

Johnston County Farm-City Week 2022

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The Johnston County Board of Commissioners declared November 18-24th as Farm-City Week in Johnston County. Farm-City Week is part of a nationwide celebration of the partnership of farmers, agribusinesses, processors, truckers, wholesale operations, and retail that it takes to feed the American people. All of the parts of the food chain are important and viable in Johnston County.

NC Cooperative Extension and the staff at the Johnston County Extension Center provided leadership for this celebration along with the support of the County Commissioners, the Farm-City Week Committee and many other sponsors and volunteers. Local agribusinesses, financial institutions, and grower organizations supported the weeklong celebration. The Johnston County Youth Livestock Festival took place on Friday evening November 18 with approximately 500 people in attendance. Proceeds from this fundraiser go to support and fund the Johnston County Youth Livestock Show and Sale. Approximately 120 youth each year raise and exhibit market animals through this program. The Farm-City Week celebration again culminated with a banquet on Monday, November 21st at the Johnston County Agricultural Center with approximately 200 people in attendance. Dr. A Blake Brown, Extension Economist and Hugh C. Kiger professor from NC State University was the keynote speaker addressing the current agricultural economy and the market influences on shipping and commodities for the coming growing season. Johnston County 4-H also partnered with the Farm-City Week Committee to conduct a food drive. This year the food drive resulted in over 1,300 lbs. of food donated to local schools for children and families that have limited resources. Food donations this year were delivered to West Smithfield Elementary and Wilsons Mills Elementary schools.

The highlight of Farm-City Week and the banquet is always the special recognition of an outstanding farm family and an outstanding agribusiness. While the award does not have an official title it is viewed by many as the highest recognition that a farmer or agribusiness can receive in Johnston County. The award recognizes lifetime achievement, community service, success in farming or business, and the respect of the countywide community of the people and organizations involved.

This year, the Charles T. Wiggs Family and Wiggs Brothers Farming, Inc. were recognized as the outstanding farm family and Paul Dunn and Mule City Specialty Feeds, Inc. was recognized as the outstanding agribusiness.

Wiggs Brothers Farming, Inc.



Front row (l-r):Brittany Narron, Anna Wiggs, Dawn Wiggs, Becky Wiggs, and Bridgette Justice. Back row (l-r):Zachery Narron, Victor Zarate, Charles Wiggs, Bobby Dale Wiggs, Julio Martinez, Shannon Sellers, Jonathon Justice. Contributed Photo

The oldest son of 9 children, Charles Wiggs was born to James and Elizabeth Wiggs in Johnston County in 1945. The Wiggs family were tenant farmers, and moved several times throughout Charles' childhood to find available farms to rent. Hard work and struggle were a part of the daily life of the entire Wiggs family, but so was love and dedication to one other. To help the family financially, Charles began working at the cotton mill in Selma. However, he was soon drafted in the Army to fight in Vietnam.

While in Vietnam, Mr. Wiggs served in the 196th Infantry Brigade. He would complete search and destroy missions, going out for 25-30 days at a time before being picked up by a helicopter to return to base camp. The sentiment around soldiers who had fought in Vietnam and were returning home was not very good at the time; many were told to just forget about what they had experienced overseas, which proved to be a difficult thing for many to overcome. Charles recalls returning home from Vietnam on a Saturday and beginning to work at the A&P Grocery Store

Warehouse in Raleigh on Monday – he did not have time to feel sorry himself, and the need to work was a blessing in disguise.

Having grown up as tenant farmers, Mr. Wiggs had no intention of farming full time, and he had his sights set on either returning to the Army or continuing to work at the warehouse. However, his dedication to his parents gave him the ambition to purchase a farm for his parents to call their own. For a year, he worked on the leased farm his family was tending during the day and worked at the warehouse at night. Mr. Wiggs was able to help make this dream a reality when he purchased a 20-acre farm with a 3-acre tobacco allotment, that was the anchor of the farm. He purchased the farm from a generous lady, Mrs. Willie Rose, who allowed him to make the farm payments every fall as he got paid. Unfortunately, Charles' father was unable to enjoy the fruits of his labor for very long as he passed away the following year.

With 5 brothers and sisters still at home and in school, the family depended upon Charles to step up and lead the farm. Despite growing up helping on the farm, his first-year curing tobacco in a stick barn was a nightmare. Mr. Wiggs leaned on experienced farmers in the area, such as Mr. Willie Glenn Jones, for advice on how to cure tobacco. After working all day, Willie Glenn would sit outside until midnight instilling the principles of growing and curing tobacco. Although technology has come a long way since those evenings, the advice Charles was given are still the guiding principles he uses today. By the grace of God and those willing to come alongside Charles with guidance, he was able to be successful growing and curing tobacco. He also picked up habits based on experience, such as putting plastic down over sheets of tobacco before it was taken to market to keep the tobacco from flying out and maintain moisture.

