

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Bill Dean, vice president of sustainability at River Point Farms, holds a clump of onions.

Hale Farms and River Point Farms owners prove hard work pays off

BY MAEGAN MURRAY
HERMISTON HERALD

The next time you are in a Subway, Chipotle or are munching on some chips and Tostitos salsa, chances are good that the onions in those products were grown and packaged by a farm headquartered in Hermiston.

River Point Farms, a Hermiston-based operation, grows and packages about 20 percent of the nation's red onions, along with a large amount of its yellow onions. It supplies 100 percent of Subway's red onions for 36 weeks out of the year, red onions for every Chipotle restaurant in North America year-round, yellow whole-peel onions year-round to each Whataburger store, which are establishments based largely in the South and Midwest, and provide about 50 percent of onions used in Tostitos products, just to name a few.

Business, however, wasn't always booming. The venture started from another farming operation owned and operated by some of the same founders as River Point Farms.

Bob Hale, one of the owners and founders of River Point Farms along with local farmer Bob Levy, said they started up a farming operation called Hale Farms in 1977

with the idea they would one day earn a successful living. He said they never imagined they would one day turn their very small operation into two thriving organizations they operate today.

"I graduated from college in 1975, and we borrowed 100 percent to buy the farm, 100 percent to buy the equipment and 100 percent to operate it," Hale said. "We worked extremely hard for the first 10 years, being driven mostly by the fear of failure."

Hale said, in the beginning, the goal was to just earn any kind of a profit

they could. In those early years, they grew hay, sugar beets and grain on their 500-acre irrigated farm in the Butter Creek valley near Echo.

"We were just trying to make it," he said.

They supplemented their income with off-farming jobs until an adjacent farm came up for sale, which allowed them to double their operation and begin farming full-time. As they made connections and built relationships that allowed them to grow their business, they developed a motto that Hale said really allowed them to excel.

Hermiston family uses farm to give back to community

BY MAEGAN MURRAY
HERMISTON HERALD

The Wick family of Hermiston proves every day that a farm can be more than the crops or livestock it produces.

For more than 20 years, the family has used its farm off of Prindle Loop to give back to children in the community.

Shari Wick and her husband, Mike, who inherited the farm from his parents, have hosted student field trips at the farm.

As they raised their own two children, they also welcomed 10 foster children so that they, too, could experience a consistent family environment and life on a farm.

The Wicks also balance normal farm operations with holding full-time jobs and other activities. Shari Wick has taught in the Hermiston School District for the last nearly 30 years, while Mike Wick has worked in agriculture, now serving as the manager of the Westland Irrigation District.

"It's been a lot of work, but I wouldn't have had it any other way," Shari Wick said.

FARM BEGINNINGS

Mike Wick said his parents purchased the farm when he was 2 years old after looking for a place that had milder winters for their cattle. He said his father was a cattle rancher and farmer and thought that Hermiston would best meet their needs after living



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
The Wick family poses for a photo. Pictured, from left, is Sam Wick, Mike Wick, Shari Wick and Jadie Wick. The farm has been in Mike Wick's family since the 1950s.

near Condon, Oregon.

When Wick was 13 years old, however, his father came down with viral encephalitis, which put him into a coma for nine years before he died in February of 1977. During that time, Wick's mother was responsible for all

the farm duties while raising her three sons.

"The thing that was admirable to me about him and his mother, who was a saint, was that they were able to hold onto this place through all of that," Shari Wick said. "She finished raising

the three boys by herself ... It has meant a lot to our family to still have it."

Mike Wick said the fact that the farm is still in their family means something to him.

"I'll always kind of have that connection to it," he said.

After a brief stint playing professional baseball, he returned home to go to school and then take over the family farm.

After graduating from Oregon State University with a degree in animal husbandry and farming, he met and married his wife, and they settled down on the family farm, only to have their twins three years later.

