JOE FITZGERALD, NURSERYMAN AND PHILOSOPHER

by Mary Joe (Fitzgerald) Clendenin

Joe Fitzgerald was born in Erath County in 1876, only three miles from where he lived the rest of his life and died. His family, Johnathan Clint and Sara Elizabeth (Nelson) Fitzgerald, settled near the head of Alarm Creek when the county was young. Writing for the local paper and many other publications, including *Country Gentleman*, *Time*, and *The Rural New Yorker*, became a hobby to him after he established a nursery business in 1900.

Joe Fitzgerald began a nursery in Central Texas when predictors said it couldn’t be done. He told a part of his own story in this excerpt from an article to the *Stephenville Tribune*: “Many years ago I remember the old apple wagons that came through the country. That must have been forty years ago (would be about 1895). The man who drove the wagon would always have an apple sticking on a stick to advertise, and from that I resolved some day to own an apple orchard.”

Mr. Joe walked eight miles to John Tarleton College, got the education necessary, and taught school five years, saving money for the time when he could buy a bit of land and fulfill his dream. He married Ellen Carraway in 1898 and then, about 1899, he bought the first of several worn-out farms, fifty-two acres of land eroded and depleted from growing cotton, and began a lifelong project of rebuilding the land and growing a variety of things. He proclaimed diversification as the way for farmers to survive. Eventually, he owned about 1,000 acres.
First, he planted blackberries and vegetables that would be ready for market within the year. His wife drove a buggy to the little nearby town of Alexander to sell what they grew. The second year he began experimenting with apple trees, ignoring the comments of neighbors who said he was wasting his time. He tried several varieties, ordering trees from nurseries up North. When one didn’t do well in his locality he abandoned it, such as the Ben Davis, for some that did better: Winesap, Missouri Pippin, Jonathan, and others. He budded the ones that did best and kept experimenting until he had a producing orchard.

Before and during the Depression years, Joe Fitzgerald was encouraging farmers to diversify. Cotton, hit during those years by boll weevils, was depleting the land. He encouraged trying many different crops, claiming that a man with a small farm could be self-sufficient and weather the hard times. He tried many of those crops himself. In one article he told of growing rhubarb. “It is a funny thing but we often get it into our heads that a thing cannot be done and we do not try it. I thought for years that rhubarb could not be raised out here in Texas where it is dry and hot. Last season I tried my first rhubarb.” He went on to say that rhubarb made the best pies in the world, and he explained how and where to plant it. Rhubarb needed chicken-yard fertilizer and some shade protection, but he grew some with stems as big around as hoe handles. He and his daughter enjoyed the pies, but the rest of the family preferred fruit pies, and grown-at-home fruit was available in many varieties: plum, berry, apple, pear, and peach.

Soil conservation was important to this budding nurseryman before country people knew the meaning of the word. Soon, he had other farmers working for him in their off-seasons when he filled gullies with brush, spread rotted hay and barn fertilizer, and learned to use surveyor instruments so that he could lay off and have built his own terraces. He cultivated on the contour set by the terraces. No one told him he couldn’t plant an orchard setting trees on top of the terraces. It probably would not have kept him from trying the method if they had told him. On one old place, spaced on top
of the terraces, he planted a peach orchard, and on another he planted apples. Soon, he was selling fruit in season to truckers from all over. Growing fruit trees to sell soon followed his own orchards.

Each fall he had planted hundreds of pounds of peach seed for seedlings to be budded in the spring. That was the beginning of a big mail order business and a catalogue by which to sell. He grew from 75,000 to 100,000 peach, plum, apricot, and pear trees for market each year. Each seedling had to be budded. Cutting bud wood from his own orchards, he grew varieties he knew would do well in his area, and traveled to other parts of the state for varieties adapted there. He then grew trees for other localities and stated in his catalogues which did well where. His catalogues also listed pecans, rose bushes, figs, and many kinds of ornamentals.

With correspondence with other nurseries, he was always trying new things. He even ordered seed and plants from Italy and Japan and corresponded with the owners of nurseries in those countries. Setting out trees in the fall or winter depended on the weather, according to Mr. Joe. He wrote advice about pruning, setting, and the best varieties for each soil type. Going barefoot most of the year, as he walked through the fields, might have had something to do with his ability to judge soil. He walked the plowed fields to decide when and what to plant.

