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

# **Family Education and Entertainment on the Farm**

Interview with Steve and Dorothy Enger, RR 2, Box 68A,  
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### **What is the history of your farm and farming experience?**

Both of us grew up on farms in North Dakota. After college, Steve was an agricultural credit officer and did home construction/remodeling. Dorothy taught elementary school. In 1978, we rented land near Hatton and purchased this farm in 1987; home construction was also part of the business. We are wheat, barley, pinto beans and soybean producers on our 1,450 acres. In 1993-94, we tried producing “high value” crops such as cucumbers, tomatoes, pumpkins and carrots, but lost money on the cucumbers and tomatoes. Today, we raise 130 acres of carrots and 10 acres of pumpkins for the wholesale market. We sell 25 percent of the pumpkins at the farm.

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

We have developed “Fall Family Fun on the Farm” that provides entertainment and education for the whole family—from toddlers to seniors. We want to give people something they can go back home and talk about. Education is a major part of what we do. We have developed nine different activities to accomplish this—Corn Maze, Face Painting, Haunted House, Enterprise Golf, Tunnel of Doom, Rat Racers, Pumpkin Patch, Straw Maze and Tess the Cow. All of these activities tell a story about life with the focus being on agriculture and how food is grown and processed.

Education, the center of our alternative enterprise, is designed in a way that everyone has fun while learning about food and agriculture.

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

In 1997, our church became involved in Heifer Project International. They wanted to raise \$5,000 and challenged the rest of the churches in our “conference” to do the same. The fund raising idea was to have a Halloween party on our farm. Our family converted our old granary into a haunted house, built a straw bale maze, and used another building for indoor games and the garage area for food and other goodies. It was so much work we decided that we would open early to the public (by placing hand made flyers in neighborhood businesses) and then have our Church’s Halloween Party on October 31st. That night we had a blizzard, but the people still came! About 100 people came to the farm that year other than for the church fundraiser.

Our guests told us how much fun they had and asked us to do it again.

We have never set any definite goals. We treat this enterprise the same as the others on the farm. We know that living in a sparsely populated area like North Dakota, an entrepreneur must have new ideas, activities and attractions each year to get the customer to return. Our farm is not located near a city of any size. We are 35 miles from Grand

Forks, with a population of 50,000 and 75 miles from Fargo, with 75,000 people.

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

We started our Fall Family Fun on the Farm in 1997 by having a haunted house, straw bale maze and pumpkin patch. We served hot cider to our guests. This was the time for us to learn this new business of agritainment. We grew the business slowly. It is too much to comprehend at one time. Some of the things you try don't work as planned and you need time to correct them. It is a step-by-step and area-by-area process to grow your business. It is a time commitment and the mind and body need to adjust and adapt to all the different activities. We grew the agritainment business as follows:

*1998*—We accepted the challenge of designing something new every year to keep the people coming back. Our daughter, Jennie, 14, developed the theme for the haunted house “Who Murdered Dad?” She wrote the story about how the haunted house was a B&B and some one allegedly murdered Dad. These are guided tours through the haunted house, but actors have been placed strategically to increase the anticipation of the guest as well as the tour guide adding suspense. That year, we planted six tenths of an acre of our yard into a football field size corn maze and coordinated its design with the murder theme and the solving of the mystery. We also had the straw bale maze.

*1999*—We added the miniature golf course. It is said to be one of the most difficult in the region. It is agricultural based with each “hole” based upon a crop or livestock enterprise in North Dakota. Obstacles are parts from machinery associated with the crop or livestock “featured” at the hole. The fairways and paths from one hole to the other features the design of farm equipment such as a John Deere-A tractor pulling a dairy wagon.

