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Frank McGill, 95, helped save Georgia peanut farms

OBITUARIES | March 12, 2021

By Martha Anne Tudor



J. Frank McGill overhauled peanut production in Georgia and beyond, his impact increasing the income of peanut farmers across the state by billions of dollars over the last 50 years.

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His innovations revamped struggling farms and helped the state's peanut productivity to explode by more than 2,000 pounds per acre in less than two decades. He shaped federal farm legislation, worked with 21 countries on five continents to establish peanut research and education programs, and he helped developing countries grow peanuts to fight famine and disease, all while investing in people he met along the way.

Former President Jimmy Carter, upon being inducted into the Georgia Agricultural Hall of Fame in 2018, recognized McGill for mentoring him in peanut production when Carter took over his family farm in 1953.



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McGill, 95, died at his home in Tifton on March 3, following a brief illness. A private funeral was held at First United Methodist Church of Tifton.

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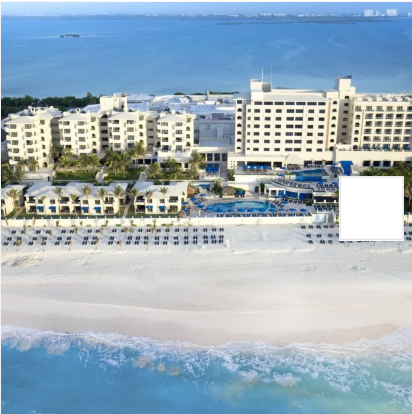
The youngest of five children, he was born in Chula, Ga., in 1925 to a peanut farmer with a seventh-grade education and a dream to see his children finish college. When the oldest son ran out of money during his senior year at the University of Georgia during the Great Depression in 1933, he packed for home. School officials had a better idea. They offered to take produce and meat in lieu of tuition, making a lasting impression on 8-year-old Frank McGill.

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McGill graduated from Tift County High School in 1942. He got a draft deferment because he had two brothers serving in World War II and served instead from 1945 to 1947 as a radio operator in the United States Air Force.

After the military, McGill completed an agronomy degree in two and half years, graduating from UGA in 1951. He became the Georgia extension agent at the Coastal Plain Experiment Station, now the UGA Tifton Campus, where he pioneered the role of peanut specialist. He earned a master's degree in agronomy at UGA in 1962.

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With his science training and people skills, McGill bridged the gap between research labs and peanut farms. He taught classes on every aspect of peanut production, visiting farmers to give hands-on assistance.

“What he did was revolutionary,” said Donald Chase, board member of the Georgia Peanut Commission and chairman of its research committee. McGill’s contributions led to a combined income boost for Georgia peanut farmers of more than \$250 million a year since 1952, he said.

Chase, a third-generation peanut farmer in Oglethorpe, Ga., credits McGill with transforming his family’s farm. Chase’s father and grandfather were struggling with their crops in 1969, when they sought McGill’s help. Their yield increased 100 percent in one year.

McGill devised the “package approach,” an integrated best-practices system that starts at ground preparation and ends with marketing the produce, which is now used by most peanut farmers in Georgia and taught by the UGA Extension Service. After 31 years as an extension agent, he worked more than 20 years as a consultant for clients including Mars Inc. and the National Peanut Laboratory.

He served as technical advisor to the National Peanut Growers Group and the U.S. Senate Agriculture Commission, helping craft the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981. He received the United States Department of Agriculture Award for Superior Service in 1977, Georgia Peanut Hall of Fame induction in 1982, Georgia Agriculture Hall of Fame in 1996,

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Accolades did not overshadow McGill's humility, humor, or interest in others. He paid tuition for needy students, gave devotionals at nursing homes, sought out the homeless for hiring, and sent friends and coworkers handwritten notes of encouragement. His "Up with Peanuts" Scholarship at UGA has provided financial assistance for more than 100 agriculture students since he established the fund in 1984.

"He brought together good science with being a good person," said Chase.

Survivors include his wife of 67 years, Janet Reed McGill of Tifton; son Mark McGill of Tifton; daughters Becky McGill Barber of Marietta, Ga., Laurie McGill Bolen of Tifton, and Kelly McGill Dean of Sandy Springs, Ga.; 15 grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

McGill left handwritten instructions that memorials be made as "random and unexpected expressions of love and compassion to others on a continuing basis."

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