Hammons Products Company
Merging traditional cottage industry and international business

Overview
Hammons Products Company is a family-owned processor and supplier of black walnuts based in Stockton, Missouri. Hammons aggregates nuts from the Midwest (mainly from Missouri), processes them into a wide variety of value-added products, then ships many-some of these products internationally. One component of the company’s mission is to “lead and grow the black walnut nut industry.”¹ In this respect, Hammons has been quite successful, becoming the world’s largest processor of black walnuts and one of the biggest employers in the town of Stockton.²

History – A “Nostalgic Tradition.”
The Hammons Products Company website very conspicuously advertises “Our Story” (as opposed to mere “history”). The use of the word “story” helps situate the company more squarely in its traditional small-town roots. The company got its start in 1946 when “Ralph Hammons couldn’t keep enough black walnuts on his grocery store shelves in the little town of Stockton, Missouri.”³ That year, Hammons served as an intermediary, buying 3 million pounds of black walnuts from local harvesters and shipping them to Virginia for processing.⁴ Since this was an expensive endeavor, and the Virginia processing plant happened to be going out of business, Hammons bought some of their shelling equipment and brought it back to Missouri.⁵ With shelling machinery now closer to the raw product, Hammons continued to buy nuts from the “hard-working Ozarks people who gathered them each fall”—a “nostalgic tradition” it carries forth to this day.⁶

The language of “Our Story” highlights Hammons’ deep symbiosis with traditional activities in the area. According to the local daily, The Cedar County Republican, “The black walnut…is the source of happy memories for many…families—days spent in the autumn woods; cool, crisp days and days of golden sunshine. Days spent as children, parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins worked together to harvest the tasty nuts that would flavor their Christmas fudge and banana breads.”⁷ After Hammons began processing in 1946, families who collected these wild black walnuts could expect more than just tasty holiday fudge and banana bread in return for their haul. Midwesterners could now use the extra cash they made from

⁴ “Don’t miss the fun.”
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ “Our Story in a Nutshell.”
⁷ “Don’t miss the fun.”
selling to Hammons for everything from Christmas gifts to vacations, education, and property taxes.  

The tradition of the fall black walnut harvest is celebrated by the annual Black Walnut Festival held in Stockton’s city park. Local media coverage reveals how, in Stockton, the fall harvest is tied to romantic notions of community. According to the Republican, “No one is in a hurry during the festival. It is a time to slow down, enjoy the change of season and say howdy to everyone you know.” The festival is a true “celebration of community” where “no one is a stranger.” It also serves as a forum to “let people know what a special place Stockton is.” The town that Hammons calls home has a clear emotional and cultural connection to the yearly black walnut harvest.

Structure
Hammons incorporated in 1954 as a C-corporation; it is taxed as a separate corporate entity in contrast with an LLC or cooperative. The company used to have outside shareholders—mainly those who knew and trusted Ralph Hammons and invested in his business. Over the years, the Hammons family has redeemed those shares, and stock is currently held primarily by individual family members or held in trusts dedicated to taking care of older family members. The closely-held corporation has a seven-member board: three internal board members and four outside directors. According to one internal board member, “We thought that was important to do because they provide perspective and ideas and insight and are able to ask us questions that we might not be asking ourselves.” Collectively, the outside directors have experience as CEOs, as well as legal, investment, and insurance expertise. It helps Hammons keep its own internal leaders accountable, giving them an opportunity to present their performance and progress to an outside audience. In evaluating both its successes as well as places for improvement, Hammons breaks down its operation into five key areas “dashboard indicators”: harvest, yield, quality, sales, and gross profit margin.

Operations and Economic Impact
The Hammons story and Stockton’s Black Walnut Festival convey a grassroots ethos—one that is embodied by the business’ harvesting and buying structure. Hammons Products Company utilizes a diffuse network of up to 250 “buying stations” or “hullers” spread across as many as sixteen Midwest and East-central states (depending on the year), but mostly concentrated in Missouri and the Ozarks region. Individuals, families, and community groups gather wild black walnuts and bring them to one of the buying stations. Hammons’ website, www.black-walnuts.com, even includes a zip code-based search function that allows those participating in

---


9 “Don’t miss the fun.”
the harvest to find the nearest station. Nuts are hulled then weighed at the buying station, and the individual harvesters are paid for their haul. In 2012, Hammons paid harvesters a record 13 dollars per hundred pounds of hulled nuts.\textsuperscript{10}

