

Randy Teeter:

Young Cotton Grower Finds Farming a Choice Occupation

If he could not be a farmer, there are several other things that 31-year-old Randy Teeter of New Deal, TX, could be.

He could be an automobile mechanic. He ran a garage in that farm community of 700 while he was still in high school.

He could be a drummer in a country-western or rock band. He and some buddies get together now and then to entertain at parties or reunions.

He might be in law enforcement. "I always used to think that might be my option, but that was when I was younger," grins the wiry young man, lean and bronzed from hours of work on his 800-acre cotton farm.

Then again, he might be a full-time, paycheck-earning firefighter instead of the State-certified volunteer that he is.

"What would I do if I had to go out of farming?" Teeter muses, shifting his wriggling, 6-year-old son Clay from his knee to the floor of the family room. Clay's 3-year-old brother, Shane, maneuvers toward the empty knee. The Teeters live in a comfortable brick home bordered by cotton fields and one neighbor. "If I could pick what I'd do, I'd be a firefighter, but I'm not intending to quit farming."

A Farming Tradition

Randy's family have always been farmers, "as far back as anybody knows." Randy is the third generation of Teeters to farm in New Deal, 11 miles north of Lubbock. His grandparents moved there from Arkansas in the mid-1940's. Randy's late father, Clayton, produced cotton, grain sorghum, and

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Farming the arid west Texas landscape north of Lubbock is nothing new to the Teeter family. Randy Teeter is the third generation of Teeters to farm in this area.

soybeans on much of the same 800 acres that Randy tends today on the broad, flat, high plains of West Texas.

"Overall, it's about the same operation," Randy says. In addition to the land owned by his widowed mother, Randy farms other acres that he leases. Randy plants proven cotton varieties, uses soil tests to determine precise nutrient needs, and uses furrow dikes in his fields to retain the area's limited rainfall. He carefully scouts his fields for insects and uses integrated pest management to cut down on pesticide use. He works with his County Agent, testing varieties and demonstrating new methods to other producers.

Growing Up

Randy was part of the family operation from an early age. "The first thing I did was probably hoe cotton," he recalls. "I started driving the tractor when I was about 12."

At New Deal High School, Randy played drums, trumpet, and baritone in the band. "They had FFA, but I wasn't involved. I wasn't an athlete, and I sure wasn't a scholar," he confesses. "No, he was a rebel," laughs his wife, Gayla, shifting just out of reach, her eyes sparkling. Throughout high school, Randy continued to help out on the family farm "when I had time."

"I was a mechanic," he explains. "As a matter of fact, I ran a garage here in New Deal my senior year of high school. I had this '69 El Camino. It was green—a light, kind of apple green. Well, it ended up dark green . . ." It is apparent that Randy remembers that El Camino better than his father's cotton crop.

"When I graduated in 1976," Randy says, "I tried some 8-to-5 work at a garage in Lubbock. About 6 months was all I could take. In December, my dad's hired hand quit. I told him he didn't have to look for another; he already had one. I'd had all that other life I needed."

Choices

In 1977, smalltown farm boy Randy met city girl Gayla in Lubbock, metropolitan "Hub of the Plains" with a population of 190,000. "He was cruisin' the Sonic," Gayla laughs, referring to a drive-in restaurant that was a popular meeting place for teenagers. Actually, they were introduced by one of her Monterey High School classmates who knew Randy.

“My parents were from farm families,” says Gayla. “My dad farmed years ago, but had quit before my two sisters and I were born, so we were never around it.” Her introduction to farm life came when she and Randy married in 1979.

“The first year was the hardest,” she recalls. “The year before we got married, Randy hardly had to work at all; he had lots of time for me.” That brings a snort from Randy, who explains, “That was one of those years it rained. We didn’t have to water much.” And without wells to check and irrigation pipe to move, he did have a little extra time for courting.

“Then, the first year we were married, it was dry, dry, dry. We ran the wells all summer,” Randy recalls. “And on weekends,” Gayla frowns, “he always had to run the sandfighter” (tillage equipment used to reduce erosion of the sandy soils by the strong West Texas winds). The hardest thing to get used to that first year, she says, “was the uncertainty about money—and the strange hours.”

“Now it’s 7 to 7 some days, and some days it’s later, some days earlier,” Randy observes. “And some days, it’s not at all—maybe that’s what I like most about farming, right there.” He turns to see whether Gayla has risen to the bait. She lets it pass, observing, “I think what he really likes most is being his own boss.”

Now Randy is assistant chief of the well-trained, 20-member New Deal Volunteer Fire Department, president of the Lubbock County Volunteer Firefighters Association, and an instructor on transport fires for the regional schools conducted at Lubbock by Texas A&M University. Three-quarters of his Tuesday nights belong to

the fire department—business meetings and training.

For serious relaxation, Randy grabs his rod and reel and looks for the nearest bass tournament. He is a member of Lubbock Bassmasters, an organization that holds tournaments at nearby lakes. “The best lake I’ve fished—but I hate the driving, I hate the driving, I hate the driving—is Lake Amistad,” Randy muses. Lake Amistad is on the Mexican border near Del Rio, TX, 360 miles from New Deal.

The family enjoys a lot of activities together, including some of the bass tournaments. But all the activities—except answering the fire alarm—take second place to the whims of King Cotton.

Making Cotton Work

Since 1983, Randy has farmed on his own and known the uncertainties of the West Texas wind, hail, drought, and deluge.

The Texas South Plains, which produce almost a fourth of the Nation’s cotton, enjoyed a near-record year in 1988. That year Randy averaged almost 800 pounds of lint to the acre. “And 1987 was pretty good, too,” he recalls.

“But 1989 was lousy. I harvested half what I did the year before.” A June 1 hailstorm took 110 of Randy’s acres of young cotton, and continuing rain prevented replanting until June 8, when he “tracked through mud” to put in a shorter-season variety with good yield potential. More cool, wet days caused blight.

It is because of years like 1989—which sometimes come in bunches—that Gayla has kept her job as assistant office manager at the Texas A&M University Agricultural Research and Extension Center just down Interstate 27 in Lubbock. Nevertheless, neither Gayla nor Randy would swap the challenges and the opportunities of the farm, not even for a 40-hour workweek or the regular paycheck of a fireman.



An employee of the ARS Cotton Gin in Lubbock, TX, inspects a cotton sample from a recent harvest.