

Commercial Sod Industry

Huber Ranch Sod Nursery

"Instant Lawns for Home and Industry"

By TOM STUNDZA, "The Post-Tribune," Gary, Indiana

A FOG BANK has rolled off the nearby Kankakee River so the gray dawn reveals a heavy, wet cloud hovering atop the flat, green acreage of the Huber Ranch. Yet, at 6 a.m., men and machines already are well into the harvesting of the ranch's only crop — sod.

"The timing of the harvesting is important," explains Bill Huber, the owner. "We start harvesting the sod at 3 a.m. so that, in the coolness of the morning, we can insure freshness in our rolled product."

Under fertilization, irrigation, rolling and constant mowing to a uniform height, the sod is harvested in strips — 18 inches wide by six feet long.

At the Huber Ranch Sod Nursery, Inc., one of the largest in Indiana, 1.5-to-2.5 acres of what Huber calls "instant lawns for home and industry" are harvested every day in a season that runs from March 1 to Dec. 1.

Five hundred and thirty-five of the ranch's 820 acres are set aside for sod production. Half the sod acreage is harvested every year, while the other half is allowed to grow wild for gathering the succeeding season.

Located along U.S. 41, about a dozen miles southwest of Crown Point, the Huber Ranch has been used for sod production since 1967. Annual sales now approach \$1 million.

"The land has a lot going for it that makes it ideal for sod," says Huber. "First, the soil is an organic, black, mineral soil with a high water table. Second, the ranch, itself, is perfectly flat; there's only a six-inch slope across the entire two-mile width of the ranch."

The sod grown at the Huber Ranch is a special blend — called an "executive mixture" — of Merion, Delta, Fylking and Sodco seeds, developed by Huber and consultants at Purdue University.

"The big difference between our sod and that of our largest competitor (Shamrock Turf Nurseries, Inc., a 721-acre sod farm in LaPorte County) is that our sod is grown in fertile river bottom while their's is grown in peat," explains Huber.

He contends that his product — due to the soil, seed blend, and fertilization-irrigation processes used at Huber Ranch — "will give the busy executive or anybody else an almost carefree, yet luxurious, lawn." He adds that, as the sod industry is a relatively new professional farming industry, "it is an extremely competitive business" so consumer costs are kept low "to foster growth within the industry."

"What we are selling is the green of our fields," Huber says. "And, personally, I want to become well known in the sod business for doing just that — selling the green of our sod all over the Midwest."

Huber Ranch now has 15 dealers in Indiana and Illinois selling its product and 18 employees involved in the cultivation, harvesting, and semi-trailer delivery of the sod.

The ranch also is branching into the wholesaling of allied nursery products — seeds and fertilizers, specifically. And, for the past five years, has had a large "hog finishing" operation.

Huber sells 3,000 hogs a year he has bought at two months, weighing 40 pounds, and "feeds them out" to market weight, 225 pounds, at six months of age.

Huber also harvests the three-foot-high wild grass from sod acreage to be harvested the next year, and sells the hay to cattle farmers and contractors who use hay in the winter to "cure" concrete.

"But, it is the sod where we spend most of our time and money," says Huber. "We really try to 'sell' the public because high volume of sales cuts down the per unit over-

head. Yet, it really is a good deal for the public because sod provides a thick, guaranteed lawn with almost 18 months worth of fertilizer, top soil and growing grass."

Huber, a graduate of Notre Dame University with a bachelor's in business administration, is using his sod operation to once again make Huber Farms of Schneider a well-known operation.

The ranch was founded in 1947 by his father, the late William C. Huber, then owner of the nationwide Huber & Huber Motor Express Co. of Louisville, Ky.

In the 1950s and 1960s, under the elder Huber and his son, Harold L., the Huber Ranch gained recognition for its vast herds of prize-winning Polled Hereford beef cattle.

In the middle-1960s, the Huber family sold its 2,000-truck, 5,000-employee transport company to Smith Truck Lines of Staunton, Va., and sold the cattle. Harold moved to Shelbyville, Ky., where he went into the farm implement business.

"So, there I was in 1967, with 820 acres and the knowledge that I didn't want to sell the property and I didn't want to become a corn farmer," says Bill Huber.

"The people at Purdue suggested sod and we've done real well, and are going to do better, in that area," he adds.

Besides the content of the soil, the Huber Ranch's location makes it easily accessible for truck and rail transport. Split by "new" U.S. 41, the ranch's eastern border is "old" U.S. 41. And, Penn Central railroad tracks — both east-west and north-south — converge at the northeast corner of the Huber property.

In fact, the Industrial Development Department of the Penn Central Transportation Co. has suggested the use of some of the Huber Ranch's property as a 250-acre industrial park. □