In terms of yield, 2012 was a down year for Hammons at about 6.5 million pounds of black walnuts harvested. They speculate that it may have been due to drought and higher-than-average nut production the previous year. But true to the cyclical nature of black walnuts, the fall 2013 harvest rebounded to over 29 million pounds, exceeding the historical average of 24 million. Occasionally, Hammons has even enjoyed no stranger to fall yields exceeding 30 million pounds. In such a year, total payouts to individual harvesters would exceed three million dollars. Because about two thirds of the harvest comes from Missouri, over two million dollars would stay within the state during these years. The thousands of individuals participating in the harvest use their extra cash for everything from dinners out to holiday gifts to higher education. For many, it seems to function as a kind of Christmas bonus that arrives several months early. One local newspaper article even referred to black walnuts as the “Ozark’s black gold.”\textsuperscript{11}

Hammons Products Company’s nodal-like buying system of buying stations blends cottage industry with sophisticated value-added processing. It allows the nostalgic and romantic regional tradition of black walnut gathering to yield a modest monetary reward for those who participate in it. Turning hand-gathered in-hull black walnuts into a variety of desirable value-added products is a capital-intensive process (black walnuts are, indeed, particularly tough nuts to crack). Without a large enterprise like Hammons, it is unlikely that most individual gatherers would find ways to successfully sell their black walnuts. While Hammons’ website includes a page describing how to hull and crack black walnuts at home (a process it describes as “hard work” and a “challenge”), its “best advice,” is however, “is to let us do it for you.” The online instructions depict the home-processing endeavor as an arduous one: After picking up the nuts, one should run them over with a car until the hull is pulled off. Then, the nuts should be dried on a screen to make the cracking process easier. Once dried, the nuts can be cracked by a hammer or strong nutcracker—a “tiresome and messy process.” Finally, the nutmeat can be picked out using a nut hook—a “difficult” undertaking. But Hammons doesn’t discourage processing at home outright; they sell several devices meant to aid the home-harvester. One can purchase the so-called “Nut Wizard” which helps pick up nuts off the ground with greater ease, as well as a large steel nutcracker specifically designed for black walnuts. While these tools make home-processing easier, many Missourians find their time better spent gathering and selling the in-hull nuts to Hammons.\textsuperscript{12}


Hammons processes the black walnuts they collect from buying stations at their facility in Stockton, MO. A look at the details of this process reveals just how much capital is involved: In-shell nuts arrive at the Stockton plant and are cleaned and dried in open-air barns or large silo-like bins with specialized forced-air drying systems. Dried nuts are cleaned again and brought into the cracking plant where the extremely hard shells are run between two large steel cracking wheels. Then, electronic sorting machines separate nutmeats from the cracked shells, and the nutmeats are sorted according to size. A combination of infrared sorters and experienced inspectors ensure that any unwanted fragments are cleared from the line. After a final metal detector scan, the nuts are packaged and shipped. At the end of the process, the in-the-box nutmeat yield is only six to seven percent of the original purchase weight of the black walnuts.13

This capital-intensive operation provides an economic boon for Stockton beyond providing a market for wild, individually-harvested nuts: Hammons employs a total of about 85 year-round employees, and during the busy fall harvest an additional 20 to 30 temporary employees are brought onboard to help unload trucks at the Stockton facility. Hammons’ presence makes the economic impact of the fall black walnut harvest “undeniable” in the words of The Cedar County Republican.14

Value-added Products and Marketing
As showcased in their online retail “Nut Emporium,” Hammons offers an extremely wide array of value-added products. Since black walnuts are mostly shell, and are particularly tough to crack, not many customers request in-shell nuts. Nevertheless, Hammons offers cleaned, improved-variety in-shell black walnuts as a service to the few who do. The bulk of what is sold through the Emporium, however, is finished black walnut nutmeats from wild American black walnuts as well as from “smoother” tasting orchard-grown cultivars. The raw nut products include a 5lb box of in-shell black walnuts that retails for $15 ($3/lb). With the 2012 hulled purchase price of 13 cents per pound at its buying stations, this represents a markup of over 2000% for the in-shell nuts. Hammons also sells shelled black walnut nutmeats from both wild American black walnuts as well as “smoother” tasting orchard-grown cultivars. But the contents of the emporium go far beyond nuts and nutmeats: Hammons offers black walnut-based fudges, cookies, caramels, candies, cakes, snack packs, gift tins, flavorings, preserves, syrups, waffle mixes and oils. They also sell products derived from other nut varieties such as pistachios, pecans, cashews, almonds and macadamia nuts. The Emporium also has available for purchase several “tools of the trade” such as a black walnut cookbook, specialized black walnut nutcracker, and devices for picking up walnuts and pecans from the ground.15