During all this experimental farming Mr. Joe found time to keep up his writing. He wrote to the editors of many newspapers and periodicals. J. E. Fitzgerald was listed as a Contributing Editor to the monthly farm and livestock journal, Fletcher’s Farming. A long article he wrote to Country Gentleman, March 1, 1913, was entitled by the editor, “MAN WHO MADE GOOD, The Fact Story of a Wide-Awake Market-Gardner.” In it he tells about that first berry patch. He platted rows between apple rows. With good cultivation he said:

The bushes were literally ropes of berries. . . . When my berries got to bearing well, dozens of men came to my patch. After they had eaten about a gallon of my biggest and best berries they would say, “Joe, if you
want to raise berries you’ll have to go to a berry country. Now back yonder where I come from berries as big as goose eggs grew wild. And they were good too. Heap better than they are here and you didn’t have to buy them either.”

Joe went right on selling his berries. He planted another variety that would ripen when the first was finished.

He was also busy planting peaches, apples, plums, pears, apricots, and the biggest persimmon orchard in the country. He was the only orchardman to market persimmons. The improved Japanese persimmon was introduced to this country by Mr. Joe. He ordered a tree from California, imported from Japan to produce his stock. Using seed from wild persimmons and the new tree for bud-wood, he developed a way to bud the trees. Soon he had an unlimited source of bud-wood and a bearing persimmon orchard that produced more fruit than the local market could handle. That little problem was solved by advertising in *The Organic Gardener*, published in New York. He shipped, by mail, bushels of persimmons to that state. The local post office workers dreaded to see Persimmon Joe, as the *Country Gentleman* magazine called him, coming.

Smart marketing was another accomplishment. Pears that produced in his area were typically hard fruit that made good pear preserves, but were not worth much to eat fresh, but Joe Fitzgerald had the answer to that. He stored about 50 bushels of Kieffer pears until they were “good and mellow.” He said, “I didn’t have to commit any violence to get three dollars a bushel for mellow pears.” The editors made a side bar for the article where he discusses this:

A Few Things I Have Learned:

It doesn’t pay to raise things to suit your fancy altogether. Raise things to suit the buyer’s fancy. Try to raise the things that no one else will have and that every one else will want.
Give good measure, but make the customer pay for what he gets. Never cut prices because some other fellow is running ’round selling cheaper than you are.

Don’t worry; the man who sells too cheaply will soon go out of business anyway. People buy with their eyes, and high-colored fruit always sells better.

Don’t overrate anything; rather underrate it. Then you can sell to the same person day after day.

He was something of a philosopher. Talking about the difficulties of the Depression, Mr. Fitzgerald said, “When it gets so bad that such fellows as the Standard Oil and Mellon go out of business, we little fellows in Comanche and Erath counties will still be knocking along. We have our little farms that we can raise most anything on and we can cut waste entirely out . . . There is only one thing that can stop the diversified farmers of Erath County and Comanche and that is a long continued drought.”

Mr. Joe was an avid reader, with daily papers from Ft. Worth and Dallas and papers from counties throughout the area, as well as weekly and monthly national publications and books. It was no wonder that light for night reading was very important to him. In the rural home area, electricity was not available for many years. During that time he tried coal-oil lamps, carbide gas, generated electricity, and wind chargers to power a car battery to furnish light. Imagine his joy and thankfulness to Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he began encouraging Rural Electrification. It was a dream come true in 1935 when our corner of the country had light at the flip of a switch.

Joe Fitzgerald was a student of nature with respect for all of her creatures. He enjoyed making comparisons between those creatures and human beings, such as showing how bees were like communists—they worked for their Queen (the state), making sure that she would outlive all of her workers. A dirt dauber could
count up to eight, because she always made seven cells for babies and one for the trapped insect that would be their food. Crows had detailed systems of communication; the leader could tell the others just where in the pecan orchard Joe hid with a gun so that the others could plan alternate routes to the best nuts.

He had one old gander with seven wives that paraded in front of other geese, including several lone ganders, as if he were Clark Gable with a harem. The other ganders decided to attack; he said:

Old Knobhead backed up against the packing house wall and as they charged he cracked heads right and left. He soon had the other ganders whipped and pompously started across the field with his wives. I noticed several other geese casting loving looks in Knobhead’s direction, and I do believe if he had some way of starting a strain of hillbilly music every goose on the place would have followed and left the other ganders to nurse their jealousy and soothe their aching heads.