The golf course is very focused on educating the player about farming in ND. Also, we added the “Tunnel of Doom” which is an optical illusion pathway in the dark that gives an effect of fast motion. This was used to create more interest to

bring people back again. Teachers tell us this is a real “brain enhancer” which is used to stimulate the thought process of children who have learning disabilities. We knew we were in the therapy/education family fun business, but not in the treatment of learning disabilities! The five-acre corn maze was about North Dakota, its road system and location of the 53 county seats. The haunted house was filled with scary stories. This was the year we started the school tours and added “Face Painting.” Face Painting was done on children, teenagers and adults.

*2000*—We added the “Rat Racer” which is eight feet in diameter and four feet wide. It runs along a 150-foot track with rails and bumpers next to the golf course. This location of this attraction was to encourage guests to try the golf activity. This “rat racer” activity is really a challenge because the faster it moves, the faster you have to go. It is fun to watch children get themselves into a very fast mode. The 7.5-acre corn maze was about the United States. The continental 48 states were outlined and trivia about each state was presented. One entered and exited through the “International Peace Gardens.” The haunted house theme was about a girl who inherited the family home. The pumpkin patch and straw bale maze continued to be part of the Fall Family Fun farm visit.

*2001*—We added “Tess,” the Holstein cow. It was amazing that many of our school children in the rural state of North Dakota did not know that cheese was made from milk produced by cows. Children had great fun hand milking Tess. The older people who milked cows growing up said they would just as soon forget those bad memories. We really enjoyed teaching the children about agriculture, farming and a farmer's family work and life style. The haunted house theme was the journey of a young girl one stormy night. The eight-acre corn maze was of the human body. It was three-quarters of a mile around the body (skin). Everything was done in proportion so children had a real feel of where the lungs, heart, blood vessels, arms, legs and etc. were in relation to the whole body. It was a real educational reward to see the children respond to information

about the body, health, and environment. The pumpkin patch continued to grow and the straw bale maze was continued.

2002—We are building a “Pumpkin House” this year. It is 12 feet high and shaped like a pumpkin with a stem on top. It will be used as a classroom inside to teach children how agricultural crops are grown and story time about animals, birds, and nature. It will also have shelves to display pumpkins for sale. We are making several improvements in landscaping around the buildings and display areas by using trellis and other structures. We are also planting other agricultural crops such as grapes. The haunted house theme this year is in the planning stages. The 10-acre corn maze this year is “the world.” It will be 750 feet in diameter and will show latitude, longitude, airline routes to major cities and crops will be planted between continents. Since the sun moves 15 degrees each hour, time zones will be represented. We will still have Tess, the Pumpkin Patch, Straw Bale Maze, Face Painting, Golf, Rat Racer and The Tunnel of Doom.

*Destination*—We have grown to be a destination. Families will come from different cities in North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota to meet and spend a day at the farm. We have areas to relax, eat and enjoy the outdoors. Some families travel 300 miles to visit our farm. It is not unusual to have visitors travel 200 miles for a day visit and return home for work the next day.

#### **What is your decision making process?**

We really don't have a decision making process. We ask our customers what they like for Halloween entertainment. We design and build around agricultural or other educational themes. We also check with other people in this business to see what worked and what people wanted. We look at this as a challenge. We like to be creative and innovative—to add something new to the business every year. The designing and building everything ourselves is our goal. If we cannot build it, we don't add it to our set of activities. We try to provide most of the labor. Dorothy handles

all the school tours and education. This is becoming difficult as schools are now sending all their elementary classes at the same time and help is needed. During the busy weekends, we employ eight people.

#### **What is your business planning process?**

We treat this enterprise the same as the others on our farm. We finance it from the income of the previous year. It has to pay for itself. Steve's background in construction and as an agricultural loan officer helps in planning and costing out our activities. Dorothy's background as an elementary school teacher helps in the design, layout and development of educational materials for everyone from toddlers to seniors. We look at how can we add something new that will benefit the customer. This year we are looking into developing a handicap/wheelchair access to our hay wagon rides. This will permit the disabled customer to ride around the corn maze and other sites on the farm. This should attract the senior centers and other hospital rehabilitation facilities. We know we need to develop the business to attract the local population. There is not a huge population base so we need to design activities to fit the needs of many from young to old. Both of us are inclined to be very imaginative. We are always looking at how “what we see and hear can be adapted to work on our farm.”

