

'Last hurrah' for late business owner

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle



Blake Ibarra prepares a cut of meat at Russell's Custom Meats on March 21, 2022.

Justin Davis/Blue Mountain Eagle

CANYON CITY — Though he's only in his fifth year as a butcher, Blake Ibarra of Russell's Custom Meats took home the title of reserve grand champion in the boneless ham division from the Northwest Meat Processors Association's annual convention in Hermiston this month.

But then, he had a good teacher. Ibarra learned his trade under former Russell's owner Tracy Moss, who passed away in November.

Moss started working with Russell's Custom Meats in 1985 in Baker City. After the company's Canyon City facility was built in 1989, Moss and his wife, Kathy, transferred there. Tracy and Kathy ran the shop from then on and purchased it outright in 2007. They continued to operate the shop until Tracy's passing.

Tracy Moss was a long-time participant in the Northwest Meat Processors convention, starting in the early '80s. Although it took some time to develop his technique, Moss was ultimately recognized as a grand champion in 2007, 2008 and 2009 before health issues forced him out of future competitions.

Due to COVID, the 2020 and 2021 conventions weren't

held, so Ibarra jumped at the opportunity to go this year.

"When Kathy Moss told me that they were doing it this year and asked me if I wanted to go, of course I said yes," Ibarra said. "This was my first year doing this and I really didn't know what to expect."

Ibarra says winning reserve grand champion has changed the view of his peers toward him and his skill as a meat cutter.

"I've only been doing this five years — everyone else

has been doing it 30-plus years," Ibarra said. "A lot of these places are family-run for generations. I didn't have that. I had Tracy show me everything I know over the past five years."

As the youngest competitor at the convention, Ibarra hopes to see the younger generation take up professions in the meat industry. "We're trying to get them into this profession because there aren't a lot of (butchers)," he said. "When you lose this trade, it

is going to be hard."

The end of the competition represents the end of a chapter for Russell's Custom Meats, with Chuck Skupa taking over the business in the coming weeks. Having his protege, Ibarra, compete at the convention was kind of a "last hurrah" for Tracy, said his widow, Kathy, who is stepping away from the business.

A retirement party for Kathy Moss will be held in April or May.



From left, Brooke Teel, Reece Jacobs and Ava Gerry during the 2021 Youth Livestock Auction at the Grant County Fairgrounds.

Grant Fair Board plans remodel of Keerins Hall

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — After receiving word it would be getting \$2 million from the state to improve the fairgrounds, the Grant County Fair Board hopes to get started this fall on a remodel of Keerins Hall.

Plans call for the renovated building to house office space for the Oregon State University Extension Service. OSU Extension runs local 4-H programs, and having an office onsite would give 4-H a presence at the fairgrounds all year.

Mindy Winegar, the Grant County Fairgrounds manager, said 4-H and the fair run hand in hand, and it would make sense to have the offices at the fairgrounds.

"It is a building with many memories and history for many folks in Grant County," said Winegar, a Grant County native. "I think it would be beneficial to our whole community to have it back to a more usable, friendly building."

The renovation for Keerins Hall, which Winegar said was constructed in 1956, would

make the building an overall more usable space and fix the sways in the roof. As of now, she said she was not sure what the cost of the renovation would be.

While remodeling Keerins Hall and repaving the parking lot are the two high-priority projects for the fairgrounds, Winegar said the fair always has projects on its to-do list and always looks at others. She said the fair board is planning to have a public meeting in the Trowbridge Pavilion at 6:30 p.m. on Monday, March 28, to talk about potential projects and gather feedback from the community.

"We're so excited and feel very fortunate to be blessed with this funding from our state representatives," Winegar said.

Winegar said county fairs across the state are a big draw for tourism in their communities.

By hosting a variety of events, county fairgrounds serve as engines of economic activity, and during emergencies, communities lean on them — be it for vaccine clinics during the pandemic or a shelter during the Canyon Creek Fire.

Easterday bankruptcy battle heats up

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Washington — The court battle over the fraud-forced sale of ex-cattleman Cody Easterday's bankrupt farming and ranching empire in Eastern Washington intensified Wednesday, March 16.

Lawyers for Easterday's wife and mother told U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Whitman Holt in Yakima that the attorneys and two creditor committees overseeing the liquidation of Easterday Farms and Easterday Ranches should be ousted.

Debby Easterday, Cody's wife, and Karen Easterday, whose late husband, Gale, started the Columbia Basin companies, claim the attorneys and committees are

allowing the Ranches business to rob the Farms business. They are separate family businesses with different creditors.

Another difference is the Farms business expects to emerge from bankruptcy with between \$20.4 million and \$45 million left for the ex-owners, according to court records.

The Ranches business, weighed down by Cody Easterday's \$233 million debt to fraud victim Tyson Fresh Meats, will be broke.

The Easterdays allege that money is improperly flowing from the solvent Farms to the insolvent Ranches, including about \$1.1 million for fuel, labor and hauling cattle and feed last summer.

"If that happened, it's problematic," Holt said.

Much bigger sums are at stake as the committees and

Easterdays negotiate a settlement. Although the Farms and Ranches businesses filed for bankruptcy separately last year, the debts are intertwined.

Cody Easterday, due to be sentenced June 13 for

wire fraud, pledged in a plea agreement last year to pay back Tyson. A judge has twice delayed sentencing to give him time to sell family property to raise money for restitution.

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