



RURAL SETTING

Maintains Hold on Winning Farmers

Photos by Bob Ratliff

Coley Bailey has learned the benefits of planting cotton in wheat stubble, which helps the crop retain moisture during dry years.

By Linda Breazeale

Most farm children go to college seeking careers away from the hard work and uncertain futures their parents faced, but an elite group in Yalobusha County returned to their communities because they knew “there’s no place like home.”

Their efforts have earned state, regional and national recognition, but their greatest satisfaction comes from friendships formed in common toils and successful crops.

Steve Cummings, county director for the Mississippi State University Extension Service, said Yalobusha County has a talented group of young farmers. They include four state winners of the Farm Bureau Farmer of the Year awards, and three of those also have been state winners of the John Deere/Jaycees awards program.

“They are a close-knit group. They help each other. In most cases, the husbands and wives are teams in their agricultural businesses,” Cummings said. “They all work together to promote agriculture and community service.”

Three awarded farmers were students at MSU in the mid-1990s. John Ingram is the most recently recognized farmer, earning the 2005 Farm Bureau’s Farmer of the Year award. His classmates included Kevin Kimzey and Coley Little Bailey, who were also state winners of the Farm Bureau and John Deere/Jaycees competitions. Brad Brooks, who graduated from MSU in 1987, also brought both Farm Bureau and John Deere awards home to Yalobusha County.

A 1994 agricultural economics graduate, Bailey “never considered any other job” than following in his father and grandfather’s footsteps on the family farm that was started in the 1930s.

“When John, Kevin and I went to college, we knew then that we wanted to come home to farm,” said Bailey, who placed first nationally in the John Deere/Jaycees Young Farmer competition and top five nationally in the Farm Bureau competition.

A private pilot for 20 years, when in college Bailey would have breakfast on the farm with his mom, then fly to school in Starkville in time for morning classes. Today, he uses the airstrip across from his farm office to take him to meetings such as the National Cotton Council, the Mississippi Boll Weevil Management Corporation or the state Farm Bureau.

Cummings said all these winners are leaders in their communities as well as agriculture.

“I can’t teach them how to farm. They are just my friends. I



Corn is one of the crops in John Ingram’s diversified farming operation in Yalobusha County. He also grows cotton and soybeans and raises black angus cattle.

do try to encourage them to use their leadership skills. That’s what Extension is all about,” he said.

Cummings also knows the value of bringing the farmers together.

“If weather gets us down in the dumps, we all get together, listen to a ballgame and talk about farming,” Bailey said. “Steve is the first person I call if something goes wrong. I talk to him about equipment purchases, flower beds or insect questions.”

Ingram, a 1993 agricultural business graduate, also believes in the benefits of listening to other farmers and his Extension agent.

“At Mississippi State, I learned different avenues for doing things. I made a lot of good friends, including the professors who I still enjoy talking to,” Ingram said. “As much as I dreaded economics, the information I learned then and the professors I had are what help me the most now.”

Ingram is a hands-on farmer. Also following in his father and grandfather’s footsteps, he works 1,300 acres of cotton, corn and soybeans. The Ingram farm also includes a herd of black angus cattle.

Brooks studied agricultural economics before becoming the third generation to grow cotton, corn and soybeans on his family’s farm.

“I learned about record keeping at college, but everything I’ve experienced since graduation has reinforced it,” Brooks said. “When I wanted to quit and come home, my dad made it clear that I needed to finish. College helped teach me discipline, and I learned how to take care of myself – to grow up.”

Brooks credits his county Extension director with helping area farmers continue learning.

“Steve is the glue that keeps us all together,” Brooks said. “He is the reason all of us are involved in MSU research and Farm Bureau activities.”

In addition to the farming foursome, Yalobusha County has produced two Farm Bureau queens, 10 Farm Bureau District 4 winners, two Farm Bureau farmer and rancher discussion state winners and two Farm Bureau talent winners. Cummings joined his farmers as an award winner in 2004 when he was named Extension Worker of the Year.

“These farmers make my job easier. I can know what farmers all across the county need based on what these guys request,” Cummings said. “I’ve had opportunities to work in other counties, but I don’t think I could ever find a better place to be.”