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Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

‘Agritainment,’ Weddings, Reunions, and Organic Dairy Products

Interview with Tony and Carol Azevedo, Double T A-Cres
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What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

We’ve been dairying for 27 years. I’m second generation in the business in this country in that my father came from the Azores Islands of Portugal. But even back in the islands, my grandparents had dairy cows. We’ve been organic now for probably three years or a little bit longer, and we started our transition probably about five years ago.

The conventional dairying and farming was losing us money. We needed to find some way to turn things around other than doing what my neighbors were doing, which was expanding by doubling and tripling. We didn’t see them in any better shape than we were.

Describe the alternative enterprise in which you are presently engaged.

We have a collection of carriages, and the family also had a collection of paraphernalia—more than 100 kerosene lamps, for example. We organized these artifacts so groups of people could come out and see what we had. We held class reunions, company parties, and other activities along that line. We kind of fell into a situation in which our bread and butter turned out to be weddings.

The weddings are probably about 95% of what we do. Once the family has made an appointment with us, we take care of the details of putting on the wedding—the setup, the cleanup, other details. All the weddings are done

with a horse-drawn carriage. The things that we don’t do are the cake, the tuxedos, the flowers, the wedding dress. But other than that, we take care of all the details.

What made you decide to go into this enterprise?

Several years ago, we had a large anniversary party for Tony’s parents. About 500 people came, and they enjoyed the ranch. After that, we started getting calls wanting to know if we could do this or that for them.

We found out that the American public is looking for an adventure as long as the bathrooms are clean and the food is good. So when we do a wedding we focus not so much on the bride and the groom, but on their guests. If the guests have a good time, the bride and groom have a good feeling about what they did, and we keep getting more and more customers from there.

Describe your business planning process.

We critique every event. The first thing we found was that if this turned into a full-fledged business, we would quickly get tired of it. So, we focus it just from April to the end of October. We also focus it to one or two days a week.

Has anything gone wrong?

At the beginning, it took some time to get the logistics straight. The county [Merced County] was very firm about telling us that they could not

give us police protection, so we have to have our own bonded security. We have to have fire inspections to make sure we can take care of things like that. This is a very specialized type of facility even though I think there can be a facility like this every 50 miles. They would all do well.

Once when we were expecting 300 people, the beer cooler broke down. We had to hustle and find half barrels and chill down the beer. Sometimes, our security hasn't shown up. One time one of the cooks got in a car accident and almost didn't make it with the food.

What would you have done differently if you could start over again from the beginning?

We have ongoing discussions about having more indoor events. Even though we're open only at certain times of the year, it's hard to hit the right temperature all the time. The problem is that if you have a temperature-controlled building, it becomes harder to say no. Suddenly you find yourself open year-round.

Where do you plan to go from here?

We want to improve on what we have. We don't want to expand because it could become a monster that consumes us. We think that we could enhance the appearance of the ranch.

What is the most important advice you would give other farmers or ranchers considering an alternative enterprise?

1. Do what you like doing.
2. Be very aware of your neighbors. Farmers need a little time to adjust to a business like ours.

How about financing?

We built our business little by little because, first of all, we couldn't take this idea to a bank and say, "Hey, guess what we're going to do in the middle of Stevinson." It took the bankers a little time to adjust to agritainment as an enterprise.

How did you handle the liability concern?

You just need to have a million-dollar policy. That's all that's required. The liability insurance

that is hard to get is the insurance concerning horses. And we just kept our homeowner's policy. That was kind of a plus because a farm is a residence.

For a wedding, the client also has to provide additional insurance. They usually pick that up off their homeowner's policy. If there was an injury—and so far in 9 years we haven't had any—their policy would pay first before ours kicks in.

The strategy behind that is two-fold. First, it should not cost the client extra to pick up one night's entertainment. Second: If you have guests who get hurt, they have to sue their host before they sue us. This gives us a buffer for those people who are out there making a living suing other people. It also makes our clients more cautious.

What do you like most about the entertainment business and what do you dislike?

We like serving the public, we're forced to keep the yards neat and the flowerbeds cleaned up. We dislike watching mothers and brides go through the torture that they go through not realizing that they have nothing to worry about because we take care of it all. We give them a list of what they need to bring. If they go down the list and check it off, we'll do all the rest. We also dislike the cleanup work.

What groups/ organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of the entertainment business?

We were already boosters of FFA, 4H, Girl Scouts, Sober Grad Night, and the historical society. Now other museums are visiting our museum trying to figure out how they can generate more visitors.

Because of the kids, we were always involved with the community. Now we're starting to get international guests. We were invited to go to Ethiopia to see if we could help their farmers. There wasn't much we could teach them because they were on their third year of a drought. We

thought it would be much more important to try to get some immediate aid. So when we came back we focused on getting 38,000 pounds of whole powdered milk distributed there.

What conservation and education activities do you have on your farm?

We had a school program that we had targeted for fourth and fifth graders. The program was going so well that the schools were actually canceling their trips to Columbia [Columbia State Historical Park is a restoration of a Sierra-Nevada Gold Rush town] to come here. We hosted a hands-on day when kids would be split into groups and they would learn square dancing, how to shell and grind corn and other basic farm work. It was just a full day of early Western activities, but we had to quit it because of the liability. If we were to chase down a grant, it would be one that would allow us to open up that project again.

Do you do dairy tours?

We do the dairy tours in conjunction with the organics, but because we're not the average dairy it is very difficult to do tours as a California dairyman. We do organic dairy tours for the Ecological Farming Association and charge the visitors only if we do a lunch.

What do you think your customers like most about Double T A-Cres?

Most of our customers don't come from our local area. Most of them are from Turlock, Modesto, or beyond. We get a lot from the Bay Area, and I think that they're looking to go someplace different for their event that's more of an adventure. A lot of them have commented that they like the idea that they are off the main roads, their children are safe, they can enjoy the evening because they know their children can't get into the street, and no one is going to take off with them. They relax more.

Are you willing to share your information?

Yes

Do you want additional information? For more success stories and other information, see the website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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