



Playboys to film band doc /3C



Crisp and easy chicken wings/4C



Fishing on North Fork Nehalem/10C

THE MAD MECHANIC



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Shop manager Paul Thorgersen performs routine maintenance on a weed wacker at his shop Tuesday at the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center outside Pendleton.

Shop supervisor's creations power CBARC experiments

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Winter is a time of relative calm at the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center. It will likely be months before scientists can return to the fields and begin recording data from their experiments.

In his shop around back of the station, Paul Thorgersen is busy as ever. A smell of diesel fuel lingers in the air as Thorgersen and Duane Davies finish overhauling tractors for the coming season. Thorgersen plans to build a new no-till seed drill sometime later this month, along with anything else staff might need before the weather turns.

As the maintenance and equipment supervisor at CBARC, part of Thorgersen's job is tinkering with machinery and coming up with designs that help researchers work better, faster. Farmers depend on the station to help them grow healthier crops, and Thorgersen is the "mad mechanic" behind the scenes.

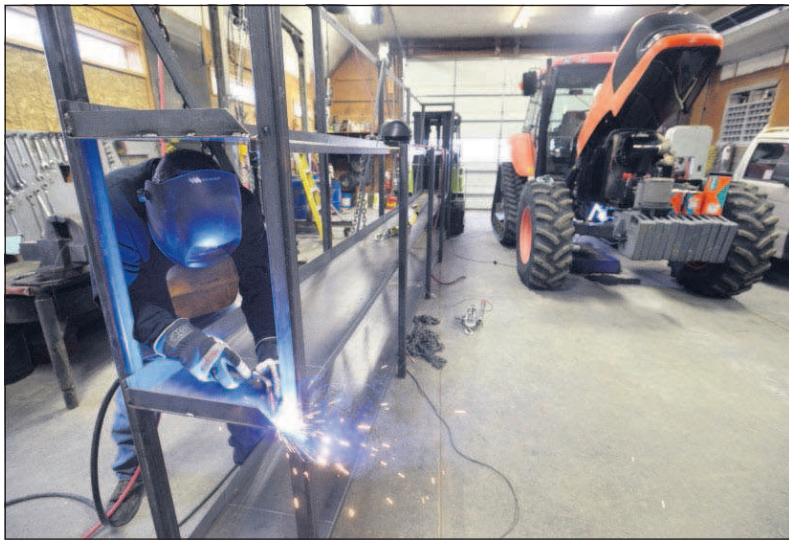
Whether it's a specialized drill or modified rig for spraying fertilizer, scientists let Thorgersen know what they need and will usually give him free rein to bring the creations to life.

"They'll bring me their idea, and it's my job to figure out how to build it," he said. "Sometimes they bring plans, sometimes they don't. It's a great challenge."

On a cold, rainy Tuesday, Thorgersen put the finishing touches on metal shelving welded from scratch. These shelves will hold long-term soil samples taken from the fields, to be stored in two empty shipping containers after mice started causing problems in a nearby barn.

Thorgersen, 61, grew up in Pendleton and taught himself much of what he knows about handiwork. He learned basic carpentry from his father, and as a kid got into small motors by taking apart lawn mowers.

Thorgersen got his first truck, a 1957 Chevy pickup, when he was 14. The rig had a blown head gasket and bad clutch, but Thorgersen and



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Shop manager Paul Thorgersen uses a tig welder while finishing a shelving system for seed storage on Tuesday at CBARC outside of Pendleton.

friends soon got it running.

"I can't remember not mechanizing," he said. "I enjoy working with my hands."

Thorgersen never went to school for mechanics. He spent 19 years working for John Deere, and eventually worked his way up to shop foreman and head combine mechanic. Thorgersen briefly started his own business, Paul's Combine Repair, before moving on to the maintenance shop at CBARC.

CBARC is one of several agricultural research stations operated by Oregon State University around the state. The Pendleton station is located several miles north of town, and is dedicated to helping local wheat growers adopt new practices that increase production while lowering cost.

Thorgersen is in charge of all buildings and vehicle repairs on campus, including two greenhouses and a fleet of 13 tractors. The sheer variety of work is more than enough to stay busy year round, he said, but it's his job to turn obsolete equipment into something new that gets him most excited.

"The designing and putting it all together is something I really enjoy," he said.

One of his recent designs started out as federal surplus — a truck previously used by Army for transferring jet fuel. With some alterations and elbow grease, Thorgersen retrofitted the rig to carry three large fertilizer tanks, making it easier to pump and carry bulk chemicals.

Thorgersen also recently built his



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Shop manager Paul Thorgersen talks about the fertilizer nurse vehicle he created out of a 1986 Chevy fuel truck he acquired through military surplus.

first no-till seed drill, which posed another set of challenges. Most drills struggle to penetrate down into untilled dirt, he said, becoming nothing more than a big hay rake. But with the right adjustments, he was able to make it work.

"There's so much to do," he said. "That's probably the best part of my

job. It's so diverse. I don't have to talk myself into coming into work every morning."

Thorgersen has help servicing tractors and combines in the winter, but otherwise is a one-man operation. His shop is a tinkerer's dream, with spare parts hanging off the walls and smaller hand tools carefully organized around the garage. The goal for now is to make sure all equipment is in good working shape by the time spring rolls around, he said.

"I'm kind of out of sight, out of mind, but when things break, you know exactly where I am," he said with a laugh.

Thorgersen said there's always something new, especially given the pace of technology in the farming industry. Just modifying equipment to meet the scientists' needs is a really big deal, he added.

"The people I work with are great. They're very supportive," he said. "Once we're on the same page, it's single vision. Their goals are my goals. We reach a common vision, and away we go."



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Shop manager Paul Thorgersen walks through one of the greenhouses Tuesday at CBARC outside of Pendleton. In addition to his duties creating and maintaining vehicles for the research center Thorgersen also helps to maintain many of the facility's research structures.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.