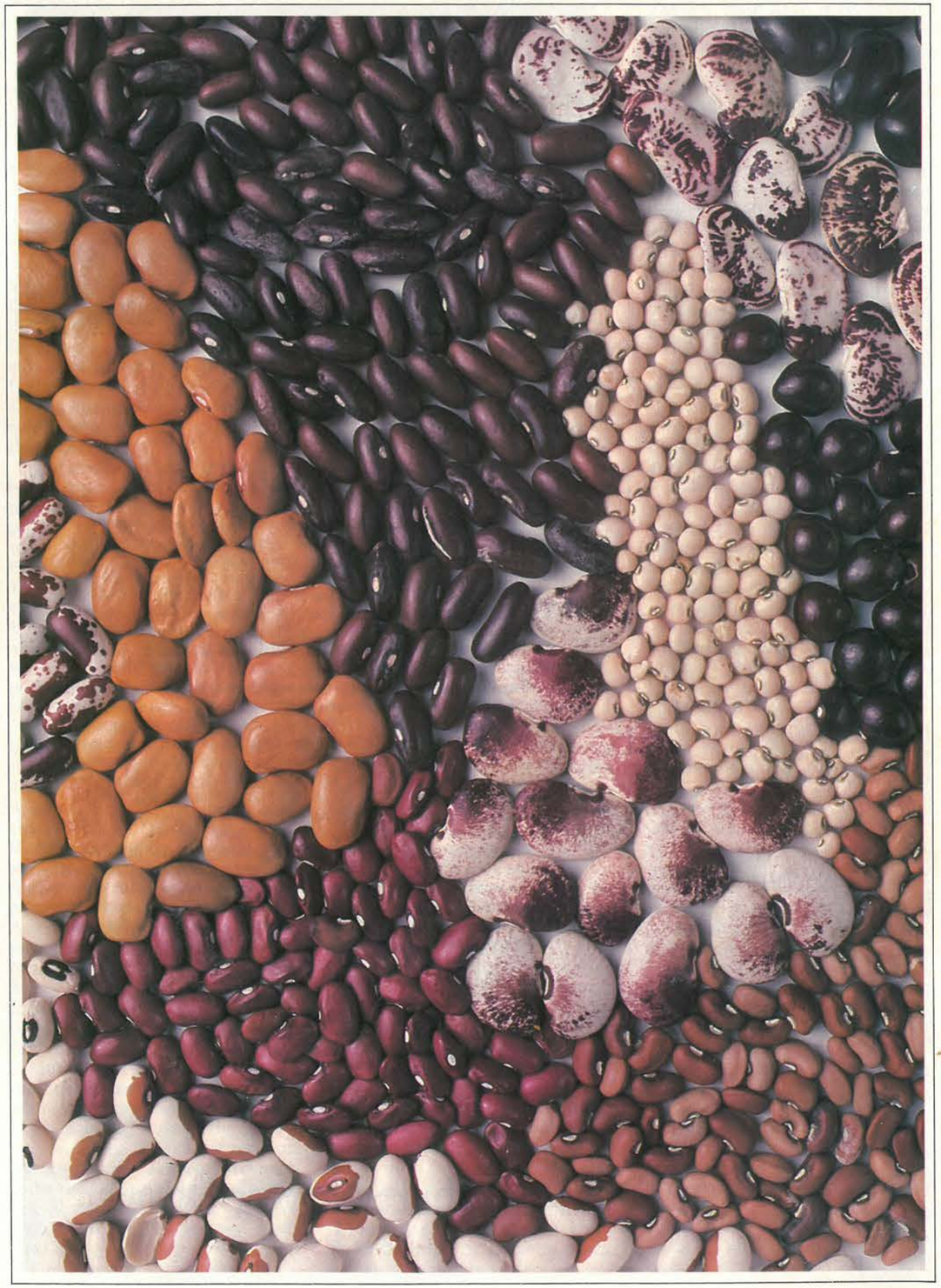


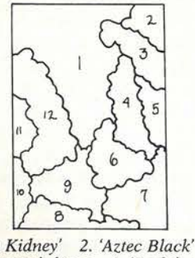
Photograph by Bill Graham

Rounding Up 'Jacob's Cattle'

