

DEMPSEY R. SAPP SR., A PIONEER ENTOMOLOGIST OF THE PEST CONTROL INDUSTRY¹

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When one thinks of a pioneer, thoughts generally travel to the Old West where brave men and women explored unchartered territory, fueled by their dreams of creating a prosperous life for themselves and their families. They faced hardships and tribulations, but never lost sight of their dreams. Same can be said for a more recent pioneer, Dempsey R. Sapp Sr. Known as a founding father of the pest control industry, by following his dreams he paved the way for future pest control professionals. Like other pioneers, he encountered adversity, yet persevered and created a legacy not only for his children, but for all those interested in entomology and pest control. This is his story.

Dempsey R. Sapp Sr. was born on January 11, 1922, in the township of New River, Florida (located near Starke in Bradford County). He grew up on the family farm and graduated from Bradford County High School. After graduating from high school in 1940, he worked in the Bradford County courthouse where his job required him to hand-type all of the deeds, divorces, mortgages and other lengthy documents on a manual typewriter. Eighteen year old Dempsey was not only a farmer and high school graduate; he was also a very proficient typist!

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Dempsey felt it was his duty as an American to protect his country and the ideals it represented. He wanted to enlist immediately, but his father refused to let him join until he turned 21. It wasn't until March 1st, 1943, that Dempsey was able to enlist in the Navy. During his naval service, Dempsey was active in the European Theatre and Asiatic Pacific Theatre. Due to his participation and bravery in combat, he was awarded the European Theatre Award, Asiatic Theatre Award and the Philippine Liberation Medal.

One of Dempsey's memories of the Navy was a typing test he was required to pass as part of enrollment for radio school and communications training. He took this test with 120 other men. The Chief Petty Officer (CPO) conducted the test and then scored their results. After the test, Dempsey recalls the CPO asking, "Who is Sapp? Everyone can leave with the exception of Sapp." Dempsey was filled with dread. He must have made a grave mistake, but had no clue what it was! He asked the instructor if, indeed, he had done something wrong. The instructor replied, "Well, I'm not sure. According to the typing test results, you typed 135 words per minute and I don't believe you can do that. So I'm going to ask you to take the test again, but this time I'll be standing next to you to make sure you don't cheat." Dempsey again took the typing test. The instructor looked at his results and said, "Well,

if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe this, but you just took the same test and typed 136 words per minute." Dempsey had typed one additional word better than the first test! To further emphasize his remarkable test results, the world record at the time was 144 words per minute.

One of Dempsey's most cherished memories was meeting his wife Margie (Fig. 1). They met one evening in Starke, while Dempsey was riding around town in a car with a cousin. He saw Margie (then Margie Beckham) and asked her to a midnight movie. She later became his wife, best friend, and soul mate. They were married September 17, 1943, and will be celebrating 68 wonderful years together in 2011!

In 1946, after serving in the Navy, Dempsey enrolled at the University of Florida with the assistance of the G.I. bill. His initial plans were to pursue a law degree, rather than a degree in entomology. His entrance into the discipline of entomology started out of financial necessity. Dempsey ran a paper route on Sunday mornings that paid very little. Once he heard from Margie that he would soon be a father, he realized he would need a better paying job to take care of his family and continue his schooling. The pest control department on campus was hiring and Dempsey decided to inquire about the job. The salary was \$40.00 per month, which was better than the money Dempsey made on his paper route. His good friend, Earl Dixon, introduced Dempsey to Dr. John T. Creighton (see Pioneer Lecture IV - Wright, 2004). Because of Dempsey's agricultural background, Dr. Creighton hired him. Hence, Dempsey started in the field of pest control.

One year later a supervisory position became available, paying \$100.00 per month. Dr. Creighton asked Dempsey to consider managing the pest control department, but there was one criterion-taking an introductory course in entomology. Dempsey signed up for the course. His instructor was Dr. Lawrence A. Hetrick (see Pioneer Lecture VII - Woodruff, 2007), who was a masterful

¹Pioneer Lecture delivered at the 94th Annual Meeting of the Florida Entomological Society, 2011.