While the range of black walnut-related treats, chocolates and confections is impressive, one Hammons official noted that it is “not a huge part of our business.” Collectively, these

---

14 Sims, “Black walnut time.”
products are more of a marketing tool than a revenue stream: “It’s mostly a customer service...to help provide some things that people might like that have black walnuts in them, and maybe somebody will get the idea of going into business for themselves...[and] buy black walnuts from us...then make those products and sell them.” Most of the volume of sales comes from selling the black walnut nut meats wholesale to food distribution companies, ice cream companies-makers and grocery stores; ice cream and home baking (especially in the fall) are the two main end uses. In past years, about 40% of the harvest has been used for ice cream, sold to companies like Baskin-Robbins, Braum's, BlueBell and Highland Dairies. 16

But, as mentioned above, only a small portion of the in-shell nut is useable nutmeat—about six to seven percent in the wild black walnuts that Hammons processes. The rest of the nut is 60-70% shell by weight, with the remaining weight comprised of moisture and hull debris. In an effort to make use of the entire nut, Hammons has dedicated a large part of its business to grinding the shells into six different grit sizes. The shells are then bought sold to be used as cleaning abrasives, filtration systems, and are even used in cosmetics. Notably, black walnut shells from Hammons were used to clean the Statue of Liberty during its renovation just over a decade ago prior to the 1976 United States Bicentennial. 17 In addition to the black walnut shells from Hammons’ harvest network, the company buys other nut shells which are also ground into abrasives.

Challenges and Partnerships
The fluctuating crop volume from one year to the next has presented one of the biggest challenges for Hammons. At times, this means not having enough yield to satisfy customers who are counting on the product. Other times, several big crops in a row can result in having more inventory than the company can market. Hammons is then faced with trying to sell down a previous year’s crop while having new inventory coming in. In an effort to better match supply and demand, Hammons keeps a supply of black walnuts in cold storage. In the words of a company official “We’ve learned a lot about keeping nuts both in-shell and nutmeats over a period of time where they’ll still retain their quality and their freshness.” Also, while it doesn’t entirely replace having a short crop in Missouri and the Ozarks region, the fact that Hammons’ buying stations cover such a large and diverse geographic range helps mitigate the effects of an off-year in a particular region.

Another challenge, as noted above, has been dealing with harvesting a product where the high-value nutmeat only comprises a small amount of the nut’s mass. Partnerships with universities, other businesses, and non-profit organizations have been important in finding uses for the entire nut, as well as trying to improve yields and increase the percentage of nutmeat per nut. Hammons has partnered with the University of Missouri for over 40 years to improve the agronomics of growing black walnut trees, with the primary goal of boosting nut production. More recently, they have worked with the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry,

---

16 Sims, “Black walnut time.”
17 Ibid.
University of Missouri Extension and Missouri State University to better understand the agronomics of black walnut growing and develop better growing techniques. Partnering with the Missouri Department of Conservation, Hammons has worked to help show landowners how planting black walnut trees can have a positive impact on their bottom line by putting on workshops, demonstrations, and compiling lists of useful contacts. They have also done a lot of collaborating with nut growing associations like Missouri Nut Growers and the Northern Nut Growers Association (NNGA).

Moving Forward

Having been in existence for almost 68 years—well over a half century—Hammons Products Company has proven that it can consistently weather challenges like seasonal yield fluctuations and competition from other tree nuts and food products; it has become the nation’s standard in black walnut processing. Despite their success, they recognize the need to keep adapting. A company official noted that they are moving toward more orchard-grown nuts hoping to develop cultivars that yield more nutmeat; and they are also trying to select against the alternate-bearing tendency in these improved varieties. Additionally, Hammons is also working to tighten nutrient cycling in its orchards, attempting to create a system whereby the hulls are immediately removed at harvest and returned to soil as organic matter.