The heirloom-bean business

Jack Cook

JOHN E. WITHEE and Guy A. Thomas have two things in common. Both men are nuts about beans. And both have discovered that beans possess a mysterious power to change the course of one's life. Beyond that, the two men are distinctly dissimilar. John Withee grew up in Maine and worked for many years as a medical photographer at a Boston hospital. He is now retired and lives in eastern Massachusetts. Guy Thomas was born in New York City and, after college, worked there for several years. Today, anything but retired, at the age of forty-one he runs a million-dollar-a-year business in Vermont. Thomas is a businessman who sells beans but grows none himself. Withee, who found, to his regret, that he is anything but a businessman, grew 230 different kinds of beans in 1981; he sold none of them, but he did give many away. The two men became absorbed with beans at about the same time, but neither had an inkling of how the diverse members of the family Leguminosae (see page 13) were going to change their lives. We'll take up Withee's story first.



1. 'Brown Kidney' 2. 'Aztec Black' runner 3. 'Christmas' lima 4. 'Lady' cowpea 5. 'Willie Clarke' 6. 'North Pole' lima 7. 'Sierra Madre' 8. 'Yellow Eye' 9. 'Red Mexican' 10. 'Early Black Eye' cowpea 11. 'Pikes Original' 12. 'Scotch'

As befits his Maine background, John Withee speaks slowly and is quick to laugh. He delights in talk about his many interests—including, to be sure, beans. His romance with them, he will tell you, goes back fifty years, to the time he worked on a truck farm in Maine, sold vegetables in Portland, and learned how to bake enough bean-hole beans—the beans, in a cast-iron pot, are baked in a pit for twenty-four hours or so—to feed hundreds of hungry people at a single sitting.

His passion for beans took a new turn in 1970, when he decided to throw a bean-hole bash for a few dozen friends at his home in Massachusetts. Now, the tastiest cultivar you can use for bean-hole beans, he maintains, is 'Jacob's Cattle', a medium-size, slender, white bean that is brilliantly splashed with bright maroon. It's also known as 'Coach Dog', 'Dalmatian', and 'Trout'. But when he went hunting for the beans for his bean-hole bash, not a single 'Jacob's Cattle' could he find within fifty miles. His second choice was the 'Soldier' bean, white like 'Jacob's Cattle' and similar in size, but marked around the eye with a distinct maroon figure resembling a soldier standing at attention. He found no 'Soldier' beans, either. He settled for some little white navy beans, and, though his friends told him the baked beans were the best they'd ever eaten, John Withee knew they'd have been better had they been 'Jacob's Cattle'. Or even 'Soldier'.

A few weeks later Withee made a trip to Maine. The situation there was alarming. He found 'Soldier' beans, but nary a 'Jacob's Cattle'. Finally, on his way back to Massachusetts, at a small store in Keene, New Hampshire, he came across a few pounds of 'Jacob's Cattle', gathering dust on a back shelf.

John E. Withee

" 'Jacob's Cattle' used to be a very common variety," Withee says today. "I figured if that one was hard to find, what must be happening to some of the other, less common varieties? That's how it all began."

What began was that he told his many relatives in Maine that he was interested in saving "heirloom" beans. The relatives told their friends. It was all quite casual. Every now and then a few beans—including some cultivars Withee had never heard of before—arrived in the mail. In six years he accumulated more than a hundred different kinds. He stored them in a cool, dark closet. His container system was eclectic: matchboxes, plastic bread bags, discarded paper cups. Each summer he planted a few of these seeds in his garden to maintain their viability (bean-seed viability decreases sharply after

Illustration by Steven Damaskos

five years or so, even under good storage conditions). He was having a lot of fun. He especially enjoyed the letters and calls he got from people who, like him, were crazy about beans. He had found himself a marvelous hobby.

Withee retired from his job in 1976. That left him with a bit of time on his hands. Because he was having so much fun with beans, he figured he'd have even more fun if he expanded a bit. Besides, his closet now contained more beans than he had the time or garden space to handle. So he formed a nonprofit organization. He called it Wanigan Associates.

