



Little Eva: a testament of time

Hurricanes nor fire can destroy the spirit of Julie and Mark Swanson's businesses - Little Eva's Pecan House and Natchitoches Pecans.

By Sam Irwin

Julie and Mark Swanson of Natchitoches Pecans are in the same boat as the rest of Louisiana's agricultural producers.

They want to get the best price for their product. They're concerned about rising costs for fertilizer and fuel. Seasonal labor is always an issue. And a horrendous hurricane season damaged a large part of their 4,000 tree orchard and the 2005 crop.

Those are all typical worries the average farmer faces every year.

But when a disastrous barn fire struck last December, the Swanson's boat was up a creek without a paddle.

"We questioned if we should or shouldn't rebuild," Julie said. "But we had 18 years invested in building a customer base. We felt like we had finally reached a place where we were reaping the seeds we planted, so we decided we didn't want to abandon the crop."

Situated on the southern side of Louisiana Hwy. 1 near the Chopin community, the Swanson's 400-acre pecan orchard is located on a piece of the old Little Eva Plantation along a winding bend of the historic Cane River.

There is speculation the Little Eva

Plantation was the setting for Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but Julie has been unable to document any hard evidence to support this.

"I think it is, but I just can't say for sure," she said. Their retail label bears the image of an antebellum cabin typical of the early 19th century and described in Stowe's novel.

As late as the 1970s, Little Eva Plantation boasted 10,000 acres of pecan orchards, but most of the trees fell victim to the axe as fields were hurriedly planted with soybeans to take advantage of sky-high prices.

And while soybean prices stabilized, oil prices went flat in the mid-1980s causing Mark to be laid off from his oil field job.

"We had a family discussion to talk about farming," Julie said. "The pecan orchard was a timely opportunity."

No strangers to agriculture, the Swansons knew it would be risky business.

"My family grew row crops and had cattle," Julie said.

"Mark has an agronomy degree from Louisiana Tech, and when we had the opportunity to buy the 400 acres of pecan orchard, we took it."

Despite their initial mistakes in pecan horticulture, the Louisiana nut business was a



The Swansons replaced this old pecan cracker with a new, high-speed model. The old model cracked 50 nuts per minute compared to the new machine's 500 nuts per minute.



Natchitoches Pecans owners Julie Swanson and her mother, Rita Nichols, pose outside their pecan house. Julie and her husband, Mark, built the new building after a fire destroyed their old wooden structure in December 2004.

good fit for the Swansons.

"We ended up learning more from our own mistakes than from the recommendations of those supposedly more knowledgeable than us," Julie said. "You just have to jump in and get wet. There's always a learning curve no matter what business you're in. But you get in there and get wet and learn from your mistakes."

After 18 years the Swansons had become experts in the nut business when the fire struck.

As difficult as it was to come back from the blaze, it ultimately gave the Swansons a chance to upgrade equipment. They bought a

new automated cracker and sheller.

"This cracker is new to the industry and can turn a volume eight times greater than the old machines. It can crack 500 nuts per minute," Julie said.

The increased production has proven to be extremely beneficial

"It has made us more efficient and enabled us to fill our large orders quicker," Julie said. "It's a better use of time."

By early December, Julie said Natchitoches Pecans was in "the heat of battle" and there were still plenty of pecans left to harvest.

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Commissioner of Agriculture and Forestry Bob Odom (center) and LDAF Assistant Commissioner of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Matthew Keppinger (left) discuss Natchitoches Pecans' marketing efforts with owner Julie Swanson. The Commissioner recently toured the Natchitoches Pecans' retail store and Little Eva Pecan House.

Coming Your Way

Tin Top Arena in Lecompte will host winter buckle series barrel racing/pole bending events Jan. 14 and 28, Feb. 11, and March 11 and 25.

Open, novice horse and age group classes will be offered. Exhibitions begin at 11 a.m. and with competitions to follow.

For more information, call (318) 445-8907.

Louisiana Angus Association will hold a bull sale at noon Jan. 28 at LSUA in Lecompte.

Seventy-five Angus bulls will be available for sale.

For a free catalog, call (662) 837-4904 or visit the Web site www.americanlivestockbrokers.com.

High Delta Exotics offers safari park wagon tours the first Sunday of every month at 362 Pickett Lane in

Delhi.

The cost is \$15 and a barbecue lunch is also served.

For more information, call 1-888-244-3319.

Johnson & Wales University is sponsoring a recipe contest for high school seniors.

The food service and hospitality school will award nearly \$80,000 in scholarships to the winners.

Recipes must be postmarked by Jan. 9, 2006.

A "Taste of the States" recipe category is available. Students must include at least one recipe ingredient that is indigenous to their state or region of the country to compete in this category.

For more information, visit the Web site www.jwu.edu.

Have a safe and happy new year!

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"The season is over as quickly as it starts," she quipped.

