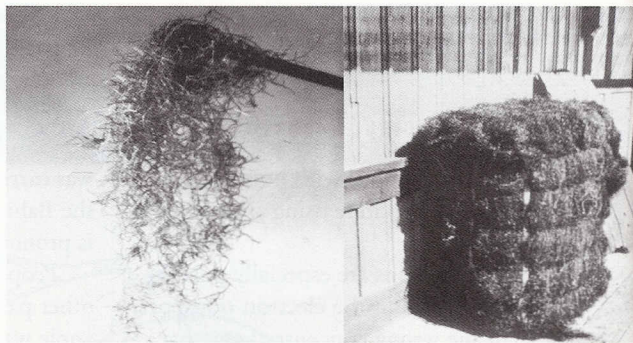


Gold Mine of the Air the Spanish Moss Industry of Florida

by Kristine Stewart, Ph.D



Close your eyes and imagine a scene of the Old South, just after the Civil War. I'll bet you see a plantation house with a live oak in the foreground, festooned with long strands of Spanish moss blowing gently in the breeze. Now let your image wander to the back forty and visualize a sharecropper family trying to scratch out a living. Perhaps dad and the kids are "picking moss" out of a live oak using a long pole with nails at the end. When their donkey cart is full of moss, this family of moss pickers will sell it and the resulting meager sum will buy food and other necessities during a time when opportunities to earn cash are few.

Aside from the picturesque qualities of Spanish moss, few people are aware that this epiphytic member of the BROMELIACEAE has a wide range of human uses. Native Americans and Central and South Americans used it medicinally for coughs, fever, hemorrhoids, measles, rheumatoid arthritis, dandruff, contraceptive, and for lung, liver, kidney, and heart ailments. It is used in nativity scenes in Latin America and, in Mexico, it is hung in doorways during celebrations. Throughout the American South, Spanish moss was processed for its fiber ("black moss") and was the basis of a booming industry. Beginning after the Civil War, large commercial operations were established to remove the green or gray outer cortex through various methods. Once the cortex was removed, the fibrous vascular tissue remained, resembling horse hair (hence, the name "black moss"). Today, the industry is still alive, except the whole plant ("green moss") is used by florists or it is desiccated (and killed) with its cortex intact. I call the early years (1870s-1940s) the Black Moss Era and the years from the 1970s to the present, the Green Moss Era. This article will take you on a tour of each.

To document the Spanish moss industry, I interviewed dozens of people who pick moss for a living now and those who picked it in their youth. Many told of family members who taught the skill to them. Not only was I interested in the history of the industry, but also in their motivations since the price in the late 1940s was a meager 1.5 cents per pound. Today, the price is about 25 cents per pound of green moss. Little is known about the early days of the industry because moss was gathered and processed by poor whites and blacks, so I interviewed members of historic societies and examined historic documents and photographs.

Black Moss Era (1870s - 1940s)

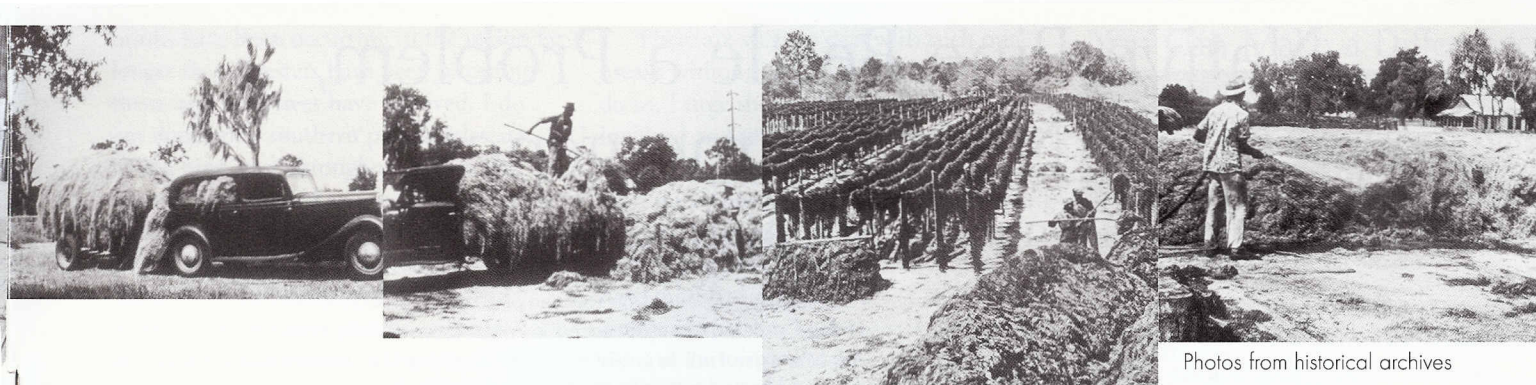
Early settlers used the fiber for horse bridles and saddle blankets. For many years, rural people valued the spongy and resilient Spanish moss as a stuffing for mattresses and for upholstered furniture. About 1870, a small industry began in rural Louisiana to commercialize Spanish moss to take advantage of this feature. Because of the industrialization of the automobile and furniture industries about that time, the Spanish moss industry became big business that spread to Florida in the 1920s. It was a cash crop, a "gold mine of the air" for the rural poor who harvested it and sold it to the factories called "ginneries." Few jobs were available in the rural South, since life revolved around farming. Picking moss provided at least part (and in some cases a good part) of the family income.