In 1972, Charles quit working at A&P so he could farm full-time. It was an adjustment learning to live getting paid only once a year, if then. Throughout the years, Charles was able to continue purchasing farms and had some wonderful landlords who knew he was trustworthy and would be a good steward to the land. According to Charles, nobody is successful on their own, and two of his brothers returned to the farm to work alongside Charles to ensure the Wiggs family's success. Brother Buck, a gentle giant, returned in 1988, and brother Bobby Gene came back in 1989. Together, the three Wiggs brothers expanded and diversified the farm to grow soybeans and wheat in addition to tobacco. Bobby Gene's son, Bobby Dale, joined the farm upon graduation from high school in 1991 and has learned everything about the farm, and is an integral part of the operation to this day.

The Wiggs family and farm operation grew again in 1996 when a group of young men came up from Mexico looking for work. Julio, Victor, Noé, Luis, Salomar, and Jorge joined the farm and have worked alongside Charles ever since. In the years since they came to the United States, these men have bought homes, had families of their own, and sent children to college. In fact, Julio's youngest child is named Carlos Tomás, the Spanish version of Charles Thomas, in honor of Charles Wiggs. They are some of the smartest people Charles has ever met, and he could not be prouder of them than if they were his own children.

As the Wiggs brothers expanded, friends and businesses offered their valued guidance and support, including First Citizens Bank and AgCarolina Farm Credit. Mr. Charles also developed a good business relationship with Mr. Frank Holding, which has carried over with his daughter,

Olivia. Wiggs Brothers Farms also contracted with RJ Reynolds Tobacco in 2000, which is one of the best things they ever did as tobacco farmers. About 8 years ago, the Wiggs brothers were asked to do research for Reynolds. This has provided a hands-on education to be able to see how a seed is bred over the years. For Charles, it's also a way to give back and improve quality for all growers.

The last few years have been a time of mourning and transition, as brother Buck lost a battle to pancreatic cancer in 2015 and brother Bobby Gene has had to step back from daily operations due to health complications. Despite not physically being on the farm each day, the presence of Buck and Bobby Gene is felt through all they accomplished and implemented during their time. Bobby Gene's grandson Zachary has joined the farm and nephew Bobby Dale has grown into Charles' right-hand man over the last few years to continue tending about 2,500 acres of crops.

According to Mr. Charles, a person shouldn't worry about what others are doing, only worry about you can do and what God can see you do. While he lives by this motto, others notice the way his farm is run, and in 2017 he was recognized as the top contributor for RJ Reynolds Tobacco.

While he enjoys his work and spending time on the farm, Mr. Charles is also an avid Duke basketball fan, and in his younger years he would spend Sunday afternoons playing basketball with neighbors and friends.

Although he now considers himself to be in the fourth quarter of his life, he hopes to continue into triple overtime. Mr. Charles is still a very hands-on contributor to the farm, and one of his favorite things to be doing on his birthday each July 3rd is topping and suckering tobacco. What started as a nightmare growing and curing tobacco has evolved into a fine-tuned recipe over the years. Mr. Charles often quotes late NC State basketball coach Jim Valvano: "Put yourself in a position to win." Each field is measured and tracked, the number of bags of fertilizer calculated, and there are no automatic controls on the barns; he climbs up on top of the barn so he can feel inside the front box. Each winter every piece of equipment goes through their shop where it is gone over with a fine-tooth comb to ensure it will run properly the following season. According to Mr. Charles, he puts everything he can in a crop and then puts it in the Lord's hands.

According to Mr. Charles, it's not where you came from, it's what you have inside of you. While he and his brothers may have come from a humble beginning in life, they were raised with love, work ethic, and how to be good stewards of the land. Having those qualities and more inside of them enabled Wiggs Brothers Farm to be the successful and lasting operation it is today.

Mule City Specialty Feeds, Inc.



Front row (l-r) Loni Jones, Paul Dunn, Cynthia Dunn, Caroline Hockaday, and Westin Hockaday. On the Back row (l-r) Curtis Jones, Shana Avery, Chris Avery, Randy Young, and Lisa Young. Contributed Photo

Mule City Specialty Feeds is a foremost agribusiness and family of Johnston County whose innovation and commitment to excellence is remarkable. Beginning in 1956 as Wayne Station under the co-ownership of Alton Massengill and Robie Dunn, they sold gas, groceries, and feed.

The next year they were able to secure resources for their first mobile feed mill and used two-way radios to dispatch what feeds were needed. It is believed that they were the first non-emergency users of two-way radios in the county. The utilization of the mobile feed mills allowed them to mix custom feeds with the farmer's grains right on the farm. Within the next year, the business moved from South Wall Street in Benson to North Wall Street, where the operation exists today.

