



TIMES STAFF PHOTO/ROBIN EARL

Ken Smith, owner of Cool Lawn Farm in Remington, was honored with the Kitty P. Smith Conservation Award by Citizens of Fauquier County.

Dairy farmer Ken Smith sees himself as a caretaker

His family, his employees,
his cows, the land:
'They are my responsibility'

By Robin Earl
TIMES STAFF WRITER

During an interview and photo op last week, Ken Smith of Cool Lawn Farm in Remington answered a half dozen phone calls, sorted out an unexpected delivery, directed employees and gave a young Holstein a little extra attention. He did it all with the calm, understated competence that comes with a lifetime of experience.

Because Smith was monitoring the grinding of corn during the "photo shoot," he could only spare a few minutes to get his picture taken. The farm needs to grind 30,000 bushels of corn to feed the operation's 2,000 dairy cows over the winter.

It wasn't that Smith was distracted. His answers were thoughtful; his attention was complete, until he needed to turn away to the next task; then his focus was all in on that task.

Smith's son Ben Smith said it was pretty typical of his dad. "Yes, that's a good description of how he is. It's a useful skill." It's one that Smith must have honed over 48 years as a dairy farmer in southern Fauquier County.

Every day is different, he said. With 18 employees and 950 acres to oversee, it's more than a fulltime job, and he wouldn't have it any other way. "I have an attachment to the animals, an attachment to the sunrise and the sunset. If you have that, you don't ever have a bad day.

"Sometimes I get tired," the 70-year-old admitted, "but the next day I'm just happy to be taking it on again."

Smith doesn't see himself as an employer or a

The Kitty Smith Conservation Award

Citizens for Fauquier County's Kitty P. Smith Conservation Award was created in 2015 to honor conservation efforts exemplified by Kitty Smith, who earned a doctorate in agricultural science and was chosen by the CFFC for devoting "her entire subsequent life to the preservation of her rural Fauquier heritage."

Smith worked for the Piedmont Environmental Council, was the chair of the CFFC's Land Use Committee, and was an "effective opponent of the kind of exurban sprawl that has engulfed much of Loudoun and Prince William counties," the CFFC has said.

The award comes with \$1,000, which the recipient can give to a local charity.

Founded in 1968, CFFC is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to local land conservation efforts.

Winners of the Kitty P. Smith Conservation Award

2015: Dr. Kitty P. Smith
2016: George Thompson
2017: Jocelyn Sladen
2018: Georgia Herbert
2019: Robert Lee
2019: Hope Porter
2021: Ken Smith

boss; in his mind, he's a caretaker. He takes care of his family, his workers, his animals and his land. "They depend on me to keep things going," he said simply.

Day to day on the farm

"There's so much going on here," said Smith, "but I have to take care of my people first." Smith's herdsman has been with him for 20 years, since he was 17 years old. The staffer who looks

after the calves has been at Cool Lawn Farm for 15 years. The manure system manager has been doing that job for 10 years and has two cousins that work at Cool Lawn Farm as well.

Smith considers all Cool Lawn Farm employees his family.

Of Smith's five children -- Ben Smith, Taylor Gough, Amy Smith, Jody Harris and Samantha Smith -- and six grandchildren, his son Ben Smith and son-in-law Kyle Gough work with him on the dairy farm. His daughter Taylor Gough is the production manager at Moo Thru, an agribusiness that uses milk from the Cool Lawn Farm dairy to make ice cream.

The original Moo Thru, a popular stop for locals and for those driving south on U.S. 29 past Remington, has been joined by four franchise ice cream shops -- in Charlottesville, Lake Anna, Hillsboro and the newest in Winchester. All locations serve ice cream made at Cool Lawn Farm in a building renovated for the purpose.

Taylor Gough, 27, said that the ice cream operation started out in the Moo Thru shop, but it soon outgrew the space. She manages four employees -- including her mother-in-law -- who create the frozen confections.

"I oversee the production and create the recipes," Gough said.

Her father said with more than a little pride, "We have to throw out any ice cream batches that don't meet Taylor's high standards."

Ben Smith said, with a smile, that his only responsibility for Moo Thru is as an occasional ice cream taster. He said his role on the farm is "a little bit of everything." He currently manages 850 acres of "cash crops," in addition to his work on the dairy farm.

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Dairy farmer Ken Smith sees himself as a caretaker

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Challenges of dairy farming

Cool Lawn Farm is the largest dairy farm of the 11 currently operating in Fauquier County; in 1970, there were 127 dairy farms here.

“Sometimes, it’s just another day in Hollywood,” Smith smiled, but “whether it’s sunny or raining, I still have the same things to do.” At the same time, no two days are the same because each day presents unique challenges.