Spanish moss was processed on a large scale at the ginneries. Black moss was composted in large piles or in pits to remove the outer cortex, a process that lasted 2-6 months. The longer it was composted, the more effective the cortex removal, and the higher the grade of finished moss. Because black moss fetched a higher price than green, most families composted their own moss, although many preferred the faster method of boiling it in large kettles. Once the cortex was removed, either at home or at the ginneries, it was hung to dry. At the ginnyery, the dried moss was placed in a modified cotton gin that combed the fibers. Finally it was baled, ready for shipment. In the heyday of the Spanish moss industry, 10 ginneries operated in Florida. By 1960, only two remained and the sole remaining Gainesville factory burned to the ground in 1963, bringing the Black Moss era to a close in Florida.

Green Moss Era (1970s-present)

The use of Spanish moss as a furniture stuffing has long been supplanted by foam rubber and other materials. However, the Spanish moss industry is still active, but on a much smaller scale. Today, the entire plant is either dried or used as a living plant. Dried moss is used by silk flower arrangers and florists to make arrangements look more natural. The living plant is used by florists for the same reason. Just examine any silk flower arrangement and you can observe the final product of Florida's Spanish moss industry.

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Photos from historical archives

During the black moss era, picking moss might be a good part of a family's income. None of the pickers of today depend on picking moss as their primary way of making a living. However, fiercely independent pickers are still found in the lower economic levels of Florida society. When I asked one of my informants why her family picked moss, she petulantly told me, "It's how we live! We do field work and all that stuff." It is no longer a booming industry, but exists as a subsistence trade for a relative few. Many use moss picking as a way to supplement a meager pension or welfare check, or as a way to maintain their independence.

The methods of picking moss remain the same as they always were. It is hard work, risking encounters with snakes, chiggers, scorpions, and even bats which rest in the moss during the day. Pickers use a variety of methods. I have seen rakes, garden forks attached to the end of a pole, and long poles made of PVC or aluminum pipe with long nails bored into the ends—whatever is cheap and handy. The idea is to have one end that will tangle itself in the strands of moss. It is then pulled from the tree. The factories will not buy moss with any debris in it. The finished product must be free of all sticks, leaves, and any unwelcome critters. Insects are removed by fumigation or by the drying process which kills the insects as well as the moss.

Once at the factory, the moss is processed in one of two ways. Live moss is packed in large aerated boxes and is sold directly to florists and interior landscape designers. Dried moss has a larger demand because it does not mold or rot. It is popular with silk flower arrangers and can be bagged for sale to craft stores. Green moss takes up to 36 hours to dry, depending on the moisture content. The market for moss is much smaller in the Green Moss Era than it was during the Black Moss Era and it is harder to document, since many factories are small operations and most pickers do not report this income.

Through many hours of interviews and a couple of tries at picking moss myself, I came to see that picking moss was part of a larger life strategy of making a living, often as a means of financial survival. In this way, it is the same life strategy used by the pickers' fathers and grandfathers. In particular, these strategies were tapped when the new florist and craft market appeared about 10-12 years ago. Nearly all current pickers did it in the past or learned the skill from a family member. When the new market opened up, nobody had to learn the skill. It was stored in their culture, ready to go. Moss pickers are hard-working people that I admire and appreciate very much. ✨

Photos above, left to right: Spanish moss is collected with simple, inexpensive tools such as a long pole with nails in the end. A bale of black moss awaits shipment. Moss is piled high on a trailer and in the back seat of this black moss-era automobile. Green moss is piled high, ready to cart off for packaging. "Black moss" refers to the dark inner fiber of the moss, obtained by composting (slow method) or boiling (fast) the moss to remove the outer cortex. Here, a field full of racks where moss is hung to dry. Green moss is kept wet until it's ready for packaging.

...my daddy was doin' it [picking moss] ever since I knowed him. As soon as you got big enough tha's what he was doin'. White and colored. If you didn't do it, how you goin' to live? Wan't no jobs, like there is now...and that's the only way you can live. (GR)

We did the best we could. He [my husband] pulled it to buy things, groceries. We just worked on the farms and that's what we had back then (MW).

...and the money comes in handy. You don't make that much. If I had to do it for a living, I'd starve to death. (EC)

I do lawn mowing in the summer. I'm also a pastor. I do it to keep busy...I go whenever I feel like it. (WS)

It's not an everyday thing...when we need a little gas, or my son wants to do something that we don't have the money for—like when he wants his bicycle tire fixed. (MJ).

A ten-ounce bag of Spanish moss retails for \$2.99 in craft stores. Pickers are paid about \$.25 a pound.