



POLE BEAN REVIVAL

An NC Cooperative Extension agent in Ashe County and several optimistic farmers are helping bring back a crop that was thought to be extinct.

written by BRYAN MIMS / *photography by* REVIVAL CREATIVES

THE MAGIC BEANS LAY HIDDEN away, in darkness and ice, as the world outside warmed to the notion of beans in a can. They had once been so bountiful, these beans, garnishing Sunday supper plates from this hill to that holler across Ashe County. They hung heavy on vines in the deep green of late summer, ripe for the picking. On creeksides, hillsides, and roadsides, the beans burst onto the landscape, summoning truckloads of workers and feeding the local economy.

But now the only ones left sat in a basement freezer, through the waning years of the Cold War. They lay there since before the Internet and social media took off, through both Bush presidencies, through roaring times and recessions, through the onset of DoorDash and Uber Eats, waiting

for someone to ... well, spill the beans about their existence.

During the late 1960s, pole beans were the biggest crop in Ashe County. They're called pole beans because their vines cling to poles or trellises, creating rows of leafy labyrinths. And the dominant bean of the area's growers was Morse's 191, a pole bean developed and registered by the Ferry-Morse Seed Company in 1938. The beans flourished in the moderate summers of the Ashe County mountains. Trucks hauled them as far away as grocery stores in Florida, where they fetched premium prices.

"It is the signature pole bean from our industry," says Travis Birdsell, director of North Carolina Cooperative Extension's Ashe County Center. In 2016, Birdsell, along with the NC State Extension Master Gardener program,



Morse's 191 pole beans were thought to be extinct, but it turns out that the climbers were just biding their time in a deep freeze, waiting for a 21st-century comeback.



From left: Travis Birdsell, Extension director in Ashe County; Blake Williams, Extension agriculture program assistant; and Bill Naser, Extension Master Gardener volunteer, all played a role in the comeback of a local icon. Can you spot the Morse's 191 pole bean below? Hint: It's a shade lighter than the green beans on either side.

started the Ashe County Victory Garden to preserve and celebrate the county's agricultural history. "I went on a pretty big expedition to find as many heritage seeds as possible," he says. But he figured Morse's 191 was as good as gone; nobody had grown the bean in decades.

Among the last growers was the late Elmer Poe, who retired from bean farming in 1980. He grew 23,000 bushels of Morse's 191 that year, but by then, the area's bean business was beginning to wither. His 84-year-old son, Paul, blames it on the demise of family get-togethers around the table — and on the rise in popularity of green beans in a can. "Somebody asked me one time what happened to the bean business in Ashe County, and I said, 'Mama quit cooking Sunday dinner,'" he says. "And

“What happened to the bean business in Ashe County? Mama quit cooking Sunday dinner.”

I'm still sure today that had a big influence on it."

Paul and his son, Mitchell, now grow Fraser firs for Christmas trees at Cardinal Tree Farms. Rows of evergreens, not pole beans, ribbon the county's rolling terrain. But back when beans were the county's bread-and-butter crop, the Poe family was royalty. After Mitchell returned home from college in the early 1990s, he worked for Ashe County Motors, where customers who had worked for his family's farm would tell him how much the Poes meant to their own families. "We just want you to know that your family kept us alive," they'd say. "That was our only means of making money."

Looking back, Mitchell describes Morse's 191 as a bean of beauty. "That 191 is as white as snow," he says. As it happens, his father decided to put some of the Morse's 191 seeds in a freezer after the Poe family quit growing pole beans. "I thought I might want to eat one a little later on," Paul says with a laugh. "It's part of my heritage."





Farmer Don Smith (above) inspects trellises brimming with Morse's 191 pole beans. He and his oldest son Josh (below left), along with their dog, Zeb, tend 10 acres of pole beans and last year harvested 300 bushels.

IN HIS QUEST TO UNEARTH THE AREA'S HERITAGE beans, Birdsell paid a visit to the Poes' office in 2017. That's when Paul brought the seeds out of the freezer in a Ziploc bag. Birdsell and others had nearly written them off as extinct, but there they were as frozen morsels, ready for planting. "I would say it's like the feeling an archaeologist gets when he finds some historical site and realizes it still exists," Birdsell says. "There's an opportunity for a whole new generation to experience it."

Birdsell planted some of the seeds in the Victory Garden at the Museum of Ashe County History and in his home garden, successfully multiplying the Morse's 191 bean. He also gave seeds to local farmer Don Smith, who had expressed interest in growing pole beans.

On a gentle slope along the South Fork New River, Smith's vines are lush in the late summer sun. "As long as they're blooming, they're making more beans," he says. "Most of the beans that you buy in the grocery store now, they're bred to get rid of the bean on the inside. The flesh of the hull is all you're getting. You're not getting any *bean* in green beans nowadays."

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Smith now has a contract with Ingles grocery stores to grow bona fide beans on his farm — and the darling of the batch is their two acres of Morse's 191. The big, white, flavorful beans can once again hang heavy on vines in the summer sun, waiting to be picked before the first frost. They can once again populate backyard gardens and side dishes from hills to hollers to flatlands.

"The best place to preserve seed is in a garden," Birdsell says. "We want to have a diversity of people growing it so that it doesn't ever get lost."

Morse's 191 may not be magic beans, exactly, but there's something magical about seeing them emerge from a deep freeze and brought back from the brink of extinction. TV dinners and Green Giant couldn't polish off the pole beans. With soil, sunshine, and a newfound appreciation for their savoriness, they have another shot at Sunday dinner. **Os**

Bryan Mims is a freelance writer based in Atlanta and a former reporter at WRAL.