For an annual fee of two dollars (soon raised to five dollars, for reasons that will become poignantly clear), a member would receive a quarterly newsletter all about beans, written by Withee, and a catalog listing the cultivars he had accumulated. A member could select from the catalog any two cultivars to grow, with a small charge if more cultivars were wanted. In addition, Withee would send along two or three other cultivars, which the member was expected to grow and harvest for Wanigan Associates as part of their effort to keep neglected beans in circulation. Members were also encouraged to seek out other heirloom beans and send them to Wanigan Associates. (The name of the organization comes from an Indian term. As John Withee explains it, "Years ago my search for old-time beans led me to my home state, Maine. I found that Withees had been lumbering people, and coupled that with the fact that woodsmen are prodigious bean eaters, or were then. More research led to the word *wanigan*, associated with the spring drive. Earliest references gave wanigan as an Abnaki [Indian tribe of Maine] word, meaning 'that into which something strays.' In Maine, it described a cookshack on a raft, which was floated downstream with the drives.")

The *Maine Sunday Telegram* ran a feature story on Withee and his organization's attempts to save heirloom beans. Then two national magazines picked up the story. The growth curve of his hobby rose sharply. The previously friendly relationship between Withee and his mailman began to decay. Instead of a few beans arriving now and then, he began receiving several pounds a day. And letters—a lot of letters—many of which enclosed no check, not even a stamped envelope. They did, however, enclose demands, like the one from the lady in North Dakota who wanted Withee to identify, sight unseen, "a bean my great aunt Millie used to grow, pinkish, or sort of brown, with little black, or maybe purple, spots." To the dismay of Mrs. Withee, another closet had to be emptied of clothes. Withee began to feel a mite tense—more tense than a retired man with a wonderful hobby should feel.

The beans kept right on coming. There was 'Mrs. Bagley's Fence Bean', described by Withee as "a kidney-shaped seed with the markings of a pinto"; 'Henderson's Lima', "a small lima from 1893, home-saved and a commercial seed since"; 'Lazy Wife', which "dates back to 1810, seed white with faint gray veiling"; 'Jacob's Ox', "a nearly all-red strain of 'Jacob's Cattle'"; 'Bumblebee', "a large, very fat, oval, white bean having a large, red, butterflylike area at the eye, a great heirloom in northern New England"; 'Comtesse de Chambord', "a snap bean from France—it may be heirloom there"; 'Holstein', a "red and white, flattened, oval seed from New Mexico, very old in heritage"; 'Limelight', "an English commercial snap bean given me by a contented Vermonter"; 'Monel', "a tiny black seed with a prominent white eye, from Kenya"; 'Money Bean', "a white kidney with spots of red, yellow, and brown all over"; 'Mexican Red Runner', "the largest bean in the Wanigan collection, egg-shaped (almost an inch from end to end), light purple overall with black spots and streaks"; 'Will Bonsall', "a bush bean of unusual coloration from Farmington, Maine—plump seed, tan with 95 percent overlay of black."

In an alarmingly short time, Wanigan Associates accumulated no less than 1,200 cultivars. They crowded every nook and cranny of the modest Withee home. Not a closet survived unscathed.

At that critical point, Withee fell ill, ill enough to be hospitalized for several weeks. Hundreds of envelopes, some full of beans, piled up. There were also many beans he had grown in his garden test plots the previous summer, which he had not yet threshed out.

"Wanigan Associates," says John Withee today, "was my downfall." Characteristically, he laughs. "I'm a lousy businessman. The five-dollar membership fee barely covered the cost of the newsletter, let alone the postage to reply to all those letters and mail out the beans."

Something had to be done. Two organizations he'd previously communicated with about beans came to his aid: the Seed Savers Exchange, operated by Kent Whealy in Princeton, Missouri, and the Organic Gardening and Farming Research Center in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, of which Dr. Richard Harwood is director. The OGF Research Center accepted the task of sorting and cataloging the Wanigan collection. They also took samples of each cultivar for storage at their special facilities in Kutztown. The Seed Savers Exchange, which deals with all kinds of open-pollinated seeds, including beans, became a clearinghouse for seed exchanges through a newsletter that Kent Whealy publishes.

