

Smith brothers epitomize “Homegrown Success...” Grand Marshals for fair parade

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

Stan, Gene and Les Smith are a classic example of what the Chase County Fair parade committee was thinking of when they chose “Homegrown Success” as the parade theme for this summer. The brothers have “lived and succeeded in Chase County from start to finish,” according to parade chair Jana Pribbeno.

The brothers will be the Grand Marshals of the parade in August, doing it as they usually do things—together.

At a recent get-together at Les’ house, the three finished each other’s sentences, reminded each other of stories, agreed upon important dates, poured over old pictures and shed some tears.

The Smith brothers epitomize “homegrown success.” Except for brief stints at college, and in Gene’s (Geno) case, a tour in Korea, they were born in Chase County, farmed successfully together and then each took on successful jobs when the farm was sold.

It all began when two Grant natives, parents Les and Gladys, married on June 28, 1927.

The couple leased a school section 23 miles northwest of Imperial. That is still known among the boys as the home place. Eventually the Smiths purchased a section nearer to Lamar, which became the headquarters for L.E. Smith & Sons Inc.

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The brothers remember the little house in which they grew up while attending District 673 School on the corner of their section. The school was also known as Little Dale.

The school teachers used to board with the Smiths. In a house less than the size of Les' present kitchen, the family of five and the teacher, who slept on the couch, lived together. A hired man lived in an adjacent shack.

As the sons grew up, they also joined the farming operation. At first they mainly grew wheat and summer fallow.

At age 18 Stan, now 83, began farming with the help of a hired man. He spent one year at what is now Colorado State University in Fort Collins. “I went to learn how to be a farmer,” he said. “They didn't teach me a damn thing so I came home to farm.”

In the meantime, Geno, 80, was in the U.S. Air Force from 1952-56, and served in the Korean War in 1954. Then he came home, too.

Les, 73, although a bit younger than his two brothers, was also close to them.

When they were growing up, the brothers agreed that they mainly worked. There wasn't much else to do.

They listened to the news on the radio, and enjoyed listening to fights, too, Stan remembered. As a matter of fact, Geno was named for Gene Tunney, a famous boxer.

“Stan and I got into a lot of trouble,” Geno laughed. They used to run over to a farm owned by the Burnsides, who had sons the same ages as the Smiths.

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They also rode a neighbor's horses, as their father didn't own horses. "That's what tractors were for," Geno explained.

Les said there weren't any lakes to play at, but there were dances in Hayes Center, Wauneta and Benkleman.

The three brothers farmed together in harmony. Les said they had a 30 minute ride to town in the morning and that's when they had their "meetings."

Stan choked up when he said he had something to say. "What's so great is that the three of us got along so well together, and we still do."

Geno chimed in jokingly, "In between arguments! We were smart enough to bite our tongues and go on."

The brothers bought out their father and formed GLS Inc. In 1964 irrigation arrived in Chase County and the Smiths sank their first well.

Shortly, they were farming corn, sugar beets, beans and wheat and had 12 hired men.

Sugar beets were king for them, though. They needed those 12 hired men. "We had to work the ground 10 times," discing, planing, planting, ditching and flood irrigating, Stan pointed out.

He showed a brochure the brothers had published, with 11 of their own pickup trucks parked in front of one of their buildings.

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The first year the brothers agreed to farm 80 acres of sugar beets, as they were new to the process. That grew to 2,000 acres over time.

The Smiths built an elevator on the state line where the Scoular elevators now stand.

GLS Inc. farmed 5,000 acres, 4,000 of their own, 1,000 rented out to others and 1,000 they rented from others.

As their sugar beet crop grew, so did their equipment. They used three loaders and 12 trucks to pick the beets. “Do it fast,” Les observed.

Geno said he wasn’t 100 percent sure, but he thinks they were “the largest sugar beet growers in the world at one time.”

Stan observed that they were Great Western’s largest growers and Great Western was the largest sugar beet company. “We always won something at the annual GW meeting,” he added.

“We did a lot in agriculture that was brand new,” Geno noted. “We built a lot of our own equipment. We didn’t buy it. We had to keep the hired men busy in the winter!”

One of the brothers added that they built their own land levelers for themselves and others. Geno remembers meeting with the future owner of Orthman’s and drawing plans for a machine on the shop floor.

In 1981 the Smiths sold the farm and all of the equipment. Immediately after that, farm prices dropped drastically. Geno said the value of the farm now has reached what was paid for all of the land and equipment in 1981.

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Stan purchased the building where Imperial Auto Renewal now operates. He restored cars. “I didn’t make any money at it but it kept me busy.”

Geno purchased Midwest Tire in 1982, renamed it Cannon Tire, and sold it in 2005. He was also and still is a crop adjuster for Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska.

Les established LES Realty in 1982, which included Grant and Kimball offices. He sold the Imperial office to Bob Colson in 2005 and retired.

While farming and owning businesses, the Smith brothers were also very involved in civic activities.

Stan was the president of the Chase/Dundy County Wheat Growers, spent 18 years on the Frenchman Valley Coop board, five or so years on the Imperial Public Power board, served on the school board and was a Lions Club member.

Les was very active in the Masonic Lodge on both the local and state levels, serving also as Grand Patron for Eastern Star. He was on the school board for six years and was also Rotary Club president.

Geno served on the sugar beet board for years and was a state director representing Sterling, Colo.

Each brother was asked the same question when they got together this week. “What’s good about living in Chase County?”

Stan replied that it’s the only place he’s ever lived.

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Les pointed to the friendly people and positive attitudes. He attended school in Lincoln, Fort Collins and McCook for one year each, planning to become a math teacher.

“My brothers came out to Denver (where he was living,) said they were going to start irrigating and did they want me to have them buy me out or come home to farm? I came home.”

Geno weighed in. “Why would anyone ever want to leave? It’s paradise. This is where I want to be.”

Stan and Shirley and Les and Sue live within blocks of each other. Geno lives up the street from Stan. His wife, Nelba, is deceased.

How do they feel about being picked as Grand Marshals of the Chase County Fair Parade?

The response was identical. “It’s a great honor,” both Stan and Geno agreed, while Les said, “It’s an honor given to very few.” They all had tears in their eyes.

They take after their mother that way, they said.