

Worm farmer fails to glean profit

by HANK EMRICH
Post Correspondent

It cost Jim Bernier of Sandy about \$15,000 to get worms out of his system.

He didn't have a mysterious disease, but he did have a bad experience in the business of worm farming.

When Bernier's "Jim-n-I Worm Farm" was in its peak production in 1979, he was gleaming nearly 300 pounds of worms a week and selling them to a broker in Eugene. The broker went out of business that year, however, and Bernier was left without a place to sell the worms.

"The broker never let us know where he sold the worms so we couldn't go there," said Bernier. "I guess he was afraid we'd steal his market."

Bernier invested approximately \$25,000 in his business and could have invested much more if he hadn't made a lot of his equipment and worm beds himself.

"There were some brokers selling starter kits, one bed and some worms with a few inches of soil, for over \$600," he said. "At least I still have a \$10,000 building to show for my investment."

Bernier hopes to rent the 80-by-40-foot building and sell the worm beds, which resemble large fish crates. He also has some potting soil left which he hopes to sell.

"Probably the way to succeed in the business would be concentrating on selling potting soil instead of the worms," he said. Potting soil is a by-product of raising the worms obtained by mixing worm residue and soil.

The major market for the sale of worms was for use



Jim Bernier inspects his worm harvester, the tumbling device that separates the worms from the soil.

Photo by Hank Emrich

as bait and they were generally sold by persons with "routes" containing fishing supply stores in given areas.

There was also a great deal of interest in worms as a protein source when he went into the business, said Bernier. Many felt worms could be one of the richest sources of protein available.

"There was even an annual Worm Cookie Bake-out in Twin Falls Idaho," he said. Probably a more suitable use was a company in Utah which reportedly used the worms in the manufacture of dog food.

Most kids are probably glad to know that even worms don't care for green vegetables, preferring to wait until whatever they are fed reaches a state of decomposition. Whatever they are fed amounts to just about anything, says Bernier.

"We used to grind up old grain and make a sort of mush to spread over the top of the worm beds," he said. "We'd feed them anything, but mainly manure."

For those with squeamish stomachs, harvesting worms is not quite as bad as it might seem. Harvesters don't generally pick through the

soil looking for the worms. They are separated by shoveling the soil into a large tumbler which sifts the soil and leaves the worms clinging to the sides.

When worm-farming was at its peak, one of these harvesters could cost a prospective farmer more than \$1,000. Bernier's was built with the help of his brother for much less.

Bernier, who spent 21 years in the heavy construction equipment business doesn't anticipate returning to

worm-farming in the future. "I'll watch to see what's going on," he said, "but I don't think it will come back."

In the meantime Bernier plans to keep looking for work in the construction equipment business and "do whatever else I can to get by." He does have one other hobby which brings in a very small profit that he has done since he was a child.

"I collect nightcrawlers and sell them to local fishermen," said Bernier.

For Hoodland firefighters

Training site underway

The Hoodland Fire District's training ground improvement project should be well under way by June, according to Lane Wintermute, assistant chief and training officer for the district.

In the past the district has had to rely on buildings set to be demolished or partially destroyed by fire for their training exercises. Wintermute said the district would still burn some buildings as exercises if any became available.

"This should greatly enhance effectiveness of training," said Wintermute. "We can accomplish a lot in classroom situations but burning houses for training exercises are a rare opportunity."

The first phase of the

training site will be a training building with a replaceable cut-out section on the roof. "The idea is to have a place to get on a roof and learn to work with the power tools to cut ventilation holes etc.," said Wintermute.

The building will have two levels enabling firefighters to train with their longer ladders, according to Wintermute. "The lower level will be built with cement block for use as a 'smoke room' training firefighters in the use of breathing apparatus," he said.

Window openings in both levels will allow training in proper methods of locating and rescuing persons from burning buildings.

"In a volunteer department we have a steady flow

of new people and there are many specific tasks we are required to teach," he said. "The training will be much more effective because of the ease in approximating real-life situations. People have to know how to do these things safely and learn in a situation."

The training site will be built using volunteer labor and district staff, a method Wintermute said was very successful in completing the Government Camp station because of community support.

"If we were to pay someone to develop the training site, it would cost several times the amount," he said.

The district has budgeted a total of \$4,500 for the project from last year and this year's budget.

County seeks sewer budgeters

Clackamas County is looking for a citizen volunteer from the Hoodland Sewer Service District to serve on the service district's budget committee.

County Utilities Director David Abraham said the citizens who, with the county commissioners, compose the budget committee generally meet for one short meeting in May to determine the budget for the coming year.

Citizens who are interested in volunteering for the budget committee

should their name, address of their residents, and a short statement of interest to Environmental Services

Assistant Director Ardis Stevenson, 902 Abernethy Road, Oregon City, prior to May 9.

Auction boosts pre-school

The only thing growing faster than the kids at Mt. Hood Pre-School in Weiches is their annual auction.

"Every year it gets more successful," said auction chairman Kim Clark.

Clark is hoping the fifth annual auction May 14 at 7 p.m. at the Hoodland Women's Club will be no exception to the steady growth. "We hope to make between \$3,500 and \$4,000 for the school this year," she said.

Members of the pre-school co-operative raise the money each year to try and keep tuition at a reasonable level, according to Clark. The school also provides some scholarships.

Renovating and building new outdoor equipment for

children in the school is another of the co-op's goals for the auction.

Clark is proud of the warm mountain flavor associated with the auction each year. "A lot of the items and services are homemade by residents of the mountain, and many of the services offered are mountain related," she said. Some members are offering backpacking excursions and related activities.

Col. Tom Cox of Zig Zag will again be auctioneer for the festivities as he has in the past for the Co-op.

The auction is not limited to items from the mountain area, Clark said. Merchants from Sandy, Gresham and Portland have also donated to the auction.

Some items on the block include lodging at Timberline Lodge, Rippling River Resort and the Portland Marriot, tickets to the Celebrity Golf/Tennis Classic, Mt. Hood Meadows ski packages and lessons, Alpine Slide tickets, charter fishing trips, dinners in many restaurants, pottery from Enna Pottery, stained glass and homebaked items and crafts.

There will be a dinner served of authentic Mexican food, beer sausage, homemade pies and cakes as well as beer, wine and soft drinks. "We have kept everything at a very reasonable price," said Clark.

Viewing for the event will begin at 6 p.m.

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