

A Man of Vision



It was the middle of planting season in the High Plains region of Texas, and farmers were preparing their fields for the coming crops. One such man not only had a passion for farming, but also for birds. If he happened to come across a bird's nest in the middle of the field, he would raise the planter and skip over the nest to preserve it.

This particular year, when he came across a pheasant nest, he did what he always did and lifted the planter over the nest. It was no different from before, or so he thought. Later that day, the farmer told his son, Jimmy, about the nest he found. Jimmy took his own kids out to see the pheasant nest only to discover the mother bird was dead.

At the time, Jimmy Wedel and his father were conventional farmers, planting in-ground chemicals carried on corn cobs. When the farmer lifted the planter, cobs fell onto the ground around the nest. The mother pheasant ate the cobs, which is what led to her death.

"Instead of doing something that he thought was good for the environment - trying to save the bird nest - my father actually killed the mother bird," Wedel commented. "I began to think, maybe there are things we can do differently."

Wedel had been raised on a farm and had been farming for several years, but was struggling to keep the business going. After he found the dead pheasant, ideas to change his business were becoming more prominent.

"We were not making any money growing cotton," Wedel stated. "I was kind of tired of spinning my wheels and not getting anywhere."

An opportunity to begin growing organic cotton and sell for a higher price presented itself, so Wedel said he decided to give it a try and see what happened. He said he consulted his father for advice, because his father was much older and had farmed before chemicals became common place.

"I was able to ask him and quiz him, 'Can we do this without herbicides?'" Wedel said.

Wedel was raised during a time when using yellow herbicides was the norm and it was very rare to find an organic farm. Many farmers, Wedel included, believed cotton could not be farmed without herbicides. Wedel was only filled with reassurance from his father that it could be done with a little tough work.

For the past 20 years, Wedel has made his mark on the organic cotton industry as a founding member

of the Texas Organic Cotton Marketing Cooperative and is serving as the current president. With help from others, Wedel has developed the market to the point where every cotton bale he produced was sold on the organic market.

"It took about 10 years for that market to really develop," Wedel said.

The sales market includes companies such as Anvil, which sources to companies like Disney, and many other smaller organizations. There are also clients that stretch beyond the boundaries of the United States. The cotton produced is sold to international clients, in countries such as Japan and Sweden.

Wedel has many contracts throughout the organic cotton industry, but they are not the normal business contracts people use today. He has no written contracts, they are all verbal agreements.

"So much of what we do is on a relationship basis. You have a personal relationship with people you are dealing with," Wedel said. "It's like the old way of doing business."

As with any agricultural industry, hard times call for perseverance and sharp attention to detail. Wedel has an analytical personality that allows him to see what things need to be done and how they need to be done in order to be successful in his current project, harvest, or anything else that comes along.

Susan Wedel, Jimmy's wife, described him as a persevering, hard-working man.

"He likes things done right and that is probably what has helped him with organic, because he's not quite a perfectionist," Susan said, "but he knows how he wants things done, so he strives to get it right."

Carl Pepper, a friend of Jimmy's and fellow organic farmer, said he has witnessed Jimmy's analytical mind and seen how effective his planning is.

"He is an artist at management, and I have learned things from him over the years," Pepper said. "He is a really solid sounding board."

Today, Jimmy is active in other organizations in addition to the Texas Organic Cotton Marketing Cooperative, and in governmental practices. He uses these experiences to share his vision of organic farming. Jimmy has gained many close relationships

over the years and credits most of those to the verbal contracts he has with those involved in organic cotton. He said he has no regrets, nor would he change anything he has done throughout his journey.

"I am not out to convert people to organic production, and chemicals are made to be environmentally safe," Jimmy said, "but if my father had been farming organic when he raised the planter over the pheasant's nest, the mother bird might have lived. By farming organic, I eliminate

the potential of chemicals harming the environment."

Kendra Holloway

Bowie, Texas



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