



Harry Simmons

Moving Simmons Farm-raised Catfish forward

There are those who change their mind several times about what they want to do with their lives, and there are those who are lucky enough to have always know. Harry Simmons is one of the lucky ones. Simmons always knew his future would hold farming.

Simmons grew up in Yazoo City, where his father also farmed. Simmons graduated from Mississippi State University with a degree in Ag Economics. He then joined the National Guard and eventually returned to Yazoo City to start his life as a farmer.

“I made a couple of crops of cotton and soybeans, but I was just looking for a way to stabilize my income and diversify some,” he says. “I was familiar with catfish, so I built four ponds and started trying to figure out what’s involved with growing catfish. Then, from the four, I built four more and then several more until we got to where we are now.”

Harry Simmons

Written by Jordan Thomas, DBJ Editor

He started growing catfish in 1976, and in 1982 he opened his processing entity Simmons Farm Raised Catfish. According to Simmons, he began this venture due to a lack of a processing plant to sell his catfish to.

“We were selling to some people that came and bought 300 to 400 pounds at the time,” he said. “Then this co-op plant opened in Indianola that we got involved with and bought some stock in, but we just weren’t able to market our fish like we needed to. So we decided to build our own place and start marketing what we produce ourselves.”

Although he is now in the processing entity of catfish, he still has catfish ponds.

“I started growing catfish in 1976, and I still do,” he says. “Most of the catfish that go through the plant come from myself and another farm nearby called Phillip Brothers Farm.”

The plant will enter its 30th year of business this March. About 70 percent of the catfish they process comes from Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. They started running 20,00 pounds of catfish a week, and they are now capable of doing 500,000 pounds a week. However, according to Simmons, they are currently only running about 300,000 pounds a week due to a low supply.

“The price is pretty high right now, and the economy is fairly weak, so we’ve got a fairly weak demand at the price levels we’re at right now,” he admits. “We’re going to do all that it takes for us to not have any layoffs, keep everybody on, and just have a good place for people to work and make a living.”

The company’s employees are very important to Simmons. Many have been with him since the beginning, and a large number have worked there for at least 20 years.

“It’s not something that I single handedly have been able to keep together for 30 years,” he says. “I’ve got a number of people who have been loyal and who have made great contributions to us being successful. I think we have a good group here that work hard and share my vision of the top quality catfish.”

His employees feel the same way about him and attribute his hard work to the success of the company.

“Harry started this 30 years ago by himself from scratch and has made it what is today by hard work,” says Seger Collier. “He pays strict attention to detail, and he wants customers to have the best product possible. We feel that philosophy is why we’re all still here today.”

Quality is an aspect of Simmons Catfish that is extremely important, and everything is done with high standards in mind. Before fish can be harvested, they are flavor tested every day for three days to ensure the high quality. The processing plant goes above and beyond industry regulations to ensure every piece of catfish that leaves in a Simmons box is perfect.

“We want everybody who buys a box of our fish or eats any of our fish anywhere to feel ‘this is the best catfish I’ve ever had,’” he says. “I hope that our reputation in the market is that we do the best job of processing and packaging and marketing and taking care of our customers of anybody in the business. I feel like that’s our reputation now. We’re not aspiring to be the largest, but I do want to be known as the company that has the best product on the market.”

The catfish industry has taken a hit, and according to Simmons, many catfish farmers have gone out of business, turning their ponds into row crop ground or hunting clubs.

“One of our biggest production costs is feed, and corn and soybeans are as high as they’ve ever been. That’s what we make our feed from,” he says. “I think that now with the economy like it is, our supply is short because a lot of people have just quit. Production acreage is down, so when the supply gets tight, the prices go up.”

Imports from Vietnam and China have also put added pressure on the catfish industry, and it has hindered the ability to grow.

“Catfish has very good quality,” says Simmons. “It’s probably more healthy than most anything

that you can eat, as long as it's U.S. catfish."

Another factor Simmons has had to overcome is the recent flood.

"We probably were the only catfish operation this year that was affected by the flood," he says. "We were actually able to save our plant by building a levee around it, and we saved a good portion of our catfish ponds by doing the same thing. Water got up to I think 106.7 and the previous high in this area was 101.3."

Simmons believes in catfish. He is a former president of both the Catfish Farmers of Mississippi and the Catfish Farmers of America. He is currently the chairman of the Catfish Institute, which does marketing and public relations for the catfish industry.

"It's funded by money from the catfish feed mills, and we use it to promote the good qualities of catfish," he says. "It's been in existence for about 25 years."

He is also a member of the First Methodist Church in Yazoo City where he serves as the chairman of the finance committee.

Simmons and his wife Shirley live on the farm in Yazoo City. They have two daughters, Emily Simmons and Katie Prosser who both live in Jackson.

The ever-changing catfish industry has kept Simmons on his toes. He concludes, "Situations change, and we're having to change with that." Although the catfish industry may be challenging at the moment, Simmons still speaks of it with a passion in his voice that make it obvious of his love for what he does. **DBJ**