

# Celebrating 75 Years & Growing

*By Diane Jackson*



## NATIONAL PECAN SHELLERS AND PROCESSERS ASSOCIATION

For more than 75 years, the National Pecan Shellers Association (NPSA) has been committed to its stated mission: to support and promote the interest of pecan shellers and the global industry to assure quality, safety and integrity of pecan products worldwide.

NPSA has played a critical role as a solutions provider for pecan shellers by implementing a wide variety of programs and services. Among these programs have been best practices related to food safety and original research on processing and sanitation procedures; business benchmarks through labor and wage; and operating ratio surveys, size and color

standards; statistical programs covering crop size and product inventories; regular reports and updates from Washington, D.C.; and so much more.

Also, the association has closely monitored and reported on government pecan statistics on crop production and cold storage as well as imports and exports and, on many occasions, its members have successfully worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service and other agencies to correct inaccuracies in their reports.

Starting in February 2018, NPSA celebrates its 75th Anniversary with its roots dating back to 1943. NPSA

*Published in DeWayne McCasland's book, "They Must Have been Nuts," this photo shows the first meeting of the National Pecan Shellers and Processors Association in Aug. 16, 1944 in New Orleans, Louisiana. The pecan industry had representation from across the country since the beginning. And that's still true today.*  
(Photo from DeWayne McCasland)

has evolved over the past 75 years into a community of commercial shellers, nearly all multi-generation family businesses, who have devoted their lives and careers to the pecan industry.

For the pecan industry as a whole, NPSA has spent the past two decades as the leading resource for pecan information to industry, media, consumer, culinary and health professionals; promoting research that supports the health benefits of pecans; encouraging culinary professionals to include pecans in their recipes and new product development; and inspiring consumers to integrate pecans into their diets and lifestyles.

Starting in the mid-1990s, NPSA spearheaded the industry's only efforts to fund and promote scientific research documenting pecans' health benefits. Over the years, NPSA raised, entirely through voluntary contributions from shellers and growers, some \$4 million to support these efforts. As a result, millions of people heard about pecans' contributions to a healthful diet for the first time.

NPSA also has consistently recognized the importance of industry unity. Growers and industry suppliers participate actively in NPSA, including

seats on the Board of Directors and the Marketing, Promotion and Research Committee. Those contributions from growers and others have provided unique



insights and brought tremendous value to NPSA. In addition, NPSA initiated pecan industry leadership summits and joint conferences with growers and has annually reported on NPSA programs at grower meetings.

"What stands out to me right now is the speed with which the pecan industry is expanding," explains Dan York, the current NPSA Chair. "With exports of in-shell and kernels plus the establishment of the Federal Marketing Order in late 2016 and the formation of the American Pecan Council (APC), we have gone from a cottage industry

into an international force. In my experience, the perception in years past was that pecans were loaded with calories from fat. But now, as it turns out, the healthy fat content is the driving force for the exponential consumer awareness of the health benefits of pecans.

"As a sheller colleague so precisely said recently, our business is still in its infancy. The wave is still cresting. One of the more important challenges we face is that the demand for pecans is taxing the supply, especially over the past four to five years, and there is no letting up in the near future."

### **Pecan Industry Pioneers**

Helping pave the way to this bright future, numerous pioneers led and contributed to the pecan industry over the past 75 years. From the large commercial processors to the independent shellers, many NPSA members have witnessed tremendous growth, turmoil and prosperity.  
*Jasper Sanfilippo, Sr.*

In 1922, Italian immigrant John B Sanfilippo (shown in the first row of the image of the association's first meeting) began a small pecan shelling company out of a rented storefront in Chicago. He eventually joined his father, Gaspare, to open a small factory to crack and shell pecans. It was from these humble beginnings that John B.





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Sanfilippo & Son Inc. (JBSS), owner of Fisher nuts, grew to become a premier processor, marketing and distributor of baking nuts, snack nuts and nut-based products. Today, John B. Sanfilippo & Son is a vertically integrated supplier of key domestically grown nut varieties, including pecans.

