

Firm's vice president recalls the 'good old days' when he was the only employee at the plant

He never knew why I had such a smile on my face!

BY GEORGE JONES
& CHARLOTTE JONES

POMPANO BEACH — Ben Pittman, vice president of operations at Liquid Ag, was the third person hired by the new company. He started as the truck driver.

"Back in 1974, Ed Darlington (a former colleague of founder Dr. Max Brown and the firm's first employee) hired me. We were a small company.

"Max was busy doing a lot of consulting at that time and was not around very much. It was primarily Ed and myself. Sally, Max's wife, came in three times a week and did all the office work. We also had Howard, a retired bookkeeper accountant who worked half a day on the days Sally wasn't there.

"Business was real slow. But we needed a telephone answering service because there would be times when Ed would be out in the field and I would be making deliveries.

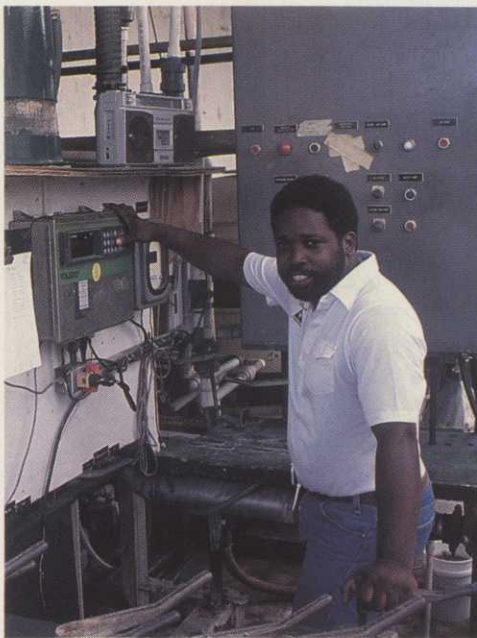
"Sometimes I'd be the only person there. I'd have to load the trucks, unload products coming in, batch and load outgoing product. When I had everything ready to make a delivery, I'd just lock up and the answering service would take over.

"I remember one time a customer asked for his order 'today.' So I hung up the phone, batched all the material, loaded the truck, typed up the paperwork, then I washed up, got in the truck and went straight out to the customer.

"When I got there, he said, 'The guy I talked with on the phone said that he could get it out here pretty soon, but I didn't know it would be this fast!'

"The customer never knew why I had such a friendly smile on my face."

In his first two years, Pittman eventually learned all the procedures at the plant, leaving Darlington free to spend all his time out in the field.



DAN JONES/FGCSA

Ben Pittman, Liquid Ag's vice president of operations

"The biggest problem we had in the early days was finding equipment that would be compatible with the fertilizers we made. The polypropylene we use today wasn't available in 1975. Our first systems were made from PVC and we had to use cast iron pumps.

"A lot of people laughed at us back then, but we knew we had a better way to get fertilizer to the plant so we just kept on going."

Liquid Ag depended on nursery business at first, but a small public course across the street from the firm's tiny plant welcomed the company to experiment in exchange for the fertilizer.

"Our first big successful golf application was Inverrary CC in Fort Lauderdale. We did a lot of research work out there and put in systems on each of the golf courses that are still

operating.

"This was all so new to everyone. What we were guaranteeing was hard even for the fertilizer administrators to strive for.

"At first we offered relatively simple mixes but now we can develop any type of liquid fertilizer. In the early days, we could not put phosphorus in the irrigation water but now we have injection systems that can handle it. And we can put out whatever levels of micronutrients are needed.

"We have grown very fast, but I think appreciating our customers has contributed the most to that growth. In the beginning, we had such a new concept that it was necessary to spend a lot of time with the customers — if a customer had a problem, we were there to help, regardless of the time.

"Max still makes a point to tell us to spend enough time with our customers, just as we did back then. Although we are established now, we must always stay conscious of our product quality and the quality of our service." 