Writing whimsical as well as serious articles to the local paper and other papers, was a hobby for Joe Fitzgerald. Sometimes, he sounded romantic as he wrote to the paper addressing make-believe women:

“Dearest Lottie: I do not like the idea of you walking alone in the moonlight. You know there is a man in the moon. I often wonder just what does the man in the moon think as he looks down on us poor mortals below. Used to be my father would take me on his knee on a moonlit night and tell me about the man in the moon. He said the man was piling brush. Mother said he was churning, and one of my uncles said he was milking a cow. Sometimes I could see half a dozen men in the moon. That was before prohibition—and now I see only one.”
He speculated about Hoover going broke during his presidency, saying, “We are going to have to build a home for ex-politicians that go broke in office.” One tall tale written to the editor of Time Magazine, October 26, 1931, earned him a real reputation. Someone had written about the size of frogs in the East. Mr. Fitzgerald wrote a tale about pet frogs he had in an earthen tank on their farm when he was a boy. Every day he caught bugs for them. The twelve frogs would line up according to size to receive the bugs he caught, one for the smallest, two for the second, three for the third largest, and so on. Bugs were hard to find sometimes. Once when he didn’t catch but one bug he gave it to the smallest. The others were very disappointed. Finally, the second frog turned and ate the first frog, the third ate the second, the fourth ate the third and so on until after the eleventh frog ate the tenth. One would expect the twelfth to eat the eleventh, but he wasn’t hungry. Joe looked down his throat to see why. Turned out, he had swallowed a wild goose. After that story appeared in the “Letters to the Editor” of Time, he got a letter from City Consumers Co., Paducah, Kentucky. It read:

Dear Mr. Fitzgerald: The enclosure is just a small token of esteem from one slinger of the bull to another. . . . Your story ranks with some of the best Kentucky yarns that I have heard, and we are only too glad to make you a charter member of our international order. Yours for bigger and better frog appetites. [Signed: Prevaricatingly yours, Charles G. Vahlkamp, Pres. City Consumers Company. (International Order of Slingers of the Bull)]

Joe Fitzgerald was one of those people who, no matter what the wardrobe—top of the line and style, or everyday apparel—he could never look neat. Being about five-foot-nine, built square and solid, he always looked like what he was, a country man. He was a country hick, if you please, and was proud of it. Though he was a man of authority and had traveled and corresponded with
governors, dozens of senators and representatives, nationally as well as in Texas (there are hundreds of copies of replies to his many correspondence, and letters commenting on his “letters to the editors”), he enjoyed making important-looking people feel ill at ease. The family took a trip up the eastern coast all the way to New York and then to Washington, D.C., in October of 1936. After getting home, the local newspaper editor asked him to write of his trip. He wrote:

But even in the great capital you can see things to laugh at. You will see people there that think they are so big and important that it will remind you that men are still like monkeys. I like to ask people like that some fool question. I got in behind a crowd of high ups that were following a guide around. I saw a picture on the wall that looked about like you often see in a barber shop or saloon. The guide explained it was painted in Germany and cost one hundred thousand dollars. I asked if the government didn’t get cheated when it was bought. The old woman turned a scornful withering look on me and a man or two looked at me like they thought I was crazy. I still believe six bits would have been plenty to give for that picture.

The glowing part of his report was saved for the Library of Congress and the Booker T. Washington School in Tuskegee, Alabama. Mr. Washington was one of his heroes and he was impressed by the people, the grounds, and the immense pecan orchards along the drives of the college.

New York City was a wonder to him, and he wanted to see the Empire State Building—from the outside. He was afraid of elevators that went that high, and though he was persuaded to stay long enough for the rest of the family to ride to the top and look around, his words when he got out of the family car and leaned up against the building across the street to see the spire at the top of the Empire building were, “Well, there she is kids, let’s go.”
In 1944 Joe Fitzgerald ran for Congressman, District #17, on the Democratic ticket. Two judges had come out for the position: S.M. Russell and R.M. Wagstaff, and when a third judge, Clyde Garrett declared his candidacy, Mr. Joe decided people needed another choice. He ran as “The Farmer With Three Judges After Him.” His political views were unusual, to say the least. Mr. Biggers said in an article to the paper, that if you wanted honesty or advice about fruit or trees, go to Fitzgerald, but if you had a political question, go to anyone else. After the votes were counted and Joe Fitzgerald had lost, he wrote a Card of Regrets to the paper. Among other things he said, “I made a clean campaign. I warn all other amateur candidates to steer clear of that.”

Almanacs and characters like Joe Fitzgerald may have gone out of style, but for many years he both entertained and advised many people. Reading some of his articles after these many years, it’s amazing to find how many things he prophesied have come to pass, including some of his ideas about eating natural foods, the wisdom of farming with little overhead, the ravages of war, and big companies consuming smaller ones. He was a pacifist, and a real fan of President Franklin Roosevelt and his moves to relieve the sufferings of the Depression, but he didn’t agree with entrance into World War II. He thought the United States was tricked into participation. One thing for sure, he didn’t hesitate to let others know where he stood.
Major John B. Hawley in France during World War I as engineer in charge of water supply and sanitation for St.-Nazaire District and Base Section Number One. Photo courtesy Freese and Nichols, Inc.