Fig. 1. Margie and Dempsey R. Sapp Sr.

teacher. After completing the entry level course, Dempsey fell in love with entomology and forgot all about law school. In September 1948, he graduated with his BS degree.

Dempsey wanted to establish his own business, and felt he would be better served if he also obtained an MS in entomology. On September 3rd, 1949, he graduated from the University of Florida with his master's degree. That was a Saturday. On the following Monday, September 5th, 1949, he opened the doors to Florida Pest Control & Chemical Co. (FPC) in Gainesville, FL (Fig. 2). He started the business with a partner, Roy Roig, whom he met during his first semester at the University of Florida (Fig. 3). They had quite a bit in common and became good friends. Both had been discharged from the military at the same time. They had the same hobbies, such as hunting, fishing and enjoying the outdoors. Both Dempsey and Roy received their BS degrees and master's degrees on the same day, as well.

Dempsey remembers the early days of Florida Pest Control as a challenging time. Opening a pest control business in September turned out

to be a learning experience. With winter right around the corner, people were not thinking of pest control. Insect activity was declining and so were people's finances with the holidays approaching. Those first 5 months were formidable. At one point Dempsey told his wife, "If things don't pick up soon, I may have to go find a job."

After Florida Pest Control survived that first winter, business began to increase, especially in the area of termite control. Springtime subterranean termite swarms lead to many post-construction termite treatment sales. After WWII, floating slab construction became more prevalent. The treatment of structures with this foundation type for subterranean termites was time consuming and labor intensive. In order to treat the interior expansion joint, the entire structure was drilled on the inside next to the outer foundation wall. Product was then applied to these drilled holes. Dempsey recalls that the odor from the product could last for years inside the treated structure. Nevertheless, the industry standard at that time was to drill on the inside of the structure.



Fig. 2. Florida Pest Control & Chemical Co. Office in 1949.

A method was needed to treat the interior expansion joint from outside of the structure. Dempsey had a student named Butch Sinclair helping him part time. While treating a floating slab foundation for subterranean termites, Sinclair proposed drilling from the outside wall and using a ¼-inch pipe under the slab to treat the underlying fill dirt and expansion joint. They tried it, and to the best of Dempsey's knowledge, that was the first subterranean termite treatment performed in this manner. Dempsey then started using longer rods, some up to 60 feet long. This method was not only less intrusive; it also reduced the odor of the termiticide and exposure of residents in the structure.

Florida Pest Control also conducted pest control for household pests. Many of these pest control services were performed on a one-time basis due to the longevity of the products used. Dempsey recalls his customers calling 5 years or more after an application of Chlordane, asking, "How long is this stuff supposed to last? I'm just now starting to see some bugs again." Until pests starting showing resistance towards Chlordane, monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly pest control was unnecessary.

The business was starting to grow so fast Dempsey was constantly adding people, buying vehicles and equipment, and establishing new locations. Dempsey says, "It kept me in debt but I never failed to pay my bills." It's only been in the

last 25 years that the company has been much more solvent.

Dempsey Sapp Sr. was not only a farmer, a typist, a WWII veteran, an entomologist, a pest control operator and business owner, he also was involved in regulation associated with the pest control industry. His first introduction to pest control regulation was in 1946. At this time Dempsey was involved with the Florida Pest Control Association (FPCA), which later was known as the Florida Pest Management Association. The association held its first four meetings at the University of Florida. Dempsey, while a student, attended these meetings (later referred to as conventions), and continued to attend for the next 59 years (Fig. 4). He became very involved with FPCA's affairs. The association represented industry leaders and was shaping the future of pest control in Florida.

Prior to 1947, pest control in the state of Florida had little regulation. FPCA recognized this deficit and sponsored the original Structural Pest Control Act, Chapter 482. It was enacted by the Florida Legislature and became effective on July 1, 1947. Dempsey stated, "I wouldn't have been in the pest control business if they hadn't passed Chapter 482 F.S. or the Structural Pest Control Act. The pest control industry had a dirty name up until it became regulated." As part of the act, a Structural Pest Control Board was created that consisted of five members with three-year terms.

