

A Man for All Seasons

Salute to Agriculture

First in a Series

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March is the time to recognize farmers, ranchers and dairymen and the role they play in putting food on our tables. March 18 is National Ag Day, and as Box Elder County is a leader in the state in agricultural production – field crops, cattle, sheep and dairy cows – this series salutes those who wouldn't trade a tractor seat for a seat on Wall Street and prefer punching steers to punching a time clock.

During any given day, Charles Holmgren dons many hats. One minute he is a truck driver, then a cattle wrangler, and even a field hand. In a moment's notice he can become a bookkeeper, a nature lover or a weatherman. But while his hats may change, his title remains constant, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 12 months a year.

Charles Holmgren is a farmer.

It's more of a passion that a profession with this Bear River City man, who partners with his brother, Spencer, in the operation of Holmgren Farms. After all, he's working the very land first cultivated by his grandfather 130 years ago and that knowledge brings with it some sense of pride.

"It's nice to come out and see a green crop," he said. "It's refreshing to me."

That green, be it in the farm's 1,100 acres of corn, wheat, alfalfa and pasture or in the wallet at the end of a successful season, doesn't come without a lot of backbreaking labor. Charles said working the land requires 80 to 90 hours a week. "It's an extremely demanding job," he admits, one that keeps him busy year round.

Spring is the time the Holmgren brothers start planting corn. Rotation of plantings helps keep the fields clear of potentially damaging bugs and makes for a better end product.

While much of the corn is processed into

silage by a neighboring dairy, the Holmgrens use the remainder to fatten their own pens of beef cattle. With a stock herd of 120 mother cows, spring means hours of calving, sorting, tagging and feeding. Come summertime, the cows are transported to Cache Valley to feed and fatten.

On this farm, summer is all about water. With 900 acres of crops to irrigate and 200 acres in summer pasture for the cattle, keeping the ground moist is a time-consuming necessity. "It keeps two or three of us going constantly," Charles said, of the five-man (including three full-time employees) operation.

Holmgren Farms uses flood irrigation to keep the thirsty plants watered and Charles, like most farmers, keeps a close eye on the weather report, hoping for added moisture. But he has gone one step further in giving Mother Nature a push for needed precipitation. For the past 30 years, a cloud seeder on the farm has been used from time to time in the hope of boosting rainfall.

This year, with the mild winter, the cloud seeder may need to be pulled into use again. Trying to second-guess the seasons just makes life more interesting, Charles said. "There is never enough water."

Summer also means harvest. Cut rows of alfalfa dry in the fields before being baled and shipped just down the road to Bailey Farms where it is cubed for overseas transport. Good weather means four cuttings a year, always the hope for any Box Elder County farmer. Wheat is also harvested in the early fall and trucked to Ogden. There it is analyzed for quality. "Every time you take a load of wheat you see the outcome. You always hope to get a good report," he said. It's like taking a test."

Wintertime is the so-called down time, time to do maintenance on the expensive equipment used to keep the ground producing, repair fences and catch up on the day-to-day duties of a farm.

But winter is also a vital interval when it comes to future finances.

"I cannot tell you how important record keeping is to us," he noted. The brothers must track cow/calf production, water usage, crop yield numbers and more. Those numbers are essential when it's time to go after government funding through a host of agriculture programs and when applying for crop insurance.

"If you don't keep a history, if you don't know where you've been, then you don't know where you are going," he reasoned.

So where is Holmgren Farms and agriculture in the county going? The question is difficult to answer. "There are big changes in farming," Charles said. "The numbers are getting down with fewer and fewer. But the farms are getting bigger. Those generation farms have been turned over because they couldn't afford to or didn't make the effort to stay on farming."

Charles said he remembers dashing home after a long day in school to put in more long hours on the farm with his father. "Now kids are more involved with sports and things. The demographic of the farmer is changing a lot."

The impressive, high-ticketed equipment is shifting the landscape, as well. "When we rode around in open-station tractors we always knew what was going on behind us," he said. "Now you sit in an air conditioned cab with the radio on. You're not as in tune with the soil as you once were."

But it's that very soil that keeps Charles getting back on that tractor day after day, month after month.

"We make a decent living, but I guess we have the farmer's mentality of 'next year.' Next year I'll do it right, next year I'll make it better. I enjoy improving the farm, manipulating the land, improving its production. When you look at what water, good soil, fertilizer and sunshine can do, it is so amazing. I'm still impressed every year."

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