





# A chicken and egg story

As the Wilcoxes begin their 100th year of working the land in the Nisqually Basin, the family is betting the farm on cage-free and organic hens

by Stacey Wilson '96



**THE VIEW FROM HERE** The spectacular sight of Mt. Rainier levitating on the eastern horizon was one of the attractions for Judson and Elizabeth Wilcox

**Y**ou can't really blame the 30,000 or so chickens huddled up against each other inside a newly renovated coop near the main entrance of Wilcox Farms in rural Pierce County. It *is* pretty darn nasty outside on this blustery first Saturday of fall. Oh, and there's that instinct thing, too.

"What can I say? They are a flock animal. They like to be together," says Jim Wilcox '59, chuckling at the site of the Rhode Island Reds, chicken-upon-chicken, visible through thick, fogged-up glass that's separating us from the birds. "They must have access to the yard to qualify as cage-free. Whether they actually leave the house, well, that's up to them."

**Preceding page:** In the egg processing facility on the farm, Jim Wilcox '59, Brent Wilcox '91, Susan Hartley Wilcox '62, and Barrie Wilcox '62.

If the Wilcox name sounds familiar, it's because you've likely consumed some of the 1 million eggs produced daily by this family-run operation, which turns 100 this year. Or maybe you know a Wilcox or two (or 10), since the clan's alumni connections to Puget Sound run long and deep.

As Jim chauffeurs me around the family's 1,760-acre farm located just outside the town of Roy, we chat about chicken behavior and other facts relating to Wilcox's transition from a comprehensive milk-and-eggs dairy to a more specialized eggs-only business focusing on organic, cage-free, and other so-called "value-added" egg varieties. The process began in earnest in January 2008 and has already seen an investment of several million dollars by the family to help fund, among many other projects, the renovation and retrofitting of existing and outdated buildings, and the care and cultivation of Wilcox's first round of organic chickens that arrived at the farm in the summer of 2006.

It's a lot of work. Thirty-one buildings to maintain. One hundred sixty employees. And 1.5 million, that's *million*, chickens to care for. Forget the jokes about chicken feed. This kind of farming is costly and labor-intensive, but worth the effort, Jim says.

Traditional, factory-farm egg operations group hens together in very close proximity in batteries or cages. In such tight quarters the birds are stressed and prone to sickness. But in recent years consumers have become more concerned about where their food comes from, and a growing number are willing to pay extra for products that are locally and sustainably produced. Cage-free hens like the ones the Wilcoxes are betting their business on are allowed to do what birds do instinctively: roam at will in the hen house and nest when laying, roost on perches at night, and scratch around outside during the day for bugs and worms in an enclosure that protects them from predators.

Organic eggs are produced under even



when they chose this property near Hart's Lake in 1909. Their descendants still farm the valley.

stricter conditions. The birds must be raised from hatchlings on organic feed, and no chemical fertilizers or pesticides can be used near the hens' yard.

Though Jim says he and his brother, Barrie, are now just consultants and "very much out of the business" after 47 years at the helm (each has two sons—J.T. and Chris; Brent and Andy—who are now running the business), his investment in the family's future is palpably heartfelt and sincere. After a year of gearing up for the farm's 100th birthday in 2009, Jim says the Wilcox clan has never been more energized.

"The concept of the family farm is pretty much a thing of the past, so we feel very lucky to still be around," he says. "Everything is changing now, but we're embracing that and looking forward to a new chapter."

### Family ties

The earliest chapter of the Wilcox legacy began around the turn of the century when

Judson Wilcox, Jim's grandfather, left his home in rural eastern Canada to join the Alaska gold rush. After a year seeking his fortune in the Yukon, Judson returned to Canada to marry his sweetheart, Elizabeth Cohoe. In 1903 the couple settled in Seattle, where they opened a hat shop in Pioneer Square. Six years later, pining for the agrarian environs of their youth, Judson and Elizabeth bought a 240-acre farm in Hart's Lake valley near Roy, Wash. A grand view of Mt. Rainier was one of the attractions of the property.

Farms in those days grew and raised a bit of everything—chickens, milk cows, hogs, vegetables—all of which Judson and Betty sold to local logging camps.