The outlook at Hammons is optimistic: More people are becoming intrigued with the unique flavors that black walnuts provide as an ingredient nut, and more chefs are incorporating them into creative dishes. As long as Hammons has buyers for their nuts, they will be able to provide a market for those who wish to participate in the time-honored Missouri tradition of the fall black walnut harvest. One Hammons official stated that, by providing this this market, “I like to think that we do have [a positive] impact on the smaller communities.” At the very least, the enthusiasm that the company helps generate makes a big fall black walnut crop “the talk of the coffee shops.”
Appendix: Midwest Value-Added Nut Enterprise Interview Themes

After conducting interviews with owners, managers, consultants, board members, and affiliates of five Midwest tree nut aggregating and/or value-added enterprises, many themes emerged. Below, they are organized by several broad categories: differentiation of the product, marketing, considerations for organizing nut growers, and challenges, solutions and opportunities. After each theme is briefly described, interview quotes are listed that illustrate and support the particular theme. It is important to note that the initial thematic observations and conclusions are dependent upon interviewees’ accurate understanding and representation of the business with which they are familiar or affiliated. Additionally, these themes are not meant to serve as universal “lessons” since agronomic, economic, social and temporal contexts necessarily vary from industry to industry. Nonetheless, these themes are meant to provide useful points of consideration for the emerging upper Midwest hazelnut industry and growers of other perennial specialty crops who may be considering collective processing of their product. This appendix is meant to be used in conjunction with the document containing the five complete case studies.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer explained that the impetus for the current research was the nascent hazelnut industry in Wisconsin and, more broadly, the upper Midwest. (As shrubs planted several years ago mature and start to bear nuts, the dozen or so growers in Wisconsin with sizeable plantings have entertained the notion of grower-owned processing infrastructure; little concrete organizing has occurred, however). With the upper Midwest hazelnut industry in mind, several of the interviewees volunteered direct advice or lessons based on their own experience. Quotations that directly apply to the upper Midwest hazelnut industry in this way are denoted with a bold (H).

**Differentiation / Non-Commodification:**

Those interviewed reiterated time and time again the need to differentiate their product from similar, lower-value products in the marketplace. Frequently, it involved differentiating a niche product from imported or domestic commodities in order to fetch a higher price. Chestnut Growers, Inc. (CGI) and Prairie Grove Nut Growers, for example, differentiate their nuts from commodity chestnuts imported from Italy and Asia. Hammons Products Company differentiates its black walnuts from English walnuts grown extensively in California; Missouri Northern Pecan Growers (MNPG) from larger, less-sweet, grafted southern pecan varieties. Heartland Nuts ‘N More differentiates its grafted black walnut cultivars from wild, “unimproved” varieties. The various enterprises have avoided competing with commodities by employing several different strategies. For
Prairie Grove Nut Growers this has entailed offering fresher, local, higher-quality chestnuts than imports often found in grocery stores, and selling these to a very specific market (Bosnian immigrants) who demand a particular variety—Chinese Chestnuts. On the other end of the spectrum, expanding sales to broader and broader markets has led MNPG to tirelessly seek ways to prevent the buyer from perceiving their product as a commodity: obtaining organic certification, selling the “story” of native northern pecans, making assertions about superior taste, and their recent pursuit of a Geographic Indication.

For upper Midwest hazelnuts, differentiation could be more difficult. Anecdotally, however, Midwest growers of hybrid hazelnuts have claimed that the smaller nuts are indeed sweeter than their Oregon or Turkish counterparts. Officially establishing a superior—or at the very least unique—taste through independent testing might be an important step for the nascent industry. Regardless of taste, MNPG has shown that the story of a particular food can be an important marketing tool. Whether it reads as putting more perennial crops on marginal land in the Driftless Area, adding biodiversity to agricultural monoculture, or helping farmers diversify income, the story of upper Midwest hazelnuts may be vital to marketing success. Overall, the message from interviewees was clear: success as a small-scale value-added nut processor means steering clear of the commodity market and not competing with huge companies that have economies of scale.

- **(H)** “I always have to be sure people use the word ‘Black Walnut Festival,’ because they tend to want to shorten it and say ‘Walnut Festival.’ I say, ‘No, Black Walnut Festival, because walnuts at the store are different!’…So that’s another [potential] point of differentiation for hazelnuts, you know—Northern Hazelnuts’ or something like that you might want to use to differentiate a little bit. (Hammons Products Company official)

Unsurprisingly, taste claims were mentioned frequently in differentiating product.