“We are proud to be a fourth-generation Chicago-based company committed to quality, expertise and innovation,” says former NPSA Chair Jasper Sanfilippo Sr. “Our employees are dedicated to carrying on John B. Sanfilippo’s legacy of providing the freshest, best quality nuts to consumers.”

*Richard (Dick) Walden*

Located on 7,000 acres in the Santa Cruz River Valley in southern Arizona lies The Green Valley Pecan Company. The land was acquired by R. Keith Walden in 1948. What started out as a cotton farm transitioned in 1965 to the largest irrigated pecan orchard in the world. This is a multi-generation company that is led by Keith’s son Dick Walden, who has served as president of the company since 1983; his wife Nan Stockholm Walden, the company’s general counsel; and his children Rich Walden and Deborah Walden Ralls who are both an integral part of the company.

The growth of the company over the last 30 plus years is attributed to expanding into the export market, producing a superior quality product, and always delivering the product to specifications. During those 30 plus years, having outstanding employees who stepped up to the plate to deliver such products, the operation has now expanded to 9,000 acres of orchards.

## Landmark Pecan Studies

For nearly two decades, NPSA funded research has confirmed that pecans can be a healthy addition to your diet. Below are summaries of landmark research studies confirming the health benefits associated with eating a diet rich in pecans. Summaries of these breakthrough studies are posted on [www.ILovePecans.org](http://www.ILovePecans.org), the NPSA website.

### 1. Natural Antioxidants:

Naturally-occurring antioxidants in pecans may help contribute to heart health and disease prevention, according to a study at Loma Linda University. The results were published in the January 2011 issue of *The Journal of Nutrition*. In addition, landmark research published in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* (June 2004) found that pecans rank highest among all nuts and are among the top category of foods to contain the highest antioxidant capacity, meaning pecans may decrease the risk of cancer, coronary heart disease, and neurological diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

### 2. Cholesterol-Lowering:

Research conducted by the University of Georgia has also confirmed that pecans contain plant sterols, which are known for their cholesterol-lowering ability. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has acknowledged this and related research and approved the following qualified health claim: “Scientific evidence suggests, but does not prove, that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, such as pecans, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease.”

### 3. Heart Disease:

Milestone research published in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* in June 2004 found that pecans rank highest among all nuts and are among the top category of foods to contain the highest antioxidant capacity, meaning pecans may decrease the risk of cancer, coronary heart disease, and neurological diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

### 4. Obesity & Weight Management:

In 2018, a study from Tufts University will be completed and the results published. And there is good news to share according to lead researcher Dr. Diane McKay, “A pecan-rich diet improves cardiometabolic risk factors in overweight and obese adults.” The major conclusions from the research “When incorporated into a diet that is low in fiber and high in saturated fat, i.e., the average American diet, 1.5 ounces of pecans per day (per 2000 kcal) for four weeks, significantly improves fasting blood glucose and insulin levels in middle-aged and older, overweight or obese adults with abdominal adiposity. The scientific implications are “A pecan-rich diet may have a general benefit in modifying metabolic risk factors for many U.S. adults.”



Today the company now encompasses operations in three states with more than 300 employees. Three generations of the Walden family, along with their loyal second and third generation employees, have maintained the principles and standards of a family farm including donating land for employee housing, a church and schools; staying true to their Sahuarita roots by giving back and celebrating the community that has helped them flourish.

"We need to encourage the pecan industry to be forward-thinking, to embrace technology to advance the industry, and to not look back and ride on the laurels of the past," Walden says. "Success in the pecan industry will only be achieved by keeping pace with new

technologies."

*Jerry Dowdy*

At just 23 years old, having graduated from the University of Georgia, Jerry Dowdy fell into the pecan business through his wife Susan. Although Susan had grown up around the pecan shelling business since her father, Hugh Oliver, was co-owner of another shelling plant, Jerry had no experience in this field. Jerry followed Mr. Oliver's guidance and "moved to Wrens and learned what [he] needed to know to operate and manage a pecan shelling plant." Jerry managed the procurement and shelling operation while Susan ran the office.