After 10 years, Judson and Elizabeth, who by then were parents to a son, Truman, and daughters Marion, Grace, and Helen, felt pressured to move beyond survival mode and help their children someday attend college. They heard about a poultry-raising

class offered in Puyallup by the Washington State University Cooperative Extension and decided to, as the *Puget Sound Business Journal* put it in 2008, "take a crack at the egg business."

Despite bumpy beginnings (they lost half their first flock of 1,000 birds within a day, and another half of the remaining chicks turned out to be roosters), Judson and Betty persevered. By the 1940s, with the help of Truman—that's Jim and Barrie's dad—Judson and Betty's chicken business was thriving. At the close of World War II the operation was ready for a new round of expansion.

Jim and Barrie grew up on their family's land doing chores such as cleaning coops and gathering eggs. Each brother attended Puget Sound. Barrie earned a degree in business, and Jim left in 1959 just one semester shy of graduation. (He returned in 1981 and completed his history degree.) He still has fond memories of the 1950s-era College of

Puget Sound, as it was then known, where he says he loved the small campus and the fact that other “small town kids like me” made up the student population. “It just felt like the right place to be,” he says. “And returning to campus at age 43 was a hoot. I enjoyed arguing politics with my women’s studies instructor,” says Jim, laughing.

Ultimately both Wilcox brothers returned to the farm to help their father run the company. Throughout the 1960s they remained firmly entrenched in the egg business, but Jim also reestablished the Wilcoxes’ herd of dairy cows. By the 1970s the company had stopped selling its milk and eggs to co-ops for processing and marketing, and instead assumed those duties in-house.

In 1981, after helping run the farm for nearly 50 years, Truman passed away. Jim and Barrie carried on. Sensing great opportunities in supplying store chains such as Albertsons and Costco, the brothers expanded their operation into sites in Moses Lake and Cheney, Wash., and facilities in Oregon near Eugene, Salem, and Aurora. By 1988 Wilcox was a chief supplier of milk and eggs to Costco (the corporation was founded by Jeff Brotman ’61, who was also a fraternity brother of Barrie Wilcox) and other chains, which propelled the company toward a distinction earned in the early 2000s of being the largest supplier of fluid milk in the Northwest and Alaska.

Jim says the company saw its most dramatic period of growth between 1995 and 2005, during which they produced upwards

of 1 million gallons of milk per week. “We were providing 30 percent of the local population’s milk,” he says. “The unique thing, though, was that we were producing *and* processing milk. It’s rare for a company to be involved in both phases of dairy production,” he says. “But we were starting to feel the pressure that many dairy farmers feel to keep prices low, maintain ample cattle numbers, deal with rising fuel costs, and, most intensely, focus on responsible ways of minimizing environmental impact.”

It was this last challenge, says Jim, that seemed to coincide directly with the relatively “quick souring” of the milk business in late 2005 and early 2006.

“The amount of organic waste we were accumulating from cows, chickens, and food processing plants were more than our acreage could absorb,” Jim says.

The family reconsidered its focus and its future.

### River watchers

If the Wilcoxes are distinct for the longevity and breadth of their business, they are equally notable for their commitment to preserving the precious commodity on which their farm has thrived for a century—the land.

Such a large, contiguous property is becoming scarce in fast-growing Western Washington, and the family is fully aware of its responsibility as stewards, as farms fall to subdivision and development all around them.

Alongside its transition out of milk production (a milestone that became official in early 2008 when they sold their milk business to Darigold), the family also has been investing time and money in creating a more environmentally friendly farm by striving for habitat protection and restoration on the Nisqually River watershed. (About five miles of the Nisqually River and its tributaries run through the Wilcox property.)

It’s an issue that Jim admits wasn’t always at the top of their agenda.

“By modern standards, we were kind of careless and took the environment for granted,” he says. “Twenty-five years ago, keeping the waterways clean just wasn’t something we thought about. But the more I learned, the more concerned I became.”