Until then, Mike Wick had managed the farm largely on his own, raising some of his own cattle, while also leasing out portions of the land to interested farmers and cattle ranchers. After the Wicks' twins, son Sam and daughter Jadie, were born, Mike relied more on leasing out the land than managing it himself as he had less time to dedicate to the family farm, but that also gave the family an opportunity to reach out to others.

GIVING BACK

Shari Wick said raising the children while trying to manage the family farm have kept she and her husband busy, but the difference they have made in people's lives has made all the hard work worthwhile.

When their children were in second grade, Shari Wick said she became attached to one of her students who was having a rough time at home. After becoming certified foster parents, the Wicks took in the student, who was followed by nine others.

"They all got to experience farm life

SEE WICK/A9

Silverdale Farms cross-breeds hearty sheep variety in Hermiston

Local couple explain changes to the industry through the years

BY SEAN HART
HERMISTON HERALD

A local couple have years of experience in the sheep industry and continue to breed a flock in Hermiston as the industry continues to change.

Tom and Karin Watson, who have owned Silverdale Farms in Hermiston for about 20 years, have worked with sheep

for decades.

Tom Watson worked for Superior Farms, purchasing and feeding lambs before they were sent to slaughter, for about 40 years. He served on the board of directors for several years before he retired, and, although the Hermiston operation was sold about "half a dozen years ago," he said the company is still the largest lamb processor in the United States with a large facility in California.

Karin Watson served as the secretary for the National Lamb Feeders Association for 23 years before retiring in January. She helped organize and promote the NLFA Howard Wyman Sheep Industry Leadership

School for 28 years and recently became one of four women to ever receive the association's Cane of Appreciation for service to the sheep industry.

Even in retirement, they continue to be involved with sheep at the fair and breed a small flock of about 150 ewes each year.

SHEARING THE INDUSTRY

Tom Watson said national policies and trends and international competition have dramatically reduced the size of the national sheep industry in the last 70 years. Ten facilities on the West Coast processed lamb meat when he started in



SEAN HART PHOTO

This pregnant Texel ewe was about to give birth earlier in March at Silverdale Farms in Hermiston.

the industry, he said, and only the Superior Farms facility in California remains.

He said about half of the lamb meat consumed in the



SEAN HART PHOTO

Karin Watson holds a new lamb at Silverdale Farms in Hermiston.



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‘It’s not a job, it’s a lifestyle’

Ditchen enjoys the business challenge, outdoor office and visible accomplishments of farming

BY SEAN HART
HERMISTON HERALD

Darrin Ditchen controls the 3,000-acre irrigation system at Golden Valley Farms in Stanfield with the touch of a button.

Ditchen, whose grandfather started Golden Valley Farms in the Willamette Valley, has managed the family business's eastern site since he finished college in 1999 and said farmers must evolve to overcome constant challenges.

"There's always new challenges every year," he said. "The day you think you have it figured out, there's a new challenge in front of you. You learn something new every day."

While business expenses, such as fuel and labor costs,



SEAN HART PHOTO

Darrin Ditchen, whose father started Golden Valley Farms in the Willamette Valley, works on the farm's eastern site in Stanfield, which is now managed by his son, Darrin.

continually increase, Ditchen said, the selling price for the commodities grown, such as grass seed at Golden Valley Farms, remains flat or even decreases.

"We've had to adapt," he said. "Usually, farmers adapt by covering more ground, covering more acres with the same amount of people. We have to become more efficient. I would say farmers are very efficient-minded people, at least I am. A lot of my friends are always looking for what we can do better. I think that's just a good

business plan. That's what we do around here. We're always looking for ways to improve and to be efficient."

Ditchen said Golden Valley Farms tries to improve each year, and new technology has helped. He said a digital upgrade in the farm's center-pivot irrigation system has vastly increased efficiency. The pumps speed up and slow down based on water pressure, he said, and every ounce of water is accounted for.

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