

## A broken limb mended

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Family farm recovers from brink through hard work, diversification

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CHELAN, Wash. -- Seven years ago, a man who grew up on a Chelan apple orchard gained notoriety for a documentary video called "Broken Limbs."

It depicted his father on the edge of losing the orchard and told about foreclosures of other north central Washington orchards. Times were tough for small, family growers. Many didn't survive the depressed apple prices from 1997 through 2002, brought on, in part, by increasing market globalization.

It took bigger companies to meet the demands of bigger retailers. And as operators got bigger, they seemed hell-bent on a race to see who could provide more fruit for less.

"My family has been in apples for three generations. I was to be the fourth. But I'm not. In this family tree, I'm the broken limb," Guy Evans said in the video narrative in 2003.

But "Broken Limbs" found hope in a new model of sustainable agriculture championed by, among others, John Ikerd, professor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri. He called for a "new American farmer" adhering to three tenants of sustainability -- that farms be ecologically sound, economically viable and socially responsible. Farms could be organic, holistic, practical or have no label at all, he said, but he called for direct marketing and farmer cooperation instead of competition to work for the community good as well as for profit.

New American farmers

Today, Guy Evans is 39 and his father, Denny Evans, is 67. Sunshine Orchards has become The Sunshine Farm.

Like many farmers around the West, they are working toward sustainability, to becoming new American farmers.

"A broken limb doesn't mean the tree is dead. This limb has mended and there's new growth," Guy said.

However, Guy's idealism of seven years ago is tempered by hard work and the reality that reaching his goal is harder and taking longer than he once thought.

"I've learned it takes a lot of time and money to try things out. The last five years, I've been in the trenches," Guy said.

Sustainability is more popular on the West Coast, Pennsylvania, New England and the upper Midwest than in other parts of the nation, Ikerd said.

Based on sales data, he estimates 7 to 10 percent of commercial farms in the nation use sustainable models or are working toward them. He estimates 4 to 4.5 percent are organic.

Food Alliance, a nonprofit organization in Portland that certifies sustainable farms, has seen a 64 percent increase in its farm and ranch certifications from Jan. 1, 2007, through June 30, 2010, said Scott Exo, alliance executive director. There are 361 Food Alliance certified farms and ranches in 25 states and two Canadian provinces compared with 220 three years ago.

"I think growers are getting strong signals from the marketplace that sustainable practices are increasingly important to commercial buyers and consumers," Exo said.

#### Video's impact

In 2003, the video, co-produced by Jamie Howell, of Wenatchee, Wash., and Guy Evans, received rave reviews.

It received a standing ovation from several hundred people and brought a tear to the eye of several, including Ikerd, at the Washington State Family Farm Summit in Wenatchee in October 2003.

"You could feel that documentary was touching people in that audience. It was almost a spiritual thing," Ikerd said.

"The sustainability movement isn't something that can be quantified in terms of numbers. It has to be described in people stories and that was what was compelling about this story. Guy made an abstract story real," Ikerd said.

The video was shown at a dozen film festivals across the country and in agricultural classes at universities. It aired on PBS in the Pacific Northwest in the fall of 2004 and later on The Documentary Channel. It was nominated for Northwest Emmy awards. It resonated with small farmers of various commodities struggling to save their spot in the marketplace. Evans and Howell received e-mails from farmers as far away as Texas and Florida.

"At the time, it was pretty big. It got all over the country and portrayed an industry in distress," said David Granatstein, a sustainable agriculture specialist at Washington State University Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center in Wenatchee.

"Broken Limbs" was "dramatic, well done and grabbed people's attention," but shortly thereafter apple prices improved, the apple industry was no longer in distress and "it's hard to say if the video's impact hung on," said Granatstein, who was in the documentary.

Sustainability remains a goal and people are moving in that direction, but its definition is fuzzier, he said.

Fred Kirschenmann, distinguished fellow of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University and President of Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills, N.Y., said "Broken Limbs" was well done and articulated issues clearly. A lot of people he knew were moved by it, he said.

But it didn't change the world and industrialized agriculture isn't likely to change until it collapses from loss of cheap energy, fresh water and favorable climate, he said.