Jerry, a past NPSA Chair, and Susan together grew Atwell Pecan Company into a successful shelling

plant and cold storage facility. In 1989, the shelling plant expanded to include Thames Pecan Company, which wholesales pecans and other nuts, and in 2005, they started The Orchards Gourmet, which manufactures candies and confections containing pecans and other nuts. Today, Atwell Pecan Co., Inc. handles between three and five million pounds of pecans annually.

### **Effective, Consistent Leadership Over Time**

These pecan pioneers' hard work and dedication are reflected in the leadership of NPSA.

"Active, effective leadership has been a hallmark of NPSA through the years," says long-time NPSA Executive Vice President, Russ Lemieux. "The Board of Directors meets frequently to affirm its

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mission and stays committed to a long-term vision and strategies for the association. Issues are identified and positions debated with passion, but always leading to a consensus that best serves the members.”

“It’s been a privilege for our firm, Kellen, to work with the NPSA for nearly half of its 75 years,” remarked Lemieux. “We are proud of the many accomplishments and thankful for the many friendships since 1984.”

### Putting the Industry First

Lenny Wells, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Extension Horticulture Specialist for pecans at the University of Georgia, provides his perspective, “There are numerous milestones for the pecan industry over the last five to ten years. The most obvious being the rise of the China market, the discoveries of the health benefits of pecans like the Loma Linda study and the designation of the pecan as a heart-healthy nut by the American Heart Association, plus the passing of the Federal Marketing Order.

“The acreage expansion is signaling a renewal of the industry,” he continues. “The increase in price as a result of the China market made pecans profitable enough for the growers to reinvest more money into their own operations and to attract new growers into the industry to help increase the supply of pecans. I am a firm believer that this increased production is absolutely necessary to achieve the goal of enhancing the domestic market for pecans. If we are successful in this, we will look back one day to see that this acreage increase was a key turning point.

“The other milestone I see is the relationship between growers



## LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY



*After voting to fund research on pecan consumption and blood cholesterol levels, the NPSA funded a three-year study through Loma Linda University, the first of its kind. Currently, NPSA is funding another study through Tufts University.*

and shellers. From the state and regional growers’ associations to the NPSA and the APC, we now see a great group of individuals from both segments working together to put the industry first, which allows everyone to profit.”

### Partnering to Promote & Research Health Benefits

One of the key contributions the NPSA has made to the pecan industry is their research on the health benefits of pecans. NPSA-sponsored studies conducted over two decades confirms that pecans can be a healthy addition to your diet. Navarro Pecan’s George Martin and Dan Zedan tell the following story of the program’s genesis:

“In 1997, the pecan industry was faced with a very large crop, near record supplies and a public that was being told that eating nuts was bad for your health.

Due to outdated and inaccurate information in the public arena, relative to the role of fat in one’s

diet, and no information on the health benefits of consuming mono- and polyunsaturated fat, the U.S. government grouped all nuts, along with red meat, at the top of the food pyramid; foods that should be avoided. Government health ads even targeted nuts as a source of fat that should be avoided altogether.

Having witnessed the significant increase in walnut consumption after the publication of the walnut industry’s research on the health benefits of consuming walnuts, NPSA made the historic decision to fund similar research relative to the consumption of pecans and its effects on blood cholesterol levels. However, unlike the almond and walnut industries that could generate the funds necessary for such research through their Federal Marketing Orders, any research done by the NPSA had to be funded through voluntary contributions generated primarily from the association’s sheller members.

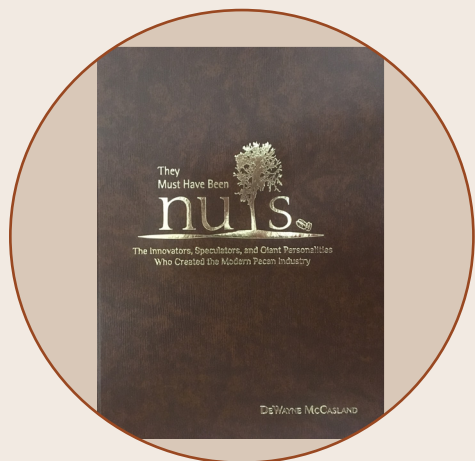


# History & Evolution of Pecans

Looking to read up on the history of the pecan industry? Wonder how it evolved to where it is today? Just in the past few years, industry insiders and experts have published a number of books on the subject. Here are three pecan must-reads.

