Local farmer turned entrepreneur celebrates 60th year in rice farming

BY SUSAN ROVEGNO
PUBLISHER



PHOTOS BY SUSAN ROVEGNO

Local rice farmer and entrepreneur Des Woods will celebrate his sixtieth year in rice farming in 2024.



Brookshire Drying Company Inc., located at 1019 Bains in Brookshire, is a rice dryer dedicated to providing quality drying and storage as well as crop marketing to area farmers. The facility exports rice to Mexico via rail and also sells a variety of rice in house, including Texas-grown Jasmine Rice. The facility is managed by Pam West, whom Des Woods worked to hire in 1993 as one of the first women in a leadership role in the industry.

Des Woods is a vibrant man who is one of a vanishing breed of rice farmers.

Woods is one of only four remaining farmers in the area still involved in rice production – the others are Clayton Pederson, Johnny Colvin and David Welch, he said.

Although Woods has been involved in rice farming himself for 60 years, his family's involvement started even earlier – in 1931, when his father J. D. Woods and uncles Ray and Richard planted their first crop off what is now Woods Road after moving from Louisiana in 1929. The family was drawn to the Brookshire area by the region's soil texture, which Woods called "the best rice land in Texas," noting that the area is at the highest point above sea level between Houston and the Brazos River, which signaled good drainage. The four branches of the family – including brother-in-law Chester Jordan -- all farmed next to each other.

That's 93 years of continuous farming.

"The Good Lord had a lot to do with where my dad and my uncle Ray settled, which is right where our headquarters is today. That is the best rice land in Katy."

Woods began working with his father following his military service in the early 1960's, in a sharecropper arrangement in which he got a third of the crop and shared in the expenses. His father projected a profit of $10,000.00 per year, at a time when Woods and his wife were living on a salary of about $300.00 per month. He planted his first crop in which he had a 200-acre share in 1965. "That first year, we made a whole lot more money than $10,000.00."

"It's hard work," said Woods. "We did everything by hand – it was pretty much me and two other hands, and we just started trying to grow a crop." That first year his parent went on a month-long trip to New Zealand, but Woods was able consult with his uncles in their absence.

Wood said that he quickly figured out that most of the work on a rice farm has to do with irrigation and levees. In those early days they had no backhoes. A farmer in Sealy – a Mr. Bollinger – was "water leveling," putting a levee around a piece of rice land and pumping water around it. "The water would show you where the high ground was, and the low ground was so you could go out there with a tractor in the water with a blade and level the land," he said. "But on the dry prairie you can get stuck a lot and the tractors that you could buy weren't designed to run in that muddy water with sand in it."

So, Woods decided to build a 4WD tractor that wouldn't get stuck, meeting up with a "very good engineer" named Jones Copeland. In1969, they started Woods-Copeland Manufacturing on the farm on Woods Road. Caterpillar got wind of what they were doing and came out at looked at what they wanted to do, eventually setting them up as a manufacturer so that Woods could buy all Caterpillar components, including engines and transmissions. Woods said that his neighboring farmers wanted no part of water leveling themselves but offered him a year's crop if he would come and level their properties. By 1973, Woods formed Katy Land Leveling Company, which leveled land all over the country, using the Woods-Copeland tractors. That same year, Woods had 2250 acres of rice that was all his own crop. "You can give those tractors the credit for that," he said. Those tractors are still all over the country, Woods added, with five even being shipped to Brazil.

In the 1970's Woods says that he realized that development was coming and that "we're going to lose this land." So, he invested some of his money in land south of El Campo, but says the land wasn't any good, so he looked at a cousin's farm in Arkansas where the land was fertile, and the water was cheap. He ended up with 7000 acres in Louisiana near Monroe and built a seed plant. At his peak he was farming and planting 6400 acres of rice in two states. He managed his multiple enterprises by becoming a pilot so that he could fly from Brookshire to South Texas and to Louisiana, often taking his little Yorkie dog, Gus. He flew his Cessna for 35 years and also became a helicopter pilot in 1974 as well, learning to fly the machine from his brother-in-law. "Our management of the water went to a much higher level," he said, but he also ended up saving on herbicides through spotting specific areas which needed to be sprayed rather than spraying the whole crop.

In addition, Woods had a ranch in West Texas between Rock Springs and Del Rio where he was managing deer and would take the helicopter out there every year with a Parks & Wildlife biologist to count the deer. Woods now has places in East Texas and Pennsylvania where he still manages deer.

Woods says that he has "been on every rice board that ever was," including being a founder of the Texas Rice Research Foundation, "just trying to help farmers with research" so that they could make more pounds per acre. But when that happens, farmers just cut the price.