Instead of trying to change industrialized agriculture, people need to work on models to replace it when it collapses, Kirschenmann said.

Farm evolves

"Broken Limbs" left off with Denny Evans facing a \$750,000 debt and foreclosure and Guy Evans spending the summer of 2003 working at his father's fruit stand, right below the orchard at the bottom of the hill where U.S. Highway 97A meets the crystal clear waters of Lake Chelan.

That summer he started thinking about how to take advantage of the orchard's gorgeous views of Lake Chelan and preserve at least some agricultural use.

Guy, whose mother is Washington state Sen. Linda Evans Parlette, R-Wenatchee, had an electrical engineering degree from the University of Washington and was considering medical school.

"I had been struggling with how to apply myself, looking for a career to bring about positive social change," he said. "In the researching for the video, I realized a regional food system brings it all together for me."

Father and son joined forces and staved off foreclosure by selling some land they later bought back. They diversified the farm.

Their 100 acres ascend a hillside from the lake. Like many orchards in the region, it produced mostly Red and Golden Delicious apples for decades. There were a few Fuji and Braeburn.

Now 30 acres of apples remain with 25 leased to another grower. The 5 acres of apples operated by Sunshine Farm are mainly Honeycrisp. There are 3 acres of cherries and 2 acres of apricots, peaches, nectarines and plums. The soft fruit is uncertified organic and is sold at Sunshine Farm's fruit stand. The apples and cherries are conventional with 10 percent sold at the stand and 90 percent through Chelan Fruit Cooperative.

There are new uses for the land. Tunnel Hill Winery and winegrapes occupy 7 acres, 4 acres are planted with organic vegetables and 15 acres are used for raising grass-fed Black Angus beef, goats and llamas.

The market stand sells the farm's produce and that of neighboring farms. The farm has a community-supported agriculture program. There's U-pick, farm tours, farm day camps, summer picnic concerts and dancing. Guy plays the piano at the winery on Thursday afternoons.

"If Guy weren't here, this (whole farm) would probably be sold by now. Guy is great at working hard to keep the farm together," said Jaclyn Evans, Denny Evans' wife.

There are plans for a restaurant at the winery and a cultural and agricultural learning center.

Denny took winemaking classes and oversees the winery, grapes and tree fruit with Guy. Retail management is Guy's responsibility. His wife, Rachel, is in charge of finances, marketing and watches over the organic vegetables. There are three year-round and 11 seasonal employees.

"What we've done has allowed me to stay here and do the type of farming I like to do, some production agriculture, not the touchy-feely stuff," Denny said. "Guy likes the promotion and dream and scheme. I come back to reality. We work well together."

Wine is the biggest moneymaker. The farm is making a profit, but most of it goes to improvements.

For Denny's retirement, they are planning to do high-density residential clusters on about 50 acres interspersed throughout the 100 acres. The remaining farmland will be preserved, through zoning, for farming and at agricultural land values. Such intermingling of development and farm is being done elsewhere and is called New Ruralism. It taps into a desire by some consumers to live next to where the food they eat is grown.

Guy and Denny believe development pressure will only increase at Lake Chelan.

"There is a lot cheaper land to farm than our land. But to let go of our agricultural heritage and take a big check and go to Hawaii isn't a good thing either," Guy said.

He sees a middle path accommodating both. He wants to work with development to preserve some farmland. He envisions an integrated or polycultural farm, where crops and livestock are rotated to benefit each other, on the 50 acres that remains farm.

He takes strength from his great-grandfather's story.

"He was 45 when he started his orchard, pulling sagebrush with a team of horses. He had four kids. Just when his apricots started to bear in '31 and '32, this region bottomed out (because of the Great Depression). It always lags behind. In '32, he had five kids. So five kids, a young orchard and no money and he (made it work).

"He died in 1954. His son, my granddad, told me he wished his dad had lived a little longer to enjoy what this orchard became.

"My life is all gravy compared to that."

Online

[www.thesunshinefarm.com](http://www.thesunshinefarm.com)

Watch "Broken Limbs" at [www.cultureunplugged.com](http://www.cultureunplugged.com)