

A wild juice chase: Collecting Florida citrus labels

By Henry M. Holden

To the unknowing, they are merely discarded crates with faded labels, cheap boxes of weathered wood once used to ship Florida citrus.

But to the savvy collector, old orange crates, or, more precisely, the colorful growers' labels on their sides, are collector's items — a nostalgic art form made more desirable by the knowledge that so few of them exist. And so few recognize their growing value. Collectors are paying from 50 cents

to \$1,000 to possess these labels.

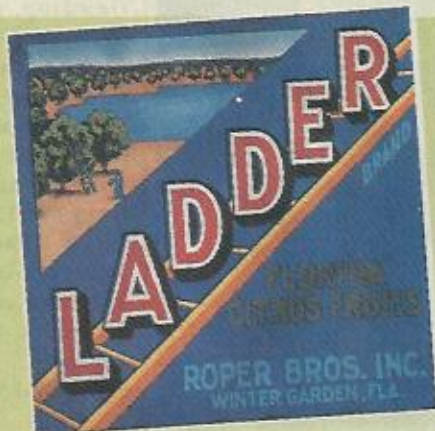
This isn't exactly what the growers had in mind.

Before the turn of the century, oranges were packed in wooden crates and shipped North, where they were stacked 20 feet high in cavernous warehouses. There they awaited the inspection of buyers who would ship them to grocers throughout the country.

At the time, Florida citrus growers, anxious to sell their oranges to a picky public, had an inspiration. They would paint colorful portraits

on the sides of their wooden packing boxes — portraits that would convey the exotic essence of the Sunshine State to the cold and snowy North. Since so many oranges look so much alike, buyers often made their choices according to the beauty and sophistication of the label.

Over time, they painted beautiful women (clothed and unclothed), flowers of pink and lavender, breeze-bent palms, golden sunsets melting into peaceful blue oceans, colorful Indians in now politically-



Ladder brand fruit from Winter Garden, Florida, conveyed the message that their fruit was top of the line.



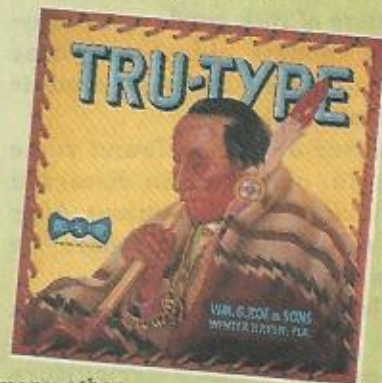
The bare-breasted Indian maiden no doubt caught the eye of buyers of Blue Lake brand citrus.



The Hebrew lettering on this esoteric label spells out "Florida." The black label suggested lower grade fruit was inside.



The name Trublu denoted top quality fruit. The grower would only put the face of his daughter on top quality produce.



Like many other brands, Tru-Type also made use of a Native American on its label.

incorrect war bonnets and lazy alligators.

The fairy tale world portrayed on the colorful labels — a land where the sun always shined, women were always beautiful, everyone was always happy and no one was ever sick, sad or discouraged — was soon luring shoppers in small stores and corner groceries across America. The labels sold people on more than oranges, they created an image of a fantasy Florida that soon would be overrun by tourists and land developers, seeking the Eden depicted on those orange crates.

In the industry's infancy, Florida growers had an image problem. Some thought their fruit was not as good as California's. So an artist invented the Plain Gal label. A barefoot, pigeon-toed girl, wearing a simple dress and straw hat stood alongside a purposely blotched orange and grapefruit. "On the inside — as good as the best." the label screamed.

The labels also reflected that men dominated the industry. Women were shown under such brands as Nude and Squeeze Me. Over time, women changed from demure Southern Belles (in the late 1800s and early 1900s), to short-skirted flappers (in the Roaring 20s). In the 1930s, they became

come-hither beauties. Pinup girls and bare-chested Indian maidens were popular in the 1940s and 1950s.

All labels were registered with the Department of Agriculture and noted the brand name and grade of fruit. Many growers adhered to a color code to designate the standard three grades of fruit — blue for Grade A, red for Grade B and yellow or green for Grade C. For instance, a blue bird indicated top grade, a red cardinal denoted second grade, and yellow, black or gold birds indicated inferior or damaged fruit.

During World War II, label printing plates were melted down to make planes and jeeps. Wood became scarce, and packers discovered cheaper, preprinted cardboard shipping boxes. Thousands of old wooden crates and labels were burned or stored away and forgotten.

Today, the labels, often as large as nine inches square, vary in value with the rarest and most colorful and best preserved bringing the highest prices.

Much of the artwork was done by the popular artists of the time, but since it was considered commercial work, labels were never signed.

Each grower had a special

reason for his label designs. Some were marketing ploys, others illustrated a love of family.

On some labels, growers used the faces of their wives, sweethearts or children. On the Trublu label, the grower would only put the wholesome face of his beloved daughter on his top quality fruit.

Many labels had interesting anecdotes and stories on how or why they got their names and sometimes carried the history of a family in the pictures represented. For instance, one family used their children's baby pictures for each child's own individual label.

The Lake Wales Citrus Growers Association always carried a royalty theme in their labels since Lake Wales was known as the Crown Jewel of the Ridge. Today, the labels seem filled with the mysteries of art.

Consider the Japanese label, so-called because of the Asian appearance of the strange characters printed on it.

Most would think that it is for fruit destined for Japan. Not so,

The Japanese label is not Japanese at all, but Hebrew. And it says "Florida." ♦

All photos in this story courtesy of Henry M. Holden.

Jacobsen, also a jazz musician, has traveled the Pacific Coast for the past two decades searching for the rare, the common and the truly beautiful specimens of American history. His personal collection numbers in the tens of thousands.

More than just historical, however, crate labels are the "largest native art form," according to Jacobsen. Most label experts concur.

In the book *Fruit Box Labels: An Illustrated Price Guide to Citrus Labels*, authors Gordon McClelland and Jay Last said, "In the hands of a good artist and a talented graphic designer, the citrus box label became an

elegant small poster, containing an easily understood and remembered message."

■ **The fruit crate label** can be called the "accidental artifact" because most labels collected today were unearthed as the result of an accident. Labels sometimes fell through the floorboards of a store or kitchen and were found much later. Unused mint stock, often in bundles, that was left over from packing plants is also often found.

These vibrant labels were used by fruit and vegetable growers to identify and advertise their wooden crates of fresh produce, like apples and oranges. All in all, however, over 40 commodities

were advertised on these paper labels, everything from lemons and nectarines to grapes and peas.

The heyday of produce labels was 1880 to 1956 when literally millions of labels were produced. By 1900, labels had become an industry-wide necessity for growers to identify their products and to communicate the appeal of fresh produce to global buyers. As competition increased, so did the packers' desire to market their product effectively.

Labels were used extensively in large agricultural regions, especially the Pacific states, Florida and Texas.

The brightly-colored label soon