For instance, when a crowd gate guiding the cows wasn’t functioning correctly, “it wouldn’t stop moving,” and threatened to hurt the animals, he said.

The back window shattered on a brand-new tractor.

And, Smith said, “When the air compressor doesn’t work, you can’t milk without it. And when there’s a problem with the well? Everything stops if the water’s not pumping. We have so many animals drinking.”

There are a thousand problems, big and small that have to be dealt with, but Smith admitted that “the only down time I have is when I lose an animal. If she slips and falls, maybe I didn’t make sure the footing was safe; if she gets sick, maybe I didn’t give her the proper nutrition. It’s my responsibility.”

Smith said, “Every single cow has a different personality,” Smith said. To keep track of all 2,000 cows, they have to be numbered because “computers don’t do well with names.” But there are some that stand out. “It’s always been the same. There are some that come right up to you. Those are the ones I just love.”

He talks fondly of No. 5320, Silver Daughter, and – like with many of his cows – he can recall her lineage going back five generations. “Her mother was one of the top 10,000 cows in the country. She’s in the top 5,000.”

Smith said he’s always focused on the intricacies of breeding. “That’s what’s made me more successful than most dairymen.” He said demand is high for his breeding stock.

Ben Smith said that the dairy operation is 95% Holstein cattle.

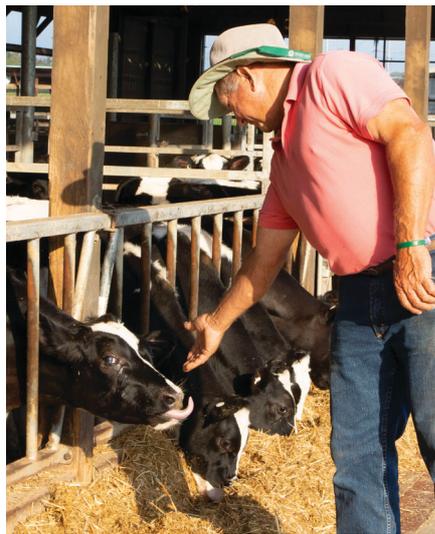
Looking ahead, Smith said he’d like to modernize the dairy operation. Currently, the farm milks 120 cows an hour, 32 at a time. Milking continues for three seven-hour shifts, with nine men working full-time to supervise the process. A new milking facility with new, more efficient equipment would enable the farm to milk 250 cows an hour.

The new milking facility is something Smith has been thinking about for a while. “We’ve had the same barn for 51 years. With 2,400 cows walking through that barn every day, all year round, it’s worn out.”

Kitty Smith Award

Smith was honored by Citizens for Fauquier County Monday night with the Kitty P. Smith Conservation Award, for his dedication to the preservation of agricultural land.

Kevin Ramundo, president of CFFC, said, “What an honor to



TIMES STAFF PHOTO/ROBIN EARL
Dairy farmer Ken Smith has a soft spot for his Holsteins.

recognize Kenny Smith, the first recipient of the Kitty P. Smith Conservation Award from the agricultural community! His comments in accepting the award about his and his father’s love of the land were truly heartfelt and inspirational. We were fortunate to have Kenny as this year’s recipient, and that so many members of Fauquier’s conservation community and his family and friends were there to celebrate this outstanding member of our community.”

Asked why he thought CFFC chose him for its conservation award this year, Smith said, “I guess it’s because I care so much about keeping our open spaces. It’s real important to me.”

When Smith’s father, Charles Smith, was a farmer in Maryland, his land was in conservation easement. The family moved to southern Fauquier County more than 50 years ago. “As soon as Fauquier County opened its conservation easement program, I signed up,” said Smith.

Funded by real estate taxes, the county’s Purchase of Developmental Rights program pays the owners of active farmland to give up the right to develop the land in the future. This also gives the landowner a significant and ongoing reduction in real estate taxes, since the land is valued at a much lower level than it would be otherwise.

Ben Smith is also enthusiastic about the conservation easement program. “I’m glad to have had the chance to participate in it.” He said it has allowed him to purchase the land he needed for his own farm. “We are lucky Fauquier has the program.”

The land is an important part of Smith’s legacy. Just as his father passed Cool Lawn Farm to him, he said in another year or so he could start transitioning Cool Lawn Farm to the next generation.

Smith said, “We’ve got to protect the land. It’s worth keeping for perpetuity, so my grandchildren can always come home to the farm.”

And they do, apparently. Smith talks with pride of his 3-year-old grandson Karter. “If you leave a key in something, he’ll start it. And he knows all my employees by name.”

Reach Robin Earl at rearl@fauquier.com

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