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## **Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories**

# **Horse-Drawn Wagon Rides**

Interview with Larry Edmonds, Three-Rock Ranch,  
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### **What is the history of your farm and farming experience?**

My wife and I purchased this ranch of 25 acres 15 miles northwest of Spokane in 1980. I worked for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Spokane, and the ranch allowed us to pursue three career goals: living in the country, ranching, and a full-time job for me. We purchased the ranch to raise Monmouth Jack stock, which are horse-sized donkeys.

### **Describe the alternative enterprise(s) in which you are presently engaged.**

I provide wagon hayrides during the Christmas season in a residential area of Spokane, which is nicely decorated for the season. I use two Clydesdale mares for raising the Monmouth Jacks and for pulling the wagon. I initially provided free wagon rides at church functions, Grange events, and other community activities.

For the Christmas hayrides, I operate from the second Saturday in December to December 30.

When I started the hayride business, I set myself up at a corner of the neighborhood and waited for the people to come. Now 90 percent of the riders make reservations by telephone or e-mail to avoid waiting, especially in cold weather.

My rides are 30 minutes long, and I schedule five rides each night. If the temperature drops to zero or if it gets too windy, I cancel the ride. If it snows, I schedule more rides each night.

I replaced my old hay wagon with a brightly painted trolley that has a roof. We have lights and music powered by a small 1,500-watt inverter powered by two dry cell batteries. Over 60 percent of my customers return each year.

I have a helper. This young man started when he was 10 and would help for a free ride. Now, I pay him to help me.

### **What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprise(s)?**

Neighbors and friends started to come out to the ranch to see the mules, horses, and Jacks. I had an old wagon, and I would give them rides. It was very low budget. Once, I was at the local county fair with the mares, and I was asked if I could haul people from the parking lot to the fair. We gave free rides to several hundred people in the following 3 hours. Also, these people were very interested in how the horses were harnessed, hooked to the wagon, and driven.

### **How did you make the transition?**

I made some improvements by putting a fifth wheel on the wagon so I could turn shorter more safely. Thinking about safety led me naturally to think about liability, so I bought insurance for \$400.00 to protect myself and the family. Insurance started to increase, so I switched to a different insurance, which costs us \$700.00 today.

Then, 12 years ago I started the Christmas wagon hayride business. I obtained a business license and went to work. I advertised in the paper and on the radio, local TV, handed out business cards, and put an ad in the Nickel. I was even on national TV one time.

### **How do you market your services?**

I advertise in the entertainment section of the local newspaper, put up flyers, and hand out business cards to everyone I see. I place a 2-inch by 2-inch ad in the local paper eight times during the season. The ad runs Friday through Sunday for a total cost of \$630.00. It reads "Horse Drawn Christmas Lights Tour, call 509-466-4936." Now I put in my e-mail address. My wife takes care of all the appointments.

This ad generates about 200 to 300 calls a week. I use the radio to market free rides. I have a total of 1,000 to 1,200 customers per year.

On some occasions, I provide free rides for senior citizens and the disabled.

### **How do you price your products?**

I charge \$5.00 for adults and \$2.50 per child ages 3 to 12. For groups such as nursing homes and others, I charge one price for the whole group rather than per person.

### **What went wrong? Why? How did you correct the situation?**

I spent too much money on advertising. I would spend about \$400.00 a year on radio alone, plus newspaper ads. I found out that flyers, business cards, and advertising only in the entertainment section of the local newspaper have been the best advertising value.

I had to buy manure bags for the horses. One year the horses messed the street in front of a house that was having a party. It turned out terrible. I cleaned the carpets in the whole house.

### **What went right? Why? How did you build on your success?**

I have a 60-percent return rate on customers. They tell me that they keep coming back not for the ride

but because of me. Building personal relationships with people is very important. I guess I just have a very friendly personality that people appreciate. I don't rush the customers. I am on time. Kids drive the team and build self esteem, and I give a little talk about the area and about ranching. They love it.

My focus is on the ride, horses, Christmas music, and Christmas decorations. Thus, I do not serve cakes, cookies, or hot cider. That would take more help and take away from the ride. Also, the health regulations are complex and expensive to comply with in Spokane.

### **What would you have done differently?**

I could charge more.

### **Where do you plan to go from here?**

I plan to get a new wagon that's easier to get into. I need a new team of horses; my mares are very old. My neighbor has started to raise bison. We are talking about giving sleigh rides through the herd. We are going to check this out during the winter of 2000-01.

### **What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?**

1. Have, or develop, people skills.
2. Look at the enterprise as supplemental income.
3. Cost it out.
4. Pick a business that makes sense.
5. Study ads in your papers to determine what you want to do.
6. Get your niche and do it well.
7. Price low enough to keep the competition out when there is not enough business to go around.

### **How did you handle the liability concern?**

I purchased insurance through my local agent.

**What do you dislike the most and like the most?**

I dislike the liability aspect of the enterprise. I work with the horses all day, but there are so many people around and something could go wrong. I like the kids the most. This is a non-monetary reward that cannot be measured. I get an opportunity to meet special people and groups. One example is an entire wagon of 22, a nationally known group called the “Singing Nuns” who played their guitars and sang the entire trip.

**Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?**  
Sure!

**Do you want additional information?** For more success stories and other information, see the website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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