Withee, however, has not given up his position as America's foremost preserver of heirloom beans. "I hope that I've gotten this thing back to hobby size," he says. "But I still want to hear from people who are interested in beans. And I'll still be sending some neglected varieties to growers with whom

The Family Leguminosae

The world of beans is complex. Members of the family Leguminosae, of which beans represent several genera, produce their seed in pods. The most common of the cultivated, edible beans is the genus *Phaseolus*, native to the tropical Americas. The most common species of the latter is *Phaseolus vulgaris*, which includes a huge number of cultivars and strains. There is also *Phaseolus lunatus*, the so-called lima bean, named for its origin in Peru, and *Phaseolus coccineus*, commonly known as the scarlet runner bean; it has a subspecies, *alba*, the white runner bean. There are more than four thousand cultivars of those three species.

There are many other genera in addition to *Phaseolus*. *Glycine Max*, the soybean, comprises several hundred cultivars; *Vigna radiata*, the mung bean; *Vigna angularis*, the adsuki bean; *Vigna unguiculata*, the so-called cowpea; and *Vicia Faba*, the fava bean, also known as the horsebean, as is the species *Canavalia ensiforma*, otherwise called the jack bean. The term *kidney bean* is sometimes used to refer to the entire *Phaseolus vulgaris* species, which is confusing because it is also the name of several cultivars of *P. vulgaris*, of which the red kidney is perhaps the best known. **J.C.**

I've established a strong relationship over the years."

Guy Thomas was graduated from American University in Washington, D. C., and went to work in New York City for the marketing department of a large corporation whose primary activity was the manufacture of plate glass. In 1969 he bought a 360-acre former dairy farm in Castleton, Vermont, and five years later decided he should do something with the land. He solicited help from Win Way, a highly regarded agronomist with the extension service at the University of Vermont. Way suggested that he grow beans, a crop once widely cultivated in now-lactophilic Vermont. Indeed, Way himself had grown 22 acres of 'Soldier' beans in the 1960s, harvesting 10,000 pounds of beans and turning a tidy profit.

Guy A. Thomas

Guy Thomas likes challenges. He had never before grown anything on a large scale and had no training in any phase of agriculture, botany, horticulture, or any other related discipline. In short, he didn't know beans about growing beans. But in 1975, in one fell swoop, Thomas became Vermont's largest grower of beans. He planted all of the suitable open land on his property in Castleton, plus some rented acreage near Burlington (about an hour's drive to the north)—sixty acres in all—to 'Pinto', 'Red Kidney', and 'Soldier'.

The results were unfortunate. It was a very wet fall in Vermont, and the yield from his fields was poor. Thomas lost money. It proved to be money well lost, however, for he learned two invaluable lessons: 1) He was really not all that crazy about growing beans for a living, and 2) There wasn't a single seed merchant in the entire United States that offered much of a selection of bean seeds. This last observation caused a bright light to flash on in the brain of the former plate-glass marketer. Paraphrasing the conclusion of many a hard-working farmer, he said to himself, "Well, there sure doesn't seem to be a lot of money in growing beans. But I'll wager there's some money in selling bean *seeds*."

Thus was born a new seed company. Thomas's first "catalog" was a ten-page pamphlet, of which four pages were devoted to order forms. It was stapled by hand; it had no covers, no illustrations, no color photographs. But it did list, and lovingly describe, a sizable selection of bean-seed cultivars—green, yellow, bush, shelling, drying, pole, lima—thirty-two cultivars in all.

At that point, Thomas made one of his few mistakes. To advertise the catalog, he put together a five-line classified advertisement that said:

> Dry Bean Garden Seeds—largest selection in the country. Over 20 varieties. 100% natural, untreated. Write for free list. VERMONT YANKEE BEAN SEED COMPANY.

The ad ran in a handful of country-oriented magazines early in 1976. Among them was *Southern Living*, which claimed a readership of five million, almost all of it in the South. But the ad in *Southern Living*, which cost Thomas thirty-five dollars, generated almost no response. "It did not take me long," he laughs, "to figure out why the response was so lousy." He changed his company's name to Vermont Bean Seed Company and now gets lots of business from Dixie.

