

Conservation Showcase

Sustaining traditions, values and resources: Family farm produces more than just organic dairy products

Their roots run deep. So too does their commitment to God, family, community and the land. Their heritage is steeped in a set of core values dating back to when their rugged ancestors first settled the area called Trout Lake in the late 1800s.

Since that time, subsequent generations have built their homes, farmed the land, and raised their families. Technology has transformed the world, but the values of their late relatives continue to bind their rich traditions to their hopes and aspirations for the future.

To this day, those original principles permeate every aspect of Robert and Lesli Schmid's lives. Direct descendants of the first European settlers of the Trout Lake area, Robert and Lesli, along with their two sons and daughter, own and operate Mountain Meadows Dairy.

But they don't just produce organic milk. They produce good citizens.

"Do right by people' is what we teach our kids," Robert says. "We believe it's important to

give back to the community – and to be good stewards of the land."

Robert and Lesli don't just teach, they lead – by example.

Robert is a community council member. He coached track at the high school and built the school's soccer field. He and Lesli purchased a snowmobile with a snow groomer to provide a cross country ski trail from the school through their property so they could share their love of the outdoors with their neighbors.



The Schmid family (from left, Peter, Leslie, Robert, Anna and Aaron) of Trout Lake, Washington, own and operate Mountain Meadows Dairy where they produce organic milk.

“ It’s important for us
to protect good farm land... ”

-Robert Schmid, landowner



“We’ve had nearly 200 skiers on the track during one weekend,” Robert says beaming.

The Schmid’s do all of this, and more, while operating a physically demanding, 365 day-a-year dairy business.

Not surprisingly, the Schmid children have learned from their parents’ examples and have embraced their values.

will double as an ice skating pond in the winter.

They are a busy, community-oriented family.

Many of the Schmid’s good citizen traditions came from the rugged European relatives who first settled the Trout Lake area. But the Schmid’s are, themselves, pioneers.

Several years after taking over the farm from his father, Leon, Robert and Lesli were approached by Organic Valley with the proposition of converting from conventional milk production to organic production.

“Monte Pearson – Lesli’s uncle – and I met with some representatives from the company down at a pizza place in Hood River and listened to them. We bought into their system because we were already doing much of what they were proposing any way,” Robert says. “They just seemed like real good, down-to-Earth people, so we started transitioning [to organic production].”

But like many pioneering endeavors, the road to success was fraught with challenges.

“When we first got started, it was really hard to source organic feed,” he says. “We were getting our hay from Utah and most of our grain from Montana. At the time, the grain was mostly junk,” Robert says, “because it was coming from farmers who couldn’t afford commercial fertilizers and herbicides.”



Robert holds a framed photograph of his great-grandfather with his pet black bear.

Son Aaron built the family museum that houses a collection of family photos, artifacts and recollections from the first settlers to the present day family. All of the family members pitched in to organize and assemble the museum’s collections. Robert’s mother, Esther, penned the historical narratives that adorn the wooden walls of the two-story museum. Daughter Anna conducts workshops for young soccer players. Son Peter will be constructing a wildlife habitat pond this summer, which

Over time, the feed sources improved. “As more organic dairies came on board, Columbia Basin farmers had an incentive to start producing organic grains and hay and the quality really improved,” he says.

Until the recent recession, the demand for organic milk products was growing at a rate of 20 percent per year. The resulting premium prices provided the income for the Schmid family to acquire and protect other farms that might have otherwise been sold for development.

“It’s important for us to protect good farm land,” Robert says, “because once that land is gone, you can’t bring it back. We want to protect the character of the valley.”

While some see protecting wetlands as an equal threat to agricultural land as development, Robert believes wetlands and agriculture can peacefully coexist.

“We have wetlands along the White Salmon River that we want to keep intact – they make a great buffer along the field,” Robert says. “In fact, we’re going to plant some of these areas strictly for wildlife habitat because those are some of our nicest areas to just enjoy,” he says.

Protecting the natural resources on that land pose their own unique set of challenges. Because of the farm’s topography, Robert had been flood irrigating his pasture and hay land. He knew it was a less efficient method than sprinkler irrigation, but between the cost of

center pivot equipment and the operational challenges due to the land’s topography, he didn’t think it was possible.

He had worked with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) several years before when he installed an



Holstein cattle graze in a pasture near Mountain Meadows Dairy in Trout Lake, Washington.

animal waste facility, so he contacted them again to see what help they could offer with this particular resource concern.

Soon afterwards, NRCS Resource Conservationist Sergio Paredes and Conservation Agronomist Kevin Davis came to the farm to walk the land and to talk with the Schmid family about their objectives. Together they worked with the family to develop a conservation plan that outlined the resource issues, potential solutions and a timeline for implementation. Through NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Schmid family applied for and received financial and technical assistance to install key conservation practices, including a gravity-fed, pressurized system and several center pivots.

“Sprinkler irrigation is significantly more efficient than flood irrigation,” NRCS’

Paredes says. “By installing these pivots,” he says, “the Schmidts have reduced energy costs, time and labor, soil erosion, and have improved their irrigation efficiency from 30 percent to 95 percent.”

“Working with the NRCS has been a great partnership. All along the way they’ve provided a lot of good advice and feedback,” Robert says. “They have the knowledge and tools to help us in areas where we might not otherwise have the expertise.”

Thanks to the recent irrigation improvements and others, key natural resources will now be protected for generations to come. Fortunately, that next generation is right around the corner.

Peter and Aaron are nearing graduation from Cedarville University in Ohio. Both will graduate with business degrees – one majoring in management, the other majoring in finance – and plan to come back to the farm to carry on the Schmid farming tradition.

“They love farming and want to do it,” Robert says, adding, “Being able to work around the kids has been one of the most rewarding aspects of this business,” he says.

It was that family and community connection that brought Robert back to the farm after he went off to college to become an English teacher.

“Growing up on the farm, working so hard

for so many years, I thought I’d had my fill of farming. But then I got to college and got so homesick. I came home in the spring and started plowing and that was pretty much the end of that,” Robert says. “I knew for sure that I wanted to be a farmer.”

The roots run deep. Thanks to the Schmid family – those roots are alive and well and still growing.



By utilizing sprinkler irrigation in their pastures, the Schmid family is able to increase water use efficiency and protect the White Salmon River from irrigation-induced sediment.

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-Sergio Paredes,
NRCS Resource Conservationist