9-22-2000

The First Manure-Pitch

Mort Mather

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In the story heard here, Mort Mather talks about the origins of what is now known as “The Harry S. Truman Games” (more on that name in a moment). The original contest was a massive manure-spreading competition that involved people spreading manure from the back of a pick-up truck. There were twenty contestants and therefore twenty trucks. The basic rules were that each driver would park the full truck in their section, sling manure around, and move the truck once to cover the whole area. The area required to hold this contest made it impractical as it took place away from the rest of the Fair. Mather organized the manure spreading contest based on his own habit of providing play-by-play and color commentary for himself while working. The contest continues to this day on a smaller scale in which fairgoers throw bags of manure for distance and accuracy. Everything else one could need to know about the contest is summarized in this short statement from MOFGA: “Mort Mather and the Manure Spreading Society of Maine (MSS of M) start the “Grand Pitch-Off” at the Common Ground Country Fair, preceded by manure pitching contests around Maine. Mather, president of MSS of M, makes up the rules for the contest, including one that politicians cannot enter because they might have an unfair advantage in a manure slinging contest. The contest is named after Harry S. Truman, for his down-to-earth style; as Mather explains: A society lady once asked Mrs. Truman if she could get the president to stop using the word ‘manure.’ Bess replied, ‘You don’t know how long it took me to get him to start using that word.’”

A couple notes may help explain some of the details. A market garden is a relatively small-scale production of fruits, vegetables, and flowers as cash crops, frequently sold directly to consumers and
restaurants. It differs from other types of farming in the diversity of crops grown on a small area of land. Also, Mather mentions that he thought this was the second Fair, but MOFGA’s historical timeline notes that the first manure-pitch took place in 1980. Mather noted that he developed “four different spreads,” meaning four different types of competitions. The contest described here was one of the four, and clearly the least practical. The other contests also took place, but this was the main event. Finally, certain segments have been edited out for time; these sections are marked by ellipses.

Transcript:
Well, my market garden, I’d segmented, it was a hundred feet wide with a road down through the middle so that I could go down through the middle with my pickup truck and spread manure. I found that I could spread it twenty-five feet on either side of the truck, so by going down through the middle I had half of it done and then by coming up each side I’d get the other half. Well, while I was doing that, you know, you’re mind is - you’re out there doing something that is pretty much of a mindless occupation. But my mind has never been really good at shutting down; it just keeps going all the time. So I found myself, as I said earlier as a football fan, I found myself giving commentary on my spreading. And I was going along there and I’d be spreading out there and I’d say, “Okay, now you’re looking around in the truck there.” What were the commentators’ names, oh, I can’t think right now. “Okay, Jim, what’s he doing there now?” “Well, he’s looking for a clump of manure see, he missed that spot over there in the corner. He’s trying to get something that will go out there and catch the spot.” And then, “Oh, wasn’t that a good spray? Didn’t he spread that out nice?” “That was, gee, that was a good one,” you know? I just kept doing the commentary as I went along, and then I started imagining the commentary and it was an Olympics year, so then I started putting it into that kind of context as a competition and so I developed four different spreads…

…So based on that principle, I went ahead and talked to Common Ground and said I wanted to do this manure spreading contest, and I said I was going to get contestants in advance – you’d have to go through a qualifying somewhere else. Well, I only found one other person who wanted to have a qualifying round at their farm, of course I was one of them, but then I found there was an awful lot of work to lining up these plots and to do all that and to put the whole thing together. I put in a whole lot more work getting other people to spread manure for me than I ever did spreading it myself.

But at any rate, I promoted, I wrote to a company in Wisconsin that I saw an ad for that had these mini-manure spreaders, and they, and I said I’m doing this manure spreading contest, and I’d like as a top prize to be your manure spreader. And they agreed, and they sent the thing to me and I went to a couple of stores and got them to promote, to give me pitchforks, wheelbarrows, shovels, the whole works, all this stuff given for free. And the first one was at Litchfield, so this was the second Fair actually, and of course we couldn’t spread truckloads of manure around the Litchfield Fair Grounds so I had to find a place outside. So I found a guy had this gravel pit that he was reclaiming, and it was flat, and you know like an amphitheater for what we were doing there. I had twenty contestants, so I had to round up twenty pick-up trucks and get the same amount of manure in all twenty trucks… Well, each driver would drive the truck out, get it loaded up, and drive out… And I had five judges; one of them was wearing a top hat and [coat] tails. I had a starter’s gun and I had somebody demonstrating the manure spreader out next to them in the background. And I had to do that because this company out in Wisconsin sent these suits so I, I thought, “Oh my goodness, I better make this a pretty good promotion for their gift. I got these three guys in suits walking around.”

At the start of the gun I got twenty people in the backs of the trucks poised and ready to go, so at the start of the gun they all go, you know, and shit flies in every direction. It was gory; it was one of the high
points of my life. I got *Organic Gardening* magazine and a photographer up there on the bank doing a picture of the whole thing, and the judges are walking around checking everybody’s spread. It was just great. One guy parked in the middle and didn’t move his truck, but he’s throwing manure all over the cab, and oh boy he’s going to get a lot taken off for – neatness counted in this thing, I mean the judges were looking at all this stuff. How was he going to get it under the truck? Well, he had it all figured out: he gets off the back of the truck and he throws it all underneath the truck. It was just great, and at the end when he’s got the truck unloaded of manure, he hauls a broom out and sweeps the whole truck off. It was great. So that was that. That was the only time that one’s been done, and I’ve been trying to get them interested in doing that for Spring Growth. We couldn’t do it for the Fair ‘cause we use too much space.

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Sources: [MOFGA’s Full Timeline](http://www.mortmather.com); Mort Mather’s website: [www.mortmather.com](http://www.mortmather.com)