Despite the Yankee doodle, 5,000 persons in all responded to the ad, and Vermont Bean Seed did $11,000 worth of business. The light in Thomas's brain took on a warm, steady glow. "This could be a very nice little business," he thought.

But he did want to expand the operation slightly. To do that he needed more capital than he had left from the bean-field misadventure. He went to the place where capital is kept. True, he told the banker, he had almost no experience in the seed business, but he was young (not yet forty) and ambitious and energetic, and he was sure he could make a little money at it. The banker intimated that Thomas had been out in the bean field too long. Thomas visited another bank. The second, apparently, was a bit more daring, or hungry, than the first. It advanced Thomas a line of credit up to $21,000. Not much, but enough to compile and mail Vermont Bean Seed Company's beautiful 1977 catalog. Today that catalog is something of a collector's item. Like the first catalog it contained no color—which immediately set it apart from almost all other seed catalogs—but instead included handsome pen-and-ink drawings on country themes, done by local artists. The cover pictures a funky, down-to-earth-looking country store. The large format, easy-to-read catalog listed nearly a hundred kinds of beans. Thomas bought mailing lists and fed them into a computer. He then mailed out 100,000 catalogs, a twentyfold increase over the first. Again he advertised the catalog in several publications, including *Southern Living*. He got back $112,000 in orders. Volume has grown considerably every year since.

The computer now has squirreled away in its maw the names, addresses and buying histories of more than 85,000 customers. They live in almost every state in this country, and several foreign countries as well. New York State holds the lead for the most customers, followed closely by Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California. Vermont ranks a modest sixteenth. Of course, Thomas chauvinistically observes, Vermont has a population of only half a million people.

None of the beans sold by Vermont Bean, one might be surprised to learn, are grown in Vermont. Most come from southern Idaho. It doesn't rain much there—about four inches a year, on the average. In Vermont, as Thomas learned in 1975, more rain can pour down in one autumn month than falls in an entire year in southern Idaho. If the plants become wet when the beans are drying, they get moldy and discolored. And if there's one thing any seed house quickly discovers, it's that gardeners don't buy seeds a second time if those they got the first time were moldy and discolored. Of course, most plants need more than four inches of water a year. In the bean fields of southern Idaho, most of it arrives via pipes, and during the critical period before the harvest no water is allowed to touch the beans.

The 1982 catalog of Vermont Bean Seed lists seventy-two cultivars of beans. There are five that no other seed company in this country carries, plus several other old ones that are still difficult for home gardeners to find. How did Thomas find them? He telephoned a few commercial seed growers and asked if they had any old bean cultivars on hand. Many, it turned out, did.

"What I want to do," he says, "is repopularize some of those old varieties that, for some reason, have lost their appeal to the gardening public. A lot of them were excellent beans—good yields, good taste, disease resistant. The 'Vermont Cranberry', for instance; it had almost become extinct. It's a beautiful-looking bean (red, speckled, and striped with purple), and one of the sweetest tasting I know." Thomas's campaign to restore the popularity of heirloom beans seems to be succeeding. Demand for 'Vermont Cranberry' is now so heavy that the amount of seed an individual could purchase from Vermont Bean in 1982 was limited to four ounces.

Guy Thomas has another love besides beans: long-distance running. In 1978 he ran in the New York Marathon and placed 710th—not bad, considering there were 16,000 entrants. Bill Rodgers won the event, and Thomas crossed the finish line just forty-five minutes behind him. Thomas did equally well in the 1979 and 1980 New

York Marathons. He did not compete in 1981, however. He did not have time. The "little, part-time" business had grown some. Vermont Bean Seed Company mailed out close to half a million catalogs and did more than a million dollars' worth of business that year. These days, Thomas contents himself with jogging to and from the bank.

As for John Withee, he now has time enough to consummate, rather than merely pursue, his great romance. He was able to complete a book about beans that he had started putting together back in 1976, before Wanigan Associates began threatening to overwhelm him. The closets of the Withee home hold clothes again, which pleases Mrs. Withee. Letters from bean lovers around the world are now answered fairly promptly. And, having planted 230 cultivars of beans in his garden in 1981, Withee's plans call for some 270 in 1982.