About 10 years after beginning operations, Robie Dunn bought out his business partner's half of Wayne Station and purchased a second mobile feed mill on credit. By 1976, they were operating four mobile feed mills and at maximum produced about 77 tons of feed per day. Around this

time, the vertical integration of the swine industry began to change the amount of commercial feed that was needed in the area. Before this change, they were producing about 80% swine feed and by 1985 the production of swine feed was reduced to approximately 1 ton per day, representing less than 3% of the business.

Bulk feed delivery was a notable addition to their service starting in 1980 when they acquired a stationary batchmaker for cattle and horse feed. Paul Dunn began working with his father, Robie, at the age of 11. Paul's passion for the business led him to his studies at NC State University. 1981 was a notable year for Paul as he graduated from NC State with an animal science degree, in the same year, the "Mule City" brand was born. Paul recounts that the term "Mule City" was considered a slang term in those days, especially by way of CB radio. In his visionary way, Paul enjoyed the opportunity to re-define the term "Mule-City" into the customer-service centric business that we know today. Mule City's viability is also attributed to Paul's willingness to innovate and think outside the box. By 1984, they were the first small business in the Benson area to completely computerize their records. Paul's research and work on the creation of this software has allowed him to continue using this same program today.

The name of the business was officially changed to Mule City Specialty Feeds, Inc. in 1991. This was attributed to the fact that customers were not finding Mule City Horse Feed in the phonebook. Paul purchased and officially assumed ownership of Mule City Specialty Feeds in 1995. He continued to propel his thoughts towards trying new things with the business. By 2000, he added feeds for crickets and fishing worms to his repertoire.

Not too long after, he began processing soybeans into meal and oil by way of a mechanical extruder and press. The demand for non-gmo grain surfaced around 2017 for pasture-raised pork and Paul again adjusted to process this type of feed. In 2022, they started extruding non-gmo corn and barley for high quality meat handlers.

Between Paul and his father, Robie, they have collectively provided leadership to their business for 68 years. The current customer portfolio includes 800 named customers that span across 40 North Carolina counties and 6 states.

Paul and his staff welcome visitors to Mule City through guided educational tours, averaging about 15 tours per year. Uniquely, Paul serves as what you may consider an animal pharmacist. When horses are administered allergy tests by their veterinarians, he will take the prescribed nutrition recommendations, and create a specific feed mix for the animal. Mule City works to produce about 38 tons of feed per day and although a large private mill may be producing more than 38 tons per hour, the Mule City team focuses on the specializations and tailoring of feeds for various customers. Their current production is made up of 40% for horses, 30% for cattle, 15% for swine, and 15% for poultry and other. Paul has pointed out that he makes more chicken feed now than when his father did, which is indicative of the increasing demand from backyard chicken flocks. Not only has Paul made feed mixes for animals, but he has also made growth media for fungi. When the Carolina Mushroom Farm in Willow Spring went into production, they worked with Mule City to acquire the growth media. Paul helped make a soybean hull and sawdust mixture for the operation. Mule City's commitment to customization is unmatched.

Additionally, Paul is no stranger to civic leadership and responsibilities. He provides tremendous support to local educational institutions such as Benson Elementary, Benson Middle, South Johnston High School, NC State University, and the University of Mount Olive. The South Johnston FFA Alumni group offers Paul the ability to continue to be an active agricultural advocate and proponent for youth leadership. In fact, if you see a 4-H show pig in North Carolina, it was likely fed Mule City feed.

In addition, Paul frequently supports many youth that show livestock in the JC Youth Livestock Show and Sale. He was also recognized by this group with the Johnston County Agricultural Hall of Fame in 2011.

Paul is a member and past president of several organizations such as the Benson Chamber of Commerce, the Benson Kiwanis Club, and the Johnston Amateur Radio Society. It is often seen that the truck that delivers animal feeds across our state, is the same truck delivering food pantry donations from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC. He is also an active member of Benson United Methodist Church.

Paul's affinity for the Benson community and the annual Mule Days festivities is notable. He received the citizen of the year award in 2002. He even served as the Grand Marshal of the Mule Days Parade in 2009 and had the Mule Days Book dedicated to him in 2013. The business has been twice recognized as the Benson Chamber Small Business of the Year in 1992 and 2016. He is proud to serve on the Mule Days Committee each year to ensure that the history and significance of the festivities hold true.

Paul attributes the success of Mule City Specialty Feeds to the foundation of his supportive family and experienced staff. Paul and his wife, Cynthia, have one daughter named Caroline Hockaday. Cynthia's brother, Robert Hood, has worked at Mule City for 31 years. Loni and Curtis Jones have worked at Mule City for a collective 22 years as office manager and truck driver, respectfully. Chris Avery runs the granary and has a tenure of 27 years. 43 years of milling have been carried out by Randy Young. There is no shortage of experience and expertise at Mule City. You can find the same incredible service today that you found at the business' inception. The cash register from 1956 still sits on the counter today and behind it you will find the long-standing promise of excellent customer-service and a community-focused operation.