

Father-son team
of Matt and Willie
Wood keep small
farm going in Helix

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The arid, sparsely populated Columbia Plateau is home to Oregon wheat country. Acres upon acres of wheat fields sprawl across rolling, hilly terrain. The wind can reach 60 miles per hour, and the unfettered view spans from the Blue Mountains to the east to the distant peak of Mt. Hood to the west.

It's here in Helix where Matt Wood farms with his son Willie. Together they're keeping alive a family tradition that stems back to 1886.

"Willie's the sixth generation of my family to grow wheat in Helix. And he had three great-grandfathers named William, one was Wilhelm actually, who were wheat farmers. It's in our blood," said Matt.

Besides being a farmer, Matt serves on the OFB Board of Directors and is a member of Umatilla-Morrow County Farm Bureau.

But those aren't all of his claims to fame.

"Whenever I meet someone and they ask what I do, I say, 'I'm Matt Wood. I'm a carpenter, a farmer, and a grave digger. Used to be part-owner of a tavern. And that's all true, but we gave the tavern to the bartender,'" he said.

Loquacious, with an encyclopedic knowledge of local history and lore — and baseball — Matt does construction work along with farming 700 acres. And he does indeed serve on the local cemetery board and has dug many a grave in his 21 years as a volunteer. He also pens a monthly column for this newspaper called "From the tractor."

Mild-mannered and taciturn, 21-year-old Willie is able to farm full-time on 1,400 acres, which includes a custom hay business that he launched while still in high school. He's a recent graduate of Blue Mountain Community College, where he earned a degree in crop production.

The Woods' personalities couldn't be more different, which makes them perfect complements to one another.

The same goes for their farming.

"We're inextricably connected because we own some equipment together," said Matt.

Matt owns two of the three combines used for wheat harvest, "but I own all the service rigs," said Willie. He also owns most of the haying equipment.

"Theoretically, we could each farm in our own right, maybe-kinda. But it works a whole heck of a lot better if we have a cooperative effort," said Matt.

HOME GROWN

WHEAT RUNS IN THE FAMILY



Willie Wood and his father Matt Wood at their Helix wheat farm near the foothills of the Blue Mountains.

Working in wheat

The Woods' combined 2,100 acres makes them one of the smaller operations in the region, which is home to wheat farms sprawling over 5,000 acres or more.

Like most farmers in the area, they raise soft white wheat for the Asian market. Customers in Japan, China, and Korea use this variety to make noodles and pastries.

In this part of Oregon, strong international trade agreements are extremely important to the local economy.

To help weather the fluctuating price they get for soft white, the Woods also grow dryland hay and Dark Northern Spring wheat, which is used for crackers and bread and is more likely to be consumed domestically.

"And this year we're experimenting with Austrian

winter peas for either seed or cattle feed. We're excited to see what happens," said Matt.

Most of the wheat is "winter wheat" that the Woods plant in the fall and harvest in the summer. The fields are planted in a summer fallow rotation, which means every year half the acreage is planted and half is left unseeded to renew the soil and conserve moisture. That's essential in a region with an average rainfall of a mere 14 inches.

When seeding a field on a steep incline, which is common terrain in Umatilla County, Willie drives the tractor along the contours of the hill, creating horizontal furrows in the ground instead vertical furrows that

run downhill. This prevents water runoff and soil erosion after the snow melts or the rain falls.

The Woods use deep-furrow drills when planting, so seeds can access the sub-surface moisture. These grooves also protect the plants from the powerful wind.

"We take soil tests every year and do what we can to promote soil health and build organic matter. It's not only the right thing to do environmentally, it's good for my bottom line. The soil is my best asset," said Matt.

Summer harvest brings long days, and Willie and Matt are out in the fields from daybreak to dark.

"When we're wheat farming and hay farming at

the same time, and there's only two of us in the crew, it stretches us sometimes," said Matt.

Deep roots in Umatilla County

With his passion for history, Matt has a sizable collection of antique farm

equipment and local memorabilia.

But among his most prized possessions are black-and-white photos documenting his ancestors' lives as Umatilla County wheat farmers.

"This is a harvest scene from 1910 of my great-great-grandfather Robert Lee Harp about 15 miles from here," he said pointing to a framed photo. "He was born 100 years ahead of me, and we do the same thing for a living."

Matt's path to farming was not a straight trajectory. He wasn't raised on the farm. After earning a degree in history from Western Oregon University in Monmouth, he planned to attend law school.

His grandfather Randy Dorran was running the farm in Helix at that point and was determined to keep it in the family. Randy approached Matt about taking it over some day — and that conversation altered the course of Matt's life.

In 1993, he returned to Umatilla County to learn how to grow wheat with his grandfather and keep his rural heritage alive.

Willie, however, has had the exact opposite experience, spending his entire life in agriculture.

"Farming is all I ever wanted to do since I was small," he said.

In fact, his high school graduation present was a combine "with a big red bow on it."

For all of their differences in personality, Matt and Willie make a fantastic team.

Besides the bond of being father and son, they share the traits that matter most in running a successful farm: pride in their work, love for the land and unwavering optimism about the bounty of the next harvest.

Said Matt: "I said this at my neighbor's funeral: Farming is not just what we do, it's who we are. It defines the very essence of our being. You get up in the morning, and whatever you do, it's related to farming. Even if you go down and have coffee with your neighbor, what are you talking about? You're talking about should I run a 10-inch or 12-inch-space grain drill? Or should I plant this variety or that variety? ... Farming is what makes us tick."

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