It is no surprise that Withee is an expert on growing beans. "The most important thing here in New England," he says, "is not to fool around with the low end of the temperature range." He explains that, while the soil must warm to at least 50 degrees Fahrenheit before beans will start to grow, they won't do really well until the soil temperature hits 60 degrees. He considers 65 degrees the ideal bean-seed-planting temperature. "It is no news to old gardeners," he writes, "that beans planted early in open ground will often not show flowers one day earlier than beans planted two weeks later, when conditions were better."

Because he deals with many beans that come from warmer climates and require a growing season that is longer than New England's, Withee gains a few days by what he calls "presprouting." He does this by washing the seeds and then soaking them in tepid water for a few hours until they swell. Then he places them on a single layer of moist paper towel. He covers the seeds with another layer of moist paper towel, places them in a plastic bag in order to retain the moisture, and puts the bag in a spot where the temperature will stay between 70 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit. When the radicle (rootlet) first appears, the seedlings can be gently planted in the garden. The soil must be kept moist for several days. Withee often plants seeds of scarce, valuable bean cultivars in peat pots, then transplants them when conditions improve. Or he will simply roll up the moist towels and put them in the refrigerator, where the low temperature stops all growth. When soil temperature reaches an acceptable level, he takes the seeds out of the refrigerator, allows them to warm gradually, and plants them. By planting only the beans that have sprouted he gets a 100 percent stand with no skips.

One of the beans listed in Withee's last annual catalog, which was published in 1980, is called 'King Tut'. It's a white runner bean, fairly large, not too distinguished looking. But it has an enchanting history. In 1922, the fabled tomb of King Tutankhamen was opened. Among all the golden treasures were a few large, white bean seeds. An archaeologist took the seeds back to England, where his gardener planted them. Amazingly, they grew and produced seed. Now, the gardener, the story goes, happened to be a friend of a woman who had since gone to live in Maine, in Lewiston, and he sent her some of the seeds. She planted them, and they produced seed. John Withee heard about the beans and wrote to her. She sent him some of the seeds. Withee grew them, and they are now listed in his catalog.

Withee smiles as he tells the story. "Of course," he says, "the whole thing is highly dubious. Number one, let's suppose the orignial seeds *did* come out of the tomb. How did they get there? There is no evidence that they were placed there with King Tut and remained viable for five thousand years, none at all. Also—and this is the clincher for me—that type of bean just wasn't grown in Egypt at the time. The seeds could have been brought into the tomb just a few years ago by rats, of course. I've not been able to keep seeds viable more than six years, and even under ideal storage conditions the limit seems to be about ten. Still, it's a fascinating story."

He adds, after a pause, "The point is that seeds will die out. If you don't keep it planted, a particular variety can disappear from the face of the earth forever, a terrible thing."

But there's more to it than simply keeping a particular cultivar extant, Withee emphasizes. Last fall he went to Arizona to attend a conference sponsored by the Meals for Millions Foundation, with support from the National Sharecroppers' Fund. There, he says, a very important point was made: "What we need to do is not just *preserve* all these different varieties of beans that have played such a vital part in the nutritional history of man, but keep them growing, for human consumption, in the areas in which the variety first appeared. That's where they do best. After all, the varieties survived not because of people like me but because they prospered naturally and provided good food for the local population."

Guy Thomas, one suspects, would heartily concur. ❦

Jack Cook, a free-lance writer specializing in rural life, wrote "Northern Seeds for Northern Gardens: Johnny's Selected Seeds," in March 1982.

Sources

Vermont Bean Seed Company
Garden Lane
Bomoseen, Vermont 05732
(802) 265-4212
Free catalog

John Withee no longer handles general correspondence. He requests that all inquiries regarding heirloom beans be sent to either of the following organizations:

Kent Whealy
Seed Savers Exchange
R.R. 2
Princeton, Missouri 64673

Dr. Richard Harwood
Organic Gardening and Farming
Research Center
Siegfriedale Road
R.D. 1, Box 323
Kutztown, Pennsylvania 19530