- **(H)** “[A different taste due to Midwest hazelnuts’ colder climate could be the unique, distinguishing factor that could keep it out of the commodity market and allow the growers to get a little better price—if that can be recognized by the users. That’s the key…The northern pecans are really great, they’re very sweet and processors like to buy those because of that…The problem is, there’s not a real differentiation in the marketplace for the most part.” (Hammons Products Company official)

**Marketing:**

Some of the nut enterprises vigorously pursue their markets while others have put themselves in a position where the customers come to them. Although the scope and scale of the different businesses’ markets varied greatly—from small, local grocers to overseas importers—several common themes emerged.
Recipes as marketing: Though few interviewees discussed the importance of recipes as marketing, each business’s website had a section dedicated to recipes that required or could be enhanced by their product. Especially when targeting a population that doesn’t regularly consume a particular nut, providing recipes can be a way of making the product more accessible. Recipes were also a way to embed particular product in nostalgic imagery. For example, the MNPG website recipe page invites the user to “Enjoy some great pecan recipes straight from Granny's secret cookbook. (She's still a little upset that we shared them, but she's getting over it!)”

- “We know that consumption of black walnuts is driven by recipes…Over the years we’ve come up with some different ideas and ways to use black walnuts.” (Hammons Products Company official)

Health benefits: Similarly, while the various health benefits of nuts were not frequently mentioned in interviews, emphasizing these benefits was an omnipresent component of companies’ online strategies:

- “Black Walnuts can help satisfy your customers’ demand for delicious, healthful foods.” (Hammons Products Company website)

Considerations when organizing growers
Interviewees noted that organizing growers to pool and collectively market their product can be difficult, especially since nut growing was not the primary endeavor for most growers in these case studies. Across the different industries studied, many growers were semi-retirees, serious hobbyists with other jobs, or farmers with other agricultural endeavors looking to diversify. This is also the case with a majority of those growing hazelnuts in the upper Midwest. Given growers’ limited time, and in some cases limited business expertise, interviewees offered several suggestions for increasing the chances of success when coming together to pursue processing and marketing as a group.

Start small; low-overhead... Most businesses didn’t immediately buy expensive processing equipment or infrastructure; instead, they built a market while pursuing custom processing or renting space and equipment. CGI, for example, doesn’t own a building, in part because they generally sell out of product just after the harvest. They rent space to do their receiving operation and contract with the owners of that space to use some of their employees. Heartland Nuts ‘N More started by bringing their nuts to Iowa to get processed, while Prairie Grove Nut Growers made use of a licensed community kitchen to shell and package their product when they were selling frozen chestnuts to chefs. During its first few years, MNPG sent its pecans to Texas and Arkansas for custom shelling while it was still building markets for its organic pecans. Pursuing custom processing might be a more difficult proposition for upper Midwest hazelnut growers since no established processing companies have appropriately-scaled shelling equipment
for the smaller European/American hybrids. Nevertheless, the growers might be able to use a community kitchen, or partner with other small processing endeavors in renting a shared facility where they could run their recently-developed custom husking and cracking machinery.

- “If they don’t have a whole lot of money and a lot of time, then go slow and small.” (Hammons Products Company Official)

**Importance of a growers association:** While Minnesota hazelnut growers have the Minnesota Hazelnut Foundation and Iowa growers have the Iowa Nut Growers Association, no such group has formed in Wisconsin despite hopes to do so at recent Upper Midwest Hazelnut Growers conferences. Several interviewees noted that apart from starting a collective business enterprise, growers in emerging industries should organize in order to coordinate marketing, receive university assistance and leverage grant funding. An advisor to CGI specifically noted how operating a for-profit cooperative alongside a non-profit growers association can be very important in making more grant funding available.

- (H) “The market for hazelnuts in the United States is tough... [Oregon growers] really worked hard and put a lot of money into marketing and promoting Oregon hazelnuts. That’s something that folks in Minnesota and Wisconsin would need to be prepared to do, is to get out there and promote and market somehow. And that probably takes a coordinated effort, probably takes some dollars.” (Hammons Products Company official)

**Other challenges, solutions & opportunities**

This section discusses themes having to do with particular challenges that the nut aggregating and processing enterprises faced, and the solutions and opportunities they took advantage of to overcome some of those hurdles.

**Variable yield is a significant agronomic challenge.** Due to the alternate bearing tendency of many tree nuts (combined with environmental factors), several enterprises encountered severe yield fluctuations from year to year. MNPG, for example, had an 82,000 pound organic crop in 2003 which jumped to 700,000 pounds by 2005. This necessitated expanding their line of credit from $200,000 to $1,000,000 in order to buy the huge crop from area growers. The crop then fell by 75% in 2006, and was entirely lost in 2007. In order to level out these swings MNPG has developed the strategy of buying as many pecans as possible in high-yield years, and keeping them frozen in a Kansas City cold storage facility; they are then cracked and packaged just before orders are shipped. Similarly, Hammons Products Company has pursued cold storage for their nuts, but is also working on developing improved varieties of black walnuts that are more even bearing. Also, the large geographic range (up to 16 states in some years) from which Hammons
aggregates helps smooth out acute yearly variations. On a smaller-scale, aggregating from growers all over Michigan has helped CGI achieve a steadier supply of chestnuts, helping them retain their customers.

