

Thomas Orchards: Remote area a perfect spot

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

KIMBERLY, Ore. — The roots of this operation go back 105 years, when Orrin Kimberly planted a small orchard near the banks of the John Day River in Central Oregon.

Then, in the 1920s, Kimberly — the nearby town was named after his family — expanded and planted a U-pick orchard that sold fruit to area residents.

Jeff Thomas' grandparents were among his customers and often drove from nearby Mount Vernon to buy canning peaches and cherries.

"Then in 1947 my grandfather was looking for a new adventure. He already had honey bees and grew berries to sell to local stores but wanted to try something new," Jeff said.

W.B. Thomas purchased the orchard at Kimberly, but continued to live in Mount Vernon.

"In the 1950s their oldest son, my Uncle Bill, got out of the Navy and came back to help. ... Then my grandparents sold their place in Mount Vernon in 1965 and moved here," Jeff said. "By then my Dad (John) was out of college and my Uncle Jim was out of the military. They worked at the orchard along with Uncle Bill."

In 1965 they bought the orchard next door, and put it all together.

By the early 1970s John's older sister, Alice, had also come back to help.

"My parents (John and Linda) were married in 1971. Bill and his wife, Janet, and Jim and his wife, Carolyn, were all working full-time at the orchard. My grandpa-



Thomas Orchards
Jeff Thomas with his wife, Laura, and their children Josh, Kaycee and Olivia.

ther and my dad built a fruit stand in Great Falls, Mont., in 1971 and my Aunt Alice has been running it since 1972,"

Jeff said.

Bill's youngest son, Chuck, also worked at the orchard.

"Then in 2011 my wife, Laura, and I took it over. My Dad and Jim are still helping, along with my mother and my aunt; our family has been in the orchard business here for almost 70 years."

The climate at Kimberly is perfect for fruit, with an elevation of about 1,800 feet.

"Our desert climate makes our fruit a little sweeter. The hot days and cooler nights increase the sugar level," he said.

The orchard today has cherries, apples and peaches, along with a few pears, nectarines, and plums.

"Between the two fruit stands — here and in Montana — we market 35% of our fruit. The rest is sold wholesale, and through many businesses and stores," he said.

Most of the people who come to the fruit stand at Kimberly are from Central Ore-

gon, though some come from as far away as Portland, the Willamette Valley and the coast.

"We have a lot of customers from La Grande, Baker City and the Pendleton area. We are about the only orchard in this area," Jeff explains.

The first orchard had flood irrigation and was less than 10 acres.

"Today we have under-tree and over-tree sprinklers on about 100 acres, but when we were at our peak in the mid 1990s we had had 225 acres of trees," he said. "My children are still young but are interested in the orchard."

"We hope they want to eventually take over, but at the same time we don't them tied to something they can't make a living doing. My oldest son is 12 and says he wants to do it but I tell him to talk to me about it when he is 20!"

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