## *They Must Have Been Nuts – The Innovators, Speculators, and Giant Personalities Who Created the Modern Pecan Industry*

by DeWayne McCasland (2013)

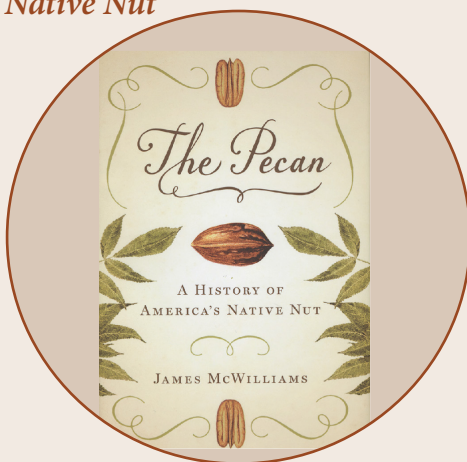


In his book, McCasland features stories from pecan industry icons who devoted their lives to the business. You are sure to recognize many shellers, growers, accumulators and associates.

## *The Pecan: A History of America's Native Nut*

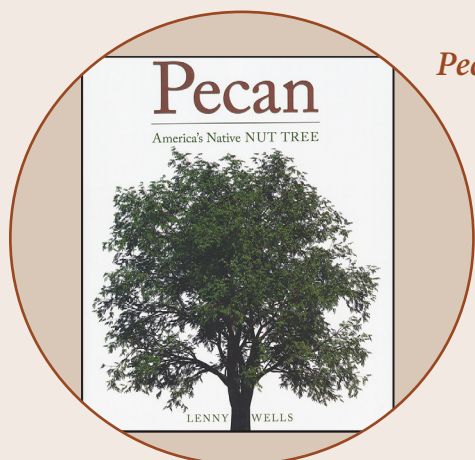
by James McWilliams (2015)

Intrigued by the pecan, McWilliams is a writer with an almost obsessive interest in contemporary agricultural issues. It fascinated him that a tree indigenous to the U.S. went from being primarily wild to being primarily domesticated in a remarkably short span of time by agricultural standards.



## *Pecan – America's Native NUT TREE*

by Dr. Lenny Wells (2017)



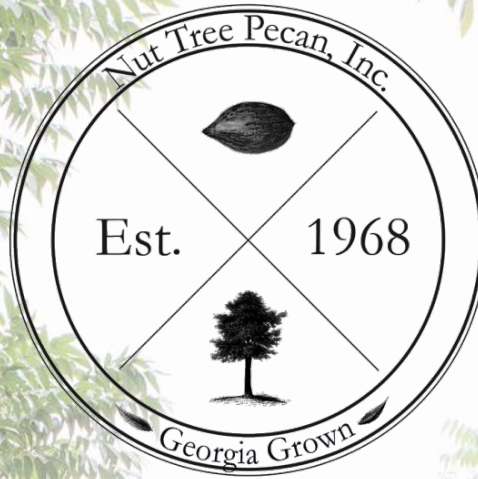
Drawing from his expertise, Dr. Wells explores the rich and fascinating story of one of North America's few native crops, long an iconic staple of southern foods and landscapes.

The NPSA voted to provide over \$300,000 to fund Loma Linda University's research, a study that would take three years to complete but would change the landscape of the pecan industry forever. The first major study of its kind in the pecan industry, the Loma Linda study became the benchmark for all future industry studies and is still the basis for the bulk of the health messages currently used by the industry in its marketing efforts.

Understanding that it would take more than one study to convince the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the public that consuming pecans was a key part of a healthy diet, the NPSA also decided to create the Marketing, Promotion and Research Program (MPRP), a program primarily funded by voluntary sheller contributions. The main goal was to conduct additional research into the health benefits of consuming pecans and develop marketing materials and outreach efforts to highlight it.

