell has put up a map-board in his office this year. Already growers representing 11 seed companies have marked-in their fields of onions, broccoli, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, mustard greens and radishes.

Sesame also is grown for its seeds, but these are for food. The Leffels pioneered sesame harvesting in the Yuma area. Currently, nearly 7,000 acres of sesame are growing under contract to Sesaco Corporation in Yuma and the California Imperial Valley.

Ray Langham, co-founder of Sesaco, says the greatest problem with sesame is its tendency to shatter. When the plant dries, the seed pods open and the small, feather-light seeds drop to the ground, lost to the harvest. Depending on the weather while the cut sesame lies in windrows drying out, harvesting losses can be as high as 50 percent.

"The secret is being as gentle as possible," says Rick Leffel. He and his dad destroyed three machines trying to learn how to harvest sesame gently.

Once the problem was Langham's effort to breed sesame varieties that were shatterproof. They succeeded. "One variety was so bulletproof, it actually broke the combine," Leon comments. These days, Langham is breeding shatter resistant varieties.

A. FERTIG

While Leon says that sesame can be harvested using any farmer's regular combines, the custom harvesting team have added a few special adaptations to their harvesters. A built in air cushion lifts plants more gently from the windrow. A front duct system picks up seeds lost between the rakes. Rick says, "We can save about one-third the crop weight without really modifying the innards of the combine."

Modifying their machines is old hat to the Leffels. Rick says, "We don't own a machine we haven't changed in some way." Both he and his dad obviously take a great personal pride in their machinery. The gleaming row of 14 pieces of harvest equipment and the well-equipped maintenance shop are evidence.

So is one small combine. It's 21 years old and is still being run every day.

The Leffels' working season starts in April and doesn't wind down until January. The four months in between they spend overhauling machinery, which doesn't leave much time for vacations. Rick took five days last year, his first vacation in three years.




Custom harvesting often means customizing the machinery. That chore is old hat to Rick Leffel.

Whenever they buy new equipment, Rick estimates it takes 14 days to get it "field-ready." "That's money out of our pocket," he comments ruefully. For example, elevator chains always need alignment. If the sprockets are off, seed can be lost through holes. Or, if the chain rubs the housing, it can wear through and seed can be lost.

"We can do an overhaul in our shop here much quicker than fix a mess in the field," Rick says. He emphasizes maintaining their equipment, not repairing it. It makes sense; if a piece breaks down, it could take another part with it.

Leon points to another example of their care. They keep a log on all the bearings in all their equipment. It's hard to judge when nongreaseable bearings are going to wear down and possibly ruin a shaft, Leon believes. So they change all the bearings at one time rather than piecemeal, a few at a time.

The bottom line is pride. As Rick puts it, "A poorer quality job doesn't bother some people. It does us. We have pride in what we do. Our name means something to us." 

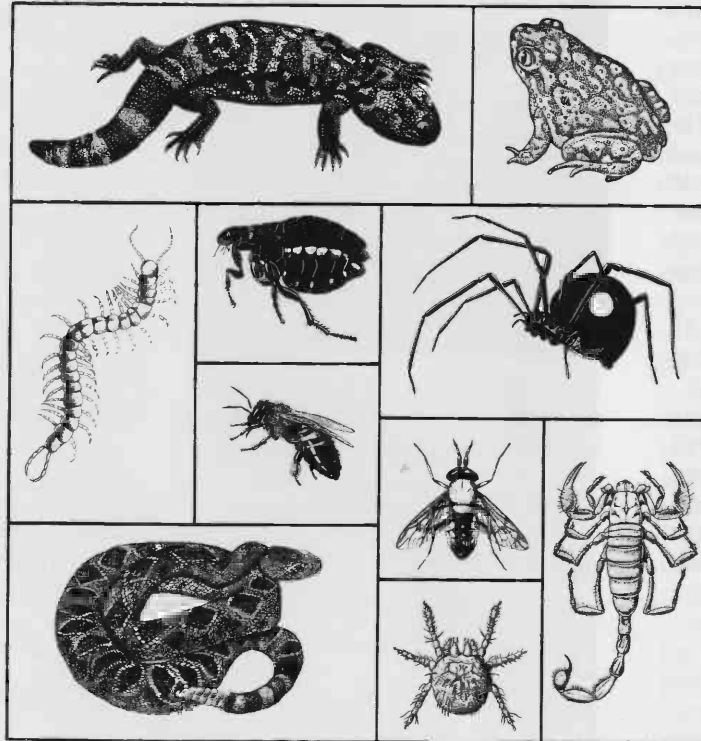
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