#### **How did you acquire your information?**

We do a lot of research and reading. The Internet is a great tool. We joined the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association and have attended their trade shows since 1998. We listen to and meet people doing the same type of agritourism at conferences and trade shows. We discuss our ideas with the friends we have made across the country. We have also attended entertainment trade shows to look at ideas, talk to vendors and other entrepreneurs. We picked up the “Tunnel of Doom” idea at the Chicago Halloween Trade Show . Steve came home and designed and built it.

**How do you price your products?**

Pricing has been a real challenge. Do we charge a general admission or by the type of activity? First, we did not charge at all because we thought people would come—have fun and buy some pumpkins. That did not work. So, we charged \$1.00 per person admission. We charged by the activities they did. As our farm events grew, our admission increased to \$2.00 per person, and some activities became free. We have found people in ND feel that having fun on the farm should be free or cost very little. Yet, they think nothing of going to a pro football, baseball or Disney and spend hundreds of dollars. We are in the process of restructuring our pricing policy. Most of the industry is now charging a general admission because it minimizes confusion, labor needs and people trying to obtain entrance to activities without paying. We are planning to make this change this year.

**What are your marketing techniques?**

Marketing can be very expensive and we have taken the low cost route. Our unique attractions and family fun on the farm have attracted the television and newspaper media. Five television stations have visited our farm and all the major newspapers in ND have carried stories on our agritainment enterprise. We have done several 30-minute radio interviews within our state, Minnesota, and Canada. We put flyers in the local communities around us, we mail special information to the schools, and we take pictures of the school children and put them on our web site. We make extensive use of discount coupons that we distribute at fairs, festivals, and parades beginning as early as Memorial Day. We also send a discount coupon home with every school child and teacher. We support our local blood bank drive by providing free pumpkins to people who give blood. We also support a near-by university by providing a family with a pass to our farm when they are doing a fund drive. We have done some marketing with bus tour companies. Our web site has really helped market the Fall Family Fun on the Farm, but word of mouth has been the best.

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

We have not had any big problems. Steve built the golf course in 1999 and we could not determine why people were not using it as much as we expected. We found out people had not allowed sufficient time, but more importantly, they did not see it. So, we added signage and landscaped it with native flowers, bushes, and trellis vines. We also noted on our flyers to save time for golf! Activity picked up very fast after the landscape was completed.

Our pumpkins were not selling as well as we expected. By talking to our customers, we found out it was difficult for them to pick 2 or 3 pumpkins and carry them to the car. So, we built pumpkin carts for this purpose. We are also going to promote the pumpkins better through our flyers and the new Pumpkin House.

A real education problem exists among the residents in rural areas, cities and towns. They think all activity exists in town and the city! It is enjoyable for them to go to a farm for a picnic or to play miniature golf. We are now promoting this by being open on July 4th and throughout the summer to play golf. It is just going to take time to change how people think.

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

The haunted house has been a real leader for us. People come back every year to participate in the “new scary theme.” People are beginning to enjoy the education aspects of everything we do. The seniors are especially interested in the crops and livestock of ND and say, “I learned a few new things today.” Everybody has something to go home and talk about.

Our school education and fun program has really developed very nicely. Whole elementary schools are coming for the fun and education. We work with the teachers to help them prepare the children about what they will see and learn about at the farm. Some schools have been driving over 100 miles, which we consider a real success. We

also invite church groups, scouts, 4-H, FFA and other groups to the farm.

Our daughter, Jennie, has gained a tremendous amount of education from the agritainment enterprise. She has been totally responsible for the haunted house theme, decoration and operation. It has made her a very good manager.