Hoping to garner additional industry support, the NPSA appointed both an American and a Mexican grower to the committee with full voting privileges. For 20 years until the recent establishment of the American Pecan Council (APC), the MPRP program was the pecan industry's only research program having generated over one million dollars of health-related research projects and support promotion. Not only has the MPRP funded domestic research, it has provided hundreds of thousands of research dollars to the International Nut & Dried Fruit Council (INC), money that not only led to the creation and adoption of the Mediterranean diet, but also to





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Stacey, a blogger for Southern Bite, prepares pecan cheesecake cookies at the NPSA's Pecan chef Summit in 2017. (Photo courtesy of NPSA)

numerous international studies focusing on the health benefits of adding nuts to the everyday diet.”

In addition to funding research, NPSA has partnered with other groups to promote pecans' health benefits. Since 2012, pecans have been designated as heart-healthy when enjoyed as part of a healthy eating pattern by the American Heart Association's Heart-Check Food Certification Program. Unroasted and unsalted pecan halves and pieces carry

the Heart-Check mark to notify consumers that they meet the program's nutritional guidelines, including criteria for saturated fat and sodium. In order to earn this designation, nuts must meet certain nutritional requirements for saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium and beneficial nutrients.

As part of the licensing agreement negotiated by NPSA, members who have successfully passed the certification process have usage rights to carry the Heart-

Check mark on their packaging and promotions. The Heart-Check mark makes it easy for consumers to spot heart-healthy foods in the grocery store or when dining out.

### Cracking the Pecan Code with Innovative Marketing Programs

In recent years, innovative marketing programs and culinary experiences have been created targeting Research and Development professionals to experience the flavor profiles, food pairings and many uses of pecans.

#### *Pecan Chefs Summits*

One such program, the Pecan Chefs Summit series, provided the opportunity to teach commercial chefs about the variety of pecan products including pieces, meal, flour and oil. They learned how to apply their cooking experiences into new and inventive recipes.

Commercial applications from highly respected brands quickly turned this program into a success with new recipes for national restaurant chains like Bloomin' Brands (Outback, Bonefish Grill, Flemings), pecan snacks added to Delta Air Lines international flights, new recipes featured on McCormick Spices' social media outlets and traditional advertising, new pecan flavors for High Road Ice Cream sold at national grocery chains like Publix and Whole Foods, and new pecan recipes for the latest trend in “meal delivery” kits with PeachDish.

#### *Pecan Harvest*

NPSA partnered with member, sheller and grower Sunnyland Farms for its first pecan harvest in Albany, Georgia. The Willson family graciously hosted bloggers for an immersion into the world of pecans

with a rare behind-the-scenes look at how pecans are harvested and processed.

From the shaking of the trees, to the cleaning, cracking and roasting of the nuts, this experience generated editorial coverage, social media buzz including a Facebook Live video with thousands of views, and new NPSA digital content for marketing and promotional efforts.

New content has been created from these programs for the various NPSA digital platforms and marketing programs. These include a series of professional videos, hundreds of professional food images, dozens of new chef-inspired recipes and numerous testimonials from culinary professionals and nutritionists.

#### **The Bright Future of NPSA** The impact of this barrage

of content can be seen in how pecans are being viewed by the public. When NPSA was founded over 75 years ago, pecans were widely known for use in pecan pies and candies. In today's global marketplace, pecans are a major commodity.

One of the hottest 2017 flavor trends was "Maple Pecan," found in everything from new dessert recipes to coffee flavors at Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks. Pecans are now featured in national restaurant chains like Baskin Robbins, Outback Steakhouse and Wendy's. Buyers from Walmart, Publix, Kroger and farmers markets nationwide are keeping their shelves stocked with pecans.

Just this past holiday season, pecans were covered in mainstream media taking center stage. Pecan

pie made the cover of Southern Living magazine's November issue and on Christmas Day hosts of "Live with Kelly and Ryan" were baking Mexican Wedding Cookies, replacing walnuts with pecans. Pecan pie was even featured in the Buick Winter Sale national television commercial throughout the holidays.

With this momentum, coupled with new funding to generate consumer awareness, the demand for pecans will only continue to grow and NPSA members will remain a significant driving force. •

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