

A DIFFERENT KIND OF FARMER

Cultivating knowledge about ag and history produces bumper crop of fun

By Sean Ellis
Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — Jeff Smith's Twin Oaks Farms are about so much more than just making money.

It's also about benefiting wildlife, youth development, educating the public about agriculture and, often, sheer fun.

Smith grows crops such as pumpkins, sweet corn, clover hay, corn for silage, sunflowers and Idaho's famous potatoes. He also raises livestock on his 200 acres.

But this is not your average farm.

For Smith, providing habitat for wildlife comes first, followed by teaching Treasure Valley residents about agriculture.

It's also about youth development — and setting world records.

Making a living and having a blast in the process are all part of life on the Eagle, Idaho, farm.

'D-Day' on the farm

One unlikely event takes place each summer on the farm. Every June, to commemorate the D-Day landing during World War II, Smith uses a large mound of earth on his farm to re-enact the day American and allied troops invaded German-occupied France.

The re-enactment involves hundreds of paint ball guns. Anyone 50 and over is a "German" and stationed at the top

of the hill while any participant under 50 is an "American" and has to try to take the hill.

When an American is hit, he goes back to the bottom of the hill and starts over. When a German is hit, he's out.

The action doesn't stop until the hill is taken, no matter how long it takes.

For the battle, Smith, 55, ordered a custom-built, fully automatic World War II-era German replica paint ball machine gun. It can shoot 300 rounds a minute.

The battle rages for hours, and about 60,000 paint balls are fired before the hill is taken, said Smith, whose father fought on Utah Beach during the historic assault.

"They have to take the flag. There's no backing down," he said. "The war will not end until the battle's over."

That experience gives participants a small appreciation for what American troops endured during the D-Day landings, he said.

"We will never again experience ... the horror and terror that those great men experienced, what kind of courage it took to keep running into those bullets," he said. "After getting shot for four hours by a paint ball gun, you're going to survive but, holy smokes, do you have an appreciation for (what those men went through)."

"At the same time, we have a frickin' blast," he added.

Teaching about ag

Visitors can see most of southwestern Idaho's Treasure Valley from the highest spot on Twin Oaks Farms.

Smith also believes he has a responsibility to use his farm to teach urban residents of the valley about agriculture and the value of hard work.

Originally from Ohio, Smith, who lives on the farm with his wife, Toni, came to Idaho when he was 19 and has



Submitted photo

Competitors in the Tater Dash Mud Run at Twin Oaks Farms in Eagle, Idaho, dig into a world record serving of french fries in 2014. The record involved 1,003 pounds of french fries made from 1,256 pounds of raw potatoes cooked in 110 gallons of cooking oil.

been involved in farming his entire life. He grew up knowing the value of hard work and how important farming is to society but fears most Americans have now lost touch with those concepts.

He tries to reach people at an early age and employs a couple dozen youngsters on his farm each year.

He starts by teaching them how to plant pumpkins in a straight line with no machinery, so they appreciate modern farm equipment.

The oldest kid drills a hole with a stick, the next one drops the seed into the hole and "the next one, usually the (youngest) because he's closest to the ground, pats the seed into the ground."

He said that whether or not they go into farming, "if nothing else, (they'll) appreciate production agriculture."

The kids get paid depending on how much they produce.

"The problem in America is that we're teaching our kids



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how to be collectors, and that doesn't work," he said. "You always have to be a producer. Once they figure out that they get paid more based on how much they produce, they are on their way to being producing and it will never end from there."

He also introduces the youngsters to some of the many advanced career opportunities involved with farming and reminds them, "(J.R.) Simplot was our first billionaire in the state and he was all agriculture."

Races and festivals

Smith holds annual events such as the Tater Dash Mud Run, which takes participants on a zig-zag course around the entire farm, and Halloween Land, a corn maze and harvest festival to attract as many people as he can to his

farm and give them a taste of agriculture.

"My goal is to get every kid and mom and dad on the farm. At least to touch it, smell and taste it," Smith said. "That means they're not sitting in front of a television or texting. They're out being real humans."

The Halloween Land event includes a "bunny hill" that involves a large mound of dirt covered with straw and 50 bunnies being chased by dozens of excited youngsters.

Wendell Livengood, 74, a retired farmer, lives in a trailer on Smith's property and takes care of a lot of Twin Oaks' farming-related tasks in the same 1946 tractor that he bought when he was 12 years old.

He said it's the best retirement he could ever dream of, and he appreciates Smith's emphasis on teaching people about agriculture and old-fashioned hard work.

"Everything we do out here I feel is part of the United States growing up," he said. "We need to bring back some of the old into the new generation."

Setting records

Several years ago, while organizing the annual Tater Dash footrace, Smith learned from one of his employees that the Guinness world records for the largest serving of french fries, mashed potatoes and baked potatoes were all held by groups in other countries.

Idaho is the potato state and those records belong here, he told his employees, and they set about researching how they could bring the records to Idaho.

They used the Tater Dash, which attracts about 1,300 people, as the setting for attempting the world records.

In 2014 they set the french fry world record and just missed setting the mashed potato record in 2015.

A plaque from Guinness recognizing the french fry record hangs in his office. The record was 1,003 pounds of french fries made from 1,256 pounds of raw potatoes cooked in 110 gallons of cooking oil.

"We're going to train harder and try (for the mashed potato record) again next year," Smith said. "The following year, we'll go after baked potatoes."

"That's great," Idaho Potato Commission member Randy Hardy said of Smith's potato world record efforts. "Idaho is the potato king around the world and it's only right that we should have those records."

The commission donates potato sack bags, potato pins and potato recipe handouts for the event and hands out Tater Dash promotion material during the IPC's annual Famous Idaho Potato Marathon.

Wildlife first

For all his focus on teaching about farming, Smith said wildlife come first on his farm and every inch of it is designed to benefit them.

For example, he'll mow only one strip of hay at a time so the remaining crop provides cover for ground-dwelling birds during nesting season.

He also created "Loghenge," a play on the famous English Stonehenge landmark, by placing ancient, dead trees in the same layout. Each tree also provides dens for wildlife.

He has also planted thousands of trees as habitat for wildlife.

As a result of his efforts to make his farm wildlife friendly, it is a home to mule deer, elk, coyotes, foxes, weasels, badgers, skunks, water fowl and other birds.

"The entire agricultural portion of (the farm) is designed for wildlife habitat," Smith said. "The two can absolutely be done together."

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