Mechanical shakers loosen the pecan fruit from the sheaves and the nuts fall to the ground. A tractor driver tows a pecan harvester under the tree and sweeps the valuable crop into a hopper. The harvester is similar to the golf ball sweeper at a driving range. Everything in its path is picked up



by the harvester, including small twigs, branches and unripened nuts. The harvested crop is brought to the pecan barn and dumped into a pit where it is lifted by an elevator conveyor belt into a "de-sticker." The de-sticker does exactly what its unglamorous name implies: it removes sticks. The sorting system removes black hulls (nuts still encased in the green shell) and light pecans (nuts that have no meat inside). The process is helped along by human hands to remove any debris the machinery may have missed.

The sorting process allows Mark a way to make a quick estimate of crop yield.

"A 5,000-pound gross load from a pecan wagon usually yields 3,000 pounds of in-shell nuts," Mark said.

"But after the hurricane, we're getting maybe 1,500 to 2,000 pounds a load. There are more black hull nuts knocked from the tree from the hurricane winds than fully ripened ones."

Once the miscellaneous trash has been removed the pecans are sent to the cracking machines that remove the shell and a steady crack-crack-crack sound is heard throughout the warehouse.

Natchitoches Pecans also offers services for neighboring growers who merely want their nut crop cleaned, but some of the smaller producers also ask the Swansons to market their pecans. The new warehouse permits Mark to store pecans as he waits for optimum prices.

"We get a better price for the smaller grower and for us. You have more clout in volume truckloads than small lots," Mark said. "It's kind of like collective bargaining. It's more cost-efficient to ship a



whole truck of pecans than a half a truck."

As a result of last year's fire, Natchitoches Pecans also lost its retail space, but it was a no-brainer for the Swansons to rebuild a completely separate gift shop.

"Our goal is to sell everything retail," Julie said. "We built a 2,000-square-foot country store."

The retail space has a sizable shipping and packing room and two full-time employees are kept busy shipping gift packages to the Swanson's national customer base. Julie is pleased they decided to rebuild.

"The response we have gotten from our customers has been great," she said. "They are so glad we have rebuilt."

Julie also said their orders have increased.

By early December, Natchitoches Pecans was posting a 30 percent gain over last year's sales and still in the heart of the busy season, she said. But their overall performance will be hurt because of the general crop loss due to Hurricane Rita. There are simply fewer pecans to sell this year.

For more information, visit www.natchitochespecans.com or call (800) 572-5925.

Southern University 63rd Annual State Livestock and 15th Annual State Market Goat Show

The Southern University livestock and goat shows will be held March 2-4, 2006, at the M.A. Edmond Livestock Arena next to Jetson Correctional.

Animal possession dates and entry form due dates are as follows:

| Division | Possession Date | Entry Date |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Market hogs | was 12/15/05 | 12/30/05 |
| Beef breeding | was 11/30/05 | 12/30/05 |
| Dairy | was 11/30/05 | 12/30/05 |
| Poultry (broilers only)* | 01/28/06 | 01/28/06 |

For more information, contact Christie Monroe at (225) 771-3510 or (225) 771-2242 ext. 328.

*All broilers must be ordered through the Southern University Livestock Show Office. Order forms had to be returned by Dec. 10, 2005.



Mark Swanson watches as pecans and other material from the orchard travel up a conveyor to the "de-sticker" machine (insets at left). Julie Swanson makes adjustments to the pecan house's new, high-speed cracker/sheller machine (above). Two Little Eva employees sort the good pecans from the bad and remove any remaining debris mixed in with the pecans (below).



LDAF employees generous during Christmas season

Commissioner Bob Odom and Department of Agriculture and Forestry employees appeared on live television with Baton Rouge TV personality Pat Shingleton to make a donation to the annual Pat's Coats for Kids coat drive.

LDAF workers collected more than 60 coats and presented Shingleton with an oversized check for \$300.

Shingleton has been the WBRZ chief weather forecaster since 1981 and originated the coat donation program for Baton Rouge area school children.

Commissioner Bob Odom also allowed Shingleton's volunteers to use LDAF warehouse space to sort, store and distribute the coats.

"I am grateful to be in the position to help Pat keep our children warm this winter," Odom said. "I am also very gratified our LDAF employees were so generous with their donations."

Following the conclusion of the coat drive, LDAF employees participated in the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation's annual

holiday toy campaign.

New toy containers were placed in the LDAF Baton Rouge headquarters building during the two-week drive and they were overflowing by the end of the first week. Three brand new bicycles were just a few of the toys employees donated.

"People in Louisiana have always generously contributed to Pat's Coats for Kids and Toys for Tots during the Christmas season. It was especially important to me this year to see that our children, after the devastation of the hurricanes, have something to look forward to," Scottie Harrell, an LDAF administrative coordinator, said. "The toys will bring joy to the eyes of the children and the coats will bring warmth during this holiday season."

During 2005, department employees have also participated in fund raisers for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, the American Heart Association, the United Way and the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank.



Sheryl Carnegie, Leslie Tassin and Marilyn Mayeaux hold the check presented to Pat's Coats for Kids.