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

We had to change our hours of operation. We have extended our season by one weekend. There is a need for natural resource diversity to attract customers. We are located on the prairie with only a shelterbelt around the farm. We should have added the natural resource side of our education program earlier. We are just developing it now.

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

We are going to build up the natural resources and develop a nature-based tourism enterprise. We are adding birdhouses, birdwatching, nature trails, signage, and working with conservation and wildlife groups. We are adding equipment to attract the disabled, and promote the sale of pumpkins on the farm. We are going to market to day care centers during the summer and develop educational programs for them. We are seriously looking into farm stays where people pay to help do the farm work. Of course the biggest challenge is developing, designing and building the new attractions. We are also looking into value-added products such as milling and selling our wheat as flour. This would have a very strong education component too.

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

We cover 13 points in our presentations at conferences. The most important are:

- One must be willing to give the time, yard, home, buildings and land base for the agritainment enterprise to develop the material and educate the public about agriculture.
- You need to be able to design, develop and build the activities for an agritainment enterprise to keep your cost down.

- You must be willing to meet the public and entertain them with a variety of activities for all ages.
- You need to create memories for your customers and educate them while they are having fun.
- You need to develop a set of peers that is in your business to discuss your experiences and challenges because you don't know how your business will operate until you open your doors. Each area of the country is different. Ours is being located in a sparsely populated area.
- Most people don't give themselves enough credit for their capabilities. Thus, people are afraid to try and fear failure. Start small and let the business evolve. "Dream it and do it!"
- It takes about 5 years to build your business so be ready for the long haul. Don't give up your other job.
- In our location, we now have about 5,000 + customers a year. We need to work harder to get customers than someone in a densely populated area. You can do it by being innovative.

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

North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association had a very good program that we participated in but it has ended. Now, Steve needs to look for a new vendor. We generally carry a one million-dollar umbrella policy.

### **Do you mind sharing your promotional material?**

Our major materials are business cards, flyers, discount coupons and the web site.

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

Dorothy dislikes the constant pressure to be looking for new entertainment ideas and activities along with being tied to the farm when community activities are happening. Steve dislikes that some people are never satisfied because the more you do the more they expect. Dorothy enjoys meeting people and learning about their professions. Steve

enjoys the challenge of designing and building new attractions. They both like seeing children, parents and seniors having fun and learning about agricultural, sharing with others, and reading the “thank you for the great time” notes. The greatest joy is touching someone’s life forever, such as the ten-year-old Tennessee girl that visited the farm in 2001 but died six months later from leukemia. One of her last wishes was to have her uncle in ND come and tell us about all the fun she had on our farm!

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

Yes. The time required to manage an agritourism business along with a farm has resulted in some very long hours. Farmers and others in agriculture need to spend more time educating the public about how their food is produced. People are eager to learn about this, especially if they can learn it while they are having fun.

**What groups/organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of the alternative enterprises?**

We joined the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association. We are becoming involved in conservation groups, wildlife associations and organizations to grow our nature-based tourism business.

**What conservation and education activities do you have?**

We are just beginning the conservation aspects of our agritainment business. We want to share the importance of caring for our land. If we take care of our land, the land will take care of us. We strive to preserve the soil and nature in all our farming practices. Education, by having fun on the farm, is really our agritainment/ agrieducation enterprise. Dorothy’s experience as an elementary teacher has resulted in the development of our education part of the business. We have an outdoor classroom to enhance indoor learning. This technique is applied in designing our corn mazes and other activities. All nine activities we have today have the education component. Since we are a family farm, the education focuses on food, agriculture, farm family lifestyle, health and the natural resources environment.

**What did your customers like the most about your product(s) or enterprise(s)?**

Customers have thanked us for the cleanliness of our farm, wholesome entertainment for the whole family, and the variety of activities for all ages to enjoy.

**Would it be ok for people to contact you?**

Yes.

**Do you want additional information?** For more success stories and other information, see <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ress/>.

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