

Gebbers Farms: Growing fruit since 1900

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

BREWSTER, Wash. — One of the largest producers of cherries in the world and one of the top apple growers in the Northwest, Gebbers Farms is a multi-generation family business in north-central Washington.

Cass Gebbers, president, is one of five siblings in his generation.

“We are the fourth generation, and our kids are the fifth. My parents had 20 grandchildren, and 14 of that fifth generation are working in the company,” he said. “We have strong continuity because we have a sixth generation coming on.”

The story of Gebbers Farms is closely linked to the story of the Washington apple.

“My great-grandfather, Dan Gamble, hiked to central



Courtesy of Gebbers Farms

From left, Cass, Alycia, Clay, Corina, Andie Lee and Wade Gebbers are shown with some of their orchards in the background.

Washington from Nova Scotia in 1885 with just a backpack

Harts Pass during the gold rush. After working in gold and silver mines in the Okan-

ogan Valley, he started a sawmill in 1894 at Cactus Canyon near Brewster,” Cass said.

Gamble planted the first orchards around Brewster soon after the turn of the century and built an apple warehouse. His sawmills produced wooden apple boxes for ship-

Gebbers Farms

Owners: The Gebbers family

Location: Brewster, Wash.

In business: Since 1900

Acreage: 12,000 acres of apples and cherries

ping fruit, and he built the first apple packing shed in Brewster in 1918.

The fruit enterprise grew, and today the family orchards are spread over foothills at the base of the Cascade Range and along the highlands around Lake Chelan. The farm is one of the largest suppliers of late-season sweet cherries, and has one of the largest contiguous apple orchards in the world.

“My dad, Dan Gebbers, was a dedicated orchardist. With his business partner and a friend and fellow grower, they brought the first Granny Smith apples into the U.S. My dad and Richard Thompson brought the first Lapin cherries — from British Columbia

— which are now a mainstay variety,” Cass said.

“The Granny Smith apples came from Australia. My dad brought them into the U.S. through the Summerland British Columbia Research Center in 1967 and 1968. We still have that original Granny Smith orchard he planted, and it is still commercially productive,” he said.

Granny Smiths were then unheard of in the U.S. The green apples caught on quickly. They offered a way for retailers to break up their shelf space color-wise, and people liked the unique tart taste.

“When my dad brought in those first Granny Smith apples, he became friends with Dr. Lapin at the Summerland Research Center near Kelowna, B.C. He told my dad we should try a new cherry that he’d been developing. Dr. Lapin said these cherries should work nicely for us, because the research center has a climate very similar to ours.”

Dan Gebbers planted his first Lapin cherry orchard in the early 1980s after several years of testing the cherry.

Gebbers Farms now has 12,000 acres of apples and cherries. This area has a perfect climate for fruit. “We have cold winters and warm summers, and large temperature split between warm daytime temperatures and cool nights. This helps finish the apples so they can ripen properly. If it’s warm all the time, day and night, you don’t get good finish on apples or cherries with good internal quality,” he explained.

“My dad brought in some of the first apple pre-sizer equipment from France. He was an innovator in the fruit business.”

Everything about the present orchards is focused toward producing the highest quality fruit with perfect flavor, texture and color.

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