

Grass seed at heart of this seventh-generation farm

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

MONROE, Ore. — The Humphrey-Nusbaum family has farmed in Oregon for more than 150 years — relying on seed crops for much of the last century.

So, it's not surprising to find a few horse thief bones rattling among those of good honest folk.

"Albert was the black sheep of the family," Orin Nusbaum said of his great-great-grandfather, Albert Humphrey. That black sheep nearly ended what became a seven-generation run on the grass seed farm near Monroe.

As the story goes, Albert, the farm's founder, returned from a cattle drive to Canada with several horses of questionable origin. He kept them hidden on the farm until one day a neighbor told him the

Marion County sheriff was coming to arrest him the next day. Albert saddled up and rode out that night, leaving his wife, Ellen, with eight children to mind the farm.

They never saw him again, and the farm fell into foreclosure. This family farm might have ended there except that Albert's father, George, a farmer and

banker, bought the farm back. He eventually left it to his grandsons, one of which was Orin's great-great grandfather, George Humphrey.

George farmed half the place until he retired. His sons, Fred and Carl, and his daughter, Grace, and her husband, Frank A. Nusbaum, took over farming on the property. The Nusbaum boys, Earl and Hermon, eventually bought out their Grandpa George and the rest of the original property that had been sold out of the family.

There have been a host of honest challenges for the family that today grows more than 2,000 acres of grass seed and other crops on the original land.

Orin, 41, his wife, Mandy, and Orin's father, Frank, 67, and mother, Sharon, now farm together. Orin manages the farming operation, while Frank focuses on the seed cleaning operation and marketing.

Early blooming seems to run in the family. Orin cleared a blackberry-covered 5-acre patch when he was 11, planted it to annual ryegrass, eventually earning

soil, the family for 30 years grew Christmas trees, closing out that crop two years ago and admitting they now enjoy the holiday down time.

In the valley's Waldo and Dayton soil, the family grows and processes forage grass seed — currently tall fescue and ryegrass, in addition to a little clover.

The generations raised cattle, dairy cows, sheep, hogs, angora goats, horses, hay, oats, wheat, corn and clover seed, but since the 1970s have settled into grass seed's ups and downs, over the years specializing in forage seed, as opposed to turf types.

"The second-best cash weed crop in the Willamette Valley," Orin jokes. In his lifetime, he's seen seed prices range from 10 cents a pound to 50, sticking by the forage seed for its relative stability — for now.

The family since 1980 has processed its seed, selling both open and proprietary varieties, including their own "Herdsman" Tetraploid. The original mill was pieced together in 1980 with equipment and has been updated through the years.

Does Orin ever regret his decision to be a farmer, made when he was younger than his own son is now?

"I never aspired to anything else," Orin said.

His family is still young, but Orin's hopes for the future of grass seed are reflected in his work.

He is a member of the Oregon Tall Fescue Commission and the Oregon Seed Council, and a past member of the Oregon Ryegrass Commission.

In 2019, the farm was honored as a Century Farm by the Oregon Agricultural Education Foundation.



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press
Mandy, Mallory, Orin and Van Nusbaum farm grass seed with Orin's parents near Monroe, Ore.





Courtesy of the Nusbaum family
Young Orin Nusbaum began tilling his parents' fields in Monroe when he was nine.


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