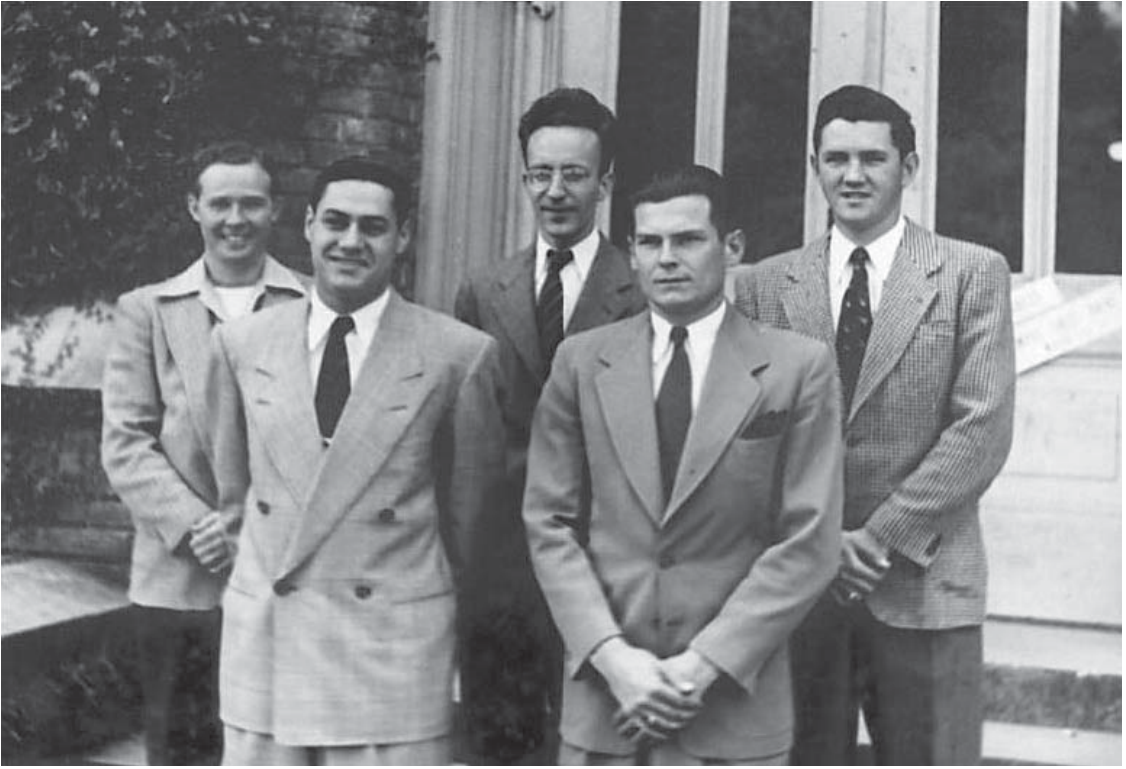


Fig. 3. Newell Entomological Society Officers. Left to right: Lewis Wright, Gene Solomon, Dan Sudia, Dempsey Sapp Sr. and Roy Roig.

Two members were prominent certified pest control operators, 2 were prominent entomologists, and the fifth was a member at large. The composition of the board was later changed, requiring that all 5 members be certified pest control operators appointed by the Governor of Florida. FPCA furnished a list of qualified candidates.

In 1958, Dempsey was elected President of FPCA. Chapter 482 was in dire need of serious modifications. He appointed a committee consisting of the 5 most prominent people in the pest control industry to assist in drafting a new pest control bill. They wrote a draft which the legislature adopted in 1959. Also in this year, Dempsey was asked to serve a three-year term on the Structural Pest Control Commission of Florida (formerly the Structural Pest Control Board of Florida). Dempsey states, "I had a lot to do with passing laws that helped clean up the pest control industry". Many of the laws passed in 1959 are still in force today.

