Jim Suber: Father, son do ag industry proud

By JIM SUBER
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Great choice. That describes the selection of Jack and Lee Reeve to share the annual Stockman of the Year award given by the Livestock and Meat Industry Council based at Kansas State University.

The council's 31st annual Stockmen's Dinner will be March 1 at the Holiday Inn in Manhattan, and that's when and where the Reeves will be honored.

Jack Reeve is actually veterinarian Marshall P. Reeve. After receiving veterinary degree from K-State in 1943, he went into the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps for three years. He moved to Garden City in 1948 after a brief practice at St. Charles, Mo. He had a private practice in Garden City until 1960. In the meantime, though, he had begun cattle feeding at the Brookover Feed Yard in 1953, one of the pioneer places in that business. By 1959 he bought a ranch, and in 1962 he started the Reeve Cattle Company.

Jack's career is filled with accomplishment and leadership roles. For example, he's a past president of the Kansas Livestock Association; he served on the Kansas Board of Regents; he has been a member of the Kansas-Colorado Water Compact Commission and the Kansas Board of Veterinary Examiners.

His son, Lee, is now group manager of the family's operations, which include a feed yard that handles up to 34,000 head, and their famous alcohol plant Lee started in 1981. Later, he added a fish operation that uses warmer cooling water from the plant to raise tilapia, a food fish. The family also raises feed on 4,500 acres of irrigated land.

They've always been innovators. On a personal level, both father and son have been gracious hosts to me, as well as patient ones while trying to explain some of their programs to me.

One of my most memorable days as a reporter was a visit to their ranch and distillery and feedlot when they first began making alcohol. There were subsequent visits, but that one sticks out because they both were there and they both took valuable time with me and a photographer. One thing that stuck out, too, was how Lee was feeding both dry and wet stillage to some of the cattle, thus adding efficiency to their overall operations.

It is difficult to believe that 20 years have passed since Lee began the alcohol plant. It was in a time of another energy crisis and when another farm crisis was about to boil over. In fact, there were recent export embargoes to the Soviet Union, interest rates exceeding 20 percent for operating loans, a cry for more value-added products and a shout for alternate energy sources. We had just come off another energy crisis, too.
And some crop farmers were asking for greater support from government, even as many were losing their farms to inflation and bank foreclosures.

Lee Reeve did what few other entrepreneurs did. He actually designed and built a bonafide distillation plant and went about the business of getting into the ethanol business. Lee, a graduate of agricultural economics from KSU, pushed as sharp a pencil as anybody.

Back then he knew more about heat exchange and fuel markets probably than anyone within 1,000 miles. His fame grew, and by 1996 he had become chairman of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Alternative Agriculture Research and Commercialization Board, had been the subject of dozens of articles and had served on a variety of state-level committees.

Dee James, executive director of the council, had this to say: "The Reeves continue to be agricultural pioneers. They are always looking for new opportunities to explore. They are prepared to take risks, and they are willing to help others along the way."

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