- “The fluctuating crop and the volume from one year to the next [have] presented the biggest challenges. Some of it has to do with not having enough nuts. Sometimes it has to do with having too many nuts for the market that we have…We’ve learned a lot about keeping nuts both in-shell and nutmeats over a period of time where they’ll still retain their quality and their freshness.” (Hammons Products Company official)

**Innovating to use the whole nut.** Only a small portion of most nuts are usable nutmeat. The average black walnut that Hammons processes, for example, contains only 6-7% percent nutmeat; the rest is shell, moisture and hull debris. Confronting this challenge, the enterprises that were studied employed two main strategies: develop nuts that contain more nutmeat, or find ways to use the entire nut, shell and all. Heartland Nuts ‘N More focuses on the first strategy, growing “improved” black walnut varieties that contain up to 35% nutmeat. Hammons Products Company, which is starting to move toward more orchard-grown nuts, is also finding ways to increase nutmeat yield.

But most processors focused on using or developing innovations that reduce waste by using the entire nut more efficiently. Hammons Products Company, for example, has made grinding black walnut shells into industrial abrasives an essential part of their business. Using federal stimulus money, MNPG bought a furnace that burns pecan shells, providing the heat to dry the pecan meats after they’ve been soaked for cracking. They have also considered marketing the shell as a mulch.

Importantly, the main role of value-added products appeared to be transforming hard-to-market raw product (that would potentially be wasted) into a more marketable form. These value-added products then complemented a business’ bulk wholesale operation. CGI, for example, turns its smallest, most unmarketable chestnuts into one-pound bags of frozen, peeled chestnuts. It also makes freeze-dried chestnut slices, and has sold chestnut chips to microbreweries for making chestnut beer. Similarly, Prairie Grove Nut Growers developed packages of frozen, shelled chestnuts before it found a market for its fresh small and medium-sized nuts. MNPG, after initially cracking the nuts, found that they were left with lots of small pieces in addition to the high-value pecan halves. One partner in the business then developed a Parmesan cheese-like shaker, marketing the smaller bits as the ideal topping for ice cream or salads. Whether finding a market for byproducts of processing or innovatively packaging smaller nutmeats and pieces, finding uses for non-premium product has been vital for these businesses.
“We separate the nutmeats from the shell [which is] used in a lot of different applications now for industrial purposes. We grind it up first and then [our customers] use different sizes for different applications.”

(Hammons Products Company Official)

**University partnerships.** Several businesses had strong partnerships with universities. Both cooperatives received help finding grants and incorporation expertise from universities. CGI in particular has enjoyed an extremely close symbiosis with Michigan State University, receiving agronomic and cooperative-related consulting, help with product development, and inexpensive leasing of the country’s only chestnut peeler.

“...we’re working with the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry, Missouri State University, University of Missouri Extension.” (Hammons Products Company official)

**Social context/demographics matter in finding markets.** Whether a particular nut and its “story” were culturally familiar to a particular region affected how it could be marketed. CGI and Prairie Grove Nut Growers have confronted the challenge that most American consumers and chefs are not familiar with the taste of chestnuts or how to prepare them beyond roasting on an open fire. A chance connection with a Bosnian community in Iowa, however, has sent demand for Prairie Grove’s fresh chestnuts skyrocketing over the past five years. Hammons Products Company appeals to nostalgic memories that its potential consumers might have about the black walnut harvest. It also taps into this local tradition to secure what is tantamount to a free labor force each fall when people hand harvest the wild nuts and bring them to Hammons’ hulling stations. People from the Ozarks region keep this foraging tradition alive, in part because they know they can sell some of the nuts they collect to Hammons.

- (H) “With hazelnuts, you’ve got a product that’s mostly known as a European product...There’s not a real strong American palate for hazelnuts other than in confections, Nutella and...some mixed nuts.” (Hammons Products Company official)
- (H) “It’s amazing...just all the hazelnut things you see in the stores [in Europe]. It’s phenomenal...totally different from here.” (Hammons Products Company official)
- “We’ve tried to connect with the ways people have used black walnuts over the years and the memories they may have of harvesting wild black walnuts...and the flavors that they may remember from...childhood...or grandma’s favorite black walnut cake...those kinds of things that we connect with.” (Hammons Products Company official)