The certification category of Lawn and Ornamental (L&O) was added in 1965. In order to keep pace with industry needs and maintain a total of 4 certification categories, the commission combined the categories of Household Pests and Rodent Control to accommodate the L&O category. Prior to this change, L&O pest control had not been

regulated on a statewide basis. Since the new statute covered pest control other than structural pests, the name of the Structural Pest Control Commission of Florida was changed to the Pest Control Commission of Florida. Dempsey asked to be reappointed to the commission. He felt it needed someone with experience in the newly created L&O category to fairly represent these pest control operators (Fig. 5). Dempsey and fellow Pest Control Commission member, Rudy Thomasello, were asked to write the first L&O state examination. No one passed! Dempsey and Rudy decided they needed to rewrite the examination. They edited it and gave it 6 months later. This time 1 person passed!

In 1969, during the reorganization of state government and the adoption of a new constitution, the Florida Legislature abolished the Pest Control Commission and assigned its responsibilities to the Office of Entomology in the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). In an attempt to downsize HRS in 1992, the government assigned responsibility for administering the Pest Control Act to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS).

Dempsey not only supported the industry via his involvement in regulation, but also contrib-



Fig. 4. Annual Florida Pest Control Association (FPCA) Convention in 1955.

uted an endowed professorship he and his wife funded at the University of Florida. Because of the positive impact the University of Florida had in Dempsey and Margie's life, they wanted to do something to show their appreciation. Dempsey says, "I owe so much to the University of Florida. It played a major role in making me who I am today." In 1999, they created the Margie B. and Dempsey R. Sapp Sr. Distinguished Endowed Professorship in Structural Pest Control and Urban Entomology at the University of Florida. No other endowed professorship in the country had been funded exclusively by a pest control operator at that time. They donated one million and one dollars. Their gift was enhanced by seven hundred fifty thousand dollars in matching funds from the Florida Legislature, bringing the total endowment to 1.75 million dollars. Dempsey and Margie were both extremely pleased when they learned who had been chosen as the recipient of the Professorship – Dr. Phillip Koehler. Dr. Koehler's research at the University of Florida has assisted in making cutting edge breakthroughs for the pest control industry.

Because of his great achievements and all that he has given to support pest control in Florida, Dempsey has received many awards in his lifetime. In 1987, he was the recipient of the first Pioneer Award ever presented by FPMA. In 2001, he was recognized by Gamma Sigma Delta's Honor Society of Agriculture. He was presented the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the University of Florida in 2005. To this day,

Dempsey remains involved in pest control and is Chairman of the Board Emeritus of FPC.

Dempsey's son, Dempsey R. Sapp Jr. (known as D.R.), continues in his father's footsteps, acting as President and CEO of FPC, as well as helping to develop pest control legislation. D.R. has held multiple positions with FPMA, including Assistant Regional Director, Regional Director, and President. He also has been a member of the FPMA Governmental Affairs Committee for over 20 years. D.R. was involved in drafting the Florida Building Code based on his knowledge of termite preconstruction treatments. He was appointed to the Negotiated Rulemaking Committee for the Termiticide Efficacy Rule for FDACS. He was a Charter member of the FDACS Pest Control Enforcement Advisory Council (PCEAC) and has been re-appointed by the newly elected Commissioner of Agriculture, Adam Putnam.

From his youth on the farm in New River, Florida, to his successes as a founding father of pest control, Dempsey R. Sapp Sr. is a true trailblazer and the epitome of a pioneer. Like other pioneers, he overcame adversity to pursue his dreams. From his initial business venture in 1949 that almost ended less than a year from when it began, he persevered and created Florida Pest Control as we know it today. It is one of the largest family owned businesses in the nation, over 500 employees strong and with 20 locations in the state of Florida. Dempsey cleared the path for those who followed by aiding in the creation of laws making pest control a respected occupation. His guidance and leadership have made him a role model for



Fig. 5. Dempsey Sapp watching Governor Burns sign legislation, which established Lawn and Ornamental as a certification category. Pictured from left to right: Dempsey Sapp Sr., Governor Hayden Burns, Dick Lewis and Ira Winstein.

many and an esteemed member of the pest control community. When one thinks of a pioneer, instead of thoughts traveling to the Old West, perhaps they should travel to the farm in New River, Florida, and the boy who, through hard work and determination, became a legend.

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