"That's why we are building the mill," said Woods. "Finally, we have something here that will be for the Texas farmer." In 1993, 29-year-old Pam West showed up at his office – they had friends in common in the Mississippi delta. Brookshire Drying Company was "a mess" at the time, Woods said, and Woods, who was on the company's board at the time, convinced the other board members to hire her to manage the facility. "At the time in 1993, the idea of a woman running a rice dryer was unheard of," he said. Things started to change then, with the stock prices increasing and offering farmers the lowest drying rate in the state.

Besides growing rice on his land, Woods has a new crop: warehouses. Beginning about ten years ago, people started moving to Katy when they started building all the warehouses, Woods said. Amazon was the first warehouse company to locate on Woods' land, "and then everybody came," he said including Goya Foods, Costco, H-E-B and others.

The value of a place goes back to location, Woods said, noting that Brookshire Drying Company, founded in 1944, is now within two miles of "all these people that buy milled rice." The proximity represents millions in savings on transportation costs to and from the mill. The mill is buying rice from all over the state and is shipping it to Mexico via rail, West said, and she has partnered with TRC Trading to ship rice on ocean-going vessels out of the Port of Houston. "We plan to pay farmers a premium where their farms will become profitable," Woods said. "At the end of the day is about sustaining Brookshire Drying but it's about sustaining the Texas rice farmer – that's it in a nutshell," West said.

Wood likes being a rice farmer because it is his heritage and because he had worked with this father and his family all those years ago. "Back in those days, Katy was a rice town," he said. His high school class of 1956 numbered about 50 and the town population was about 1500. "Having that heritage is what meant the most to me and still to this day does." He has four children and 11 grandchildren, and his daughter Christiana works with him at the office.

"I still feel very sentimental about what time I got with my dad out there. People ask me, 'what are you doing working out there in the heat,' 'you don't have to do that now' 'you're old,' and everything else," Woods said. "When I'm out on that farm – I used to hunt with my dad and now when I'm out there, I'm hunting for him. Sometimes I find him, and that's the tie to rice farming that I have. I am very thankful and blessed that I have been given the opportunity to grow rice here."

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WATER DISTRICT NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING ON TAX RATE

The WEST HARRIS COUNTY M.U.D. #17 will hold a public hearing on a proposed tax rate for the tax year 2024 on October 14, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. at 10000 Memorial Drive, Suite 260, Houston, TX 77024. Your individual taxes may increase at a greater or lesser rate, or even decrease, depending on the tax rate that is adopted and on the change in the taxable value of your property in relation to the change in taxable value of all other property. The change in the taxable value of your property in relation to the change in the taxable value of all other property determines the distribution of the tax burden among all property owners.

Visit Texas.gov/PropertyTaxes to find a link to your local property tax database on which you can easily access information regarding your property taxes, including information about proposed tax rates and scheduled public hearings of each entity that taxes your property.

FOR the proposal:	Sharlene Rhea, TJ Covino, Karen Wilson, and Ronald Perkins
AGAINST the proposal:	Bryant Gaudette
PRESENT and not voting:	None
ABSENT:	None

The following table compares taxes on an average residence homestead in this taxing unit last year to taxes proposed on the average residence homestead this year.

	Last Year	**This Year**
Total tax rate (per $100 of value)	$ .84000/$100 Adopted	$ .82000/$100 Proposed
Difference in rates per $100 of value	$ .02000/$100	
Percentage increase/decrease in rates (+/-)	-2.38%	
Average appraised residence homestead value	$ 221,377	$ 242,035
General homestead exemptions available (excluding 65 years of age or older or disabled person's exemptions)	$ 0	$ 0
Average residence homestead taxable value	$ 221,377	$ 242,035
Tax on average residence homestead	$ 1,859.56	$ 1,984.68
Annual increase/decrease in taxes if proposed tax rate is adopted (+/-) and percentage of increase (+/-)	$ 125.12 6.72%	

NOTICE OF TAXPAYERS' RIGHT TO ELECTION TO REDUCE TAX RATE

If the district adopts a combined debt service, operation and maintenance, and contract tax rate that would result in the taxes on the average residence homestead increasing by more than eight percent, the qualified voters of the district by petition may require that an election be held to determine whether to reduce the operation and maintenance tax rate to the voter-approval tax rate under Section 49.23603, Water Code.

The 86th Texas Legislature modified the manner in which the voter-approval tax rate is calculated to limit the rate of growth of property taxes in the state.

Bob Leared Interests 713-932-9011