The 78-mile-long Nisqually River had been feeling the pressure of human develop-

ment ever since farming started to boom along its banks in the early 1900s. Though the river stayed mostly untouched by industry, its salmon and trout populations declined drastically as bordering forests disappeared and cows and horses tromped through streams, silting them up and destroying spawning beds. In the mid-1980s, the Nisqually River Council, a group of government representatives, the Nisqually Tribe, timber companies, land owners, and environmentalists began working on a plan to manage the Nisqually River Basin. Like other farmers in the area, the Wilcoxes were at first skeptical of the plan, as there were murmurs of landowners possibly losing full access to their property.

Ultimately, under Jim and Barrie’s leadership, the Wilcoxes became staunch proponents of a plan of action for the entire watershed, not just the river banks, on which the original plan focused.

“I found that what I wanted in terms of being able to continue to farm and continue to build our business was for the most part what everybody else wanted too,” says Jim. “We tried to do the right thing in terms of keeping waste out of the waterways and that the waste from livestock and plants was contained during the winter and applied during the summer when the land could absorb and utilize it.”

Wilcox Farms amassed an array of accolades for its environmental activism. In April 2008 the company was named “Partner of the Year” by the Nisqually Land Trust for its efforts to protect salmon habitat on the Wilcox farm. The company also won the “Conservation Practice Implementation Award” for commercial farms from the Pierce Conservation District for another habitat restoration project completed in 2007. And, for its eco-conscious farming practices, it received a “Salmon Safe” certification in February 2008 from Stewardship Partners, a Seattle-based nonprofit. There are 25 farms certified by the group in Washington, but Wilcox is the biggest in the Northwest, and the only one in Pierce County to be awarded the distinction.

### The gamble to go organic

The next five years will be witness to the most exciting—and financially risky—era yet in the Wilcoxes’ history. Converting their

### Four generations of Wilcoxes at Puget Sound

Mildred Grosser Wilcox ’35

James T. Wilcox ’59

Barrie Wilcox ’62

Susan Hartley Wilcox ’62

Suzanne Wilcox Morse ’66

Holly Wilcox Mahan ’76

J.T. Wilcox III ’85

Gigi Blunt Burke ’86

Kathy Friesen Wilcox ’87

Brent Wilcox ’91

Anne Marie Morse M.A.T. ’95

Judson Morse ’99

J.T. Wilcox IV ’12



**A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT** The Nisqually River, that is, and the Wilcoxes (here, Jim and Barrie) are improving salmon habitat on the parts that cross the family farm.

chicken operation to organic and cage-free birds means they must build or renovate many more hen houses for existing birds and the day-old chicks they intend to purchase and rear. They will also need to transition from regular chicken feed to value-added food that includes flax and other organically grown, locally produced grains. All of this will be to the tune of about \$4.5 million.

Jim says the family also is looking into ways they can utilize their land. “We have a lot of room to grow now that the market for locally produced and organic goods is expanding,” says Jim, adding that, among their food-service and institutional clients such as universities and hospitals, liquid-egg products are booming since they are easier to transport and prepare in large quantities.

He explains this as we drive past a large building on the south side of the farm where

their liquid-egg products are processed. “The eggs used here are those that had small cracks or lack pristine shell quality. The USDA has very high standards for the eggs you find in your grocery store, so they can’t be sold if they’re flawed.” He says Costco and Haggen will likely remain their largest customers, while business from schools and other retail outlets such as Metropolitan Market will hopefully remain vigorous.

But the common thread among their customers is that most are within 200 miles of the farm. “We are starting to expand into Northern California and Montana, but the majority of our customers are in the Northwest and Alaska,” says Jim. “We are first and foremost a local family farm, and we want our customer base to reflect this.”

Our trip wraps up where we started, at

the main entrance to the farm where we see Harvest Fest revelers continuing to arrive in droves despite whipping and drizzly winds. A local folk band is shivering its way through a mandolin-led ditty while kids and their parents taste-test ham and cheese omelets made with, of course, Wilcox’s new cage-free liquid egg products. (For the record, they were delicious.)

As Jim walks me to my car, I ask him how the economic crisis is impacting farmers and whether the family is worried about launching such a bold, new business plan in uncertain times. “It’s hard not to wonder what the downturn will do to the interest in ‘value-added’ eggs, or any product, for that matter,” he says. “All we can do at this point is give the customer the best we can and stay hopeful. It’s what we’ve always done, and I guess it’s worked out pretty well.” ☞