

# Earl Smittcamp, founder of Wawona Frozen Foods in Clovis, dies at 96

By BoNhia Lee, John Ellis and Bethany Clough

Earl Smittcamp was a hard worker and a natural entrepreneur, with a love of politics, who started out a milk man before turning 200 acres in Clovis into a fruit-packing and processing empire with the help of his beloved wife.

As Wawona Frozen Foods flourished, the couple donated millions to the community helping to support students at Fresno State — where they met and graduated — and countless other organizations across the central San Joaquin Valley.

Mr. Smittcamp died in his sleep at his Clovis home Monday morning after months of declining health. He was 96.

“We were blessed to have him as long as we did,” said his son, Bill Smittcamp. “My mom, too. She passed in 2009. They were a great couple.”

Mr. Smittcamp was a Kerman native who studied business at Fresno State where he met his wife, Muriel Schmeiser.

They were married four years later and had their first son, Robert, in 1941. Mr. Smittcamp worked as a milkman before he was shipped to the South Pacific to serve in the Marines during World War II. When he returned in 1945, he and his wife bought a 200-acre farm at Minnewawa and Nees avenues in Clovis from her father.

There were 40 acres of peaches and a variety of other crops on the land, Bill Smittcamp said. “He figured out that peaches was where he wanted to focus on and so he then started a fresh fruit-packing operation packing his own (peaches) then branching out.”

The farm would eventually become Wawona Ranch and grow into an agricultural operation — led by Bob and his brother, Bill — that includes fruit farming, packing, frozen-foods production and food processing.

The operation includes Wawona Orchards, Wawona Frozen Foods, Wawona Package LLC, and Lyons-Magnus Inc.

The family ranch is a landmark in Clovis with its green Peach Tree Fruit Stand on 160 acres across from Buchanan High School. The ranch was once more than 700 acres.

Bill Smittcamp remembers hardworking summers at his family home. His dad, who liked to dance, would turn the phonograph on with “Hello Dolly” or the Marine Corps Hymn playing “to get us out of bed and working,” said Bill Smittcamp, the youngest of four children. The Smittcamps also had two daughters, Carole Copeland and Betsy Kimball.

“It was a working ranch,” Bill Smittcamp said. “We had horses, cattle and peaches and we all worked.”

Mr. Smittcamp learned to farm with help from his father-in-law, Robert Schmeiser, the farm managers and their Japanese neighbors who also grew peaches.

“He had a good teacher — somebody to lean on and ask questions — but Earl is the kind of person who doesn’t sit around,” said John Hix, a friend who on Monday still spoke as if Earl was alive. “He is very focused, very dedicated and had a very, very good mind. What he didn’t know he deliberately set out to learn and he learned well.”

Fresno County Judge Robert Oliver, who went to school with Bob and Carole Smittcamp, remembers dropping by the

packing house one day for a visit and catching Mr. Smittcamp working the packing line in tan dress slacks and a white T-shirt.

An employee wasn't working fast enough to empty the 60-pound boxes of fruit so Mr. Smittcamp jumped in to get the line back up to speed, Oliver said.

"That in my mind, and that's almost 50 years ago, is one picture of Earl Smittcamp and it epitomizes his determination, doggedness and absolute diligence to getting a job done," Oliver said.

Somewhere in between farming and getting his kids out of bed, Mr. Smittcamp served on a long list of boards and community organizations. He even ran for office twice and lost.

The first was a 1960 Assembly race against incumbent Charles B. "Gus" Garrigus, a Fresno County Democrat. Garrigus soundly defeated Smittcamp, winning two-thirds of the vote.

It would be a decade before Mr. Smittcamp again sought public office. It was 1970, and this time Smittcamp was seeking a seat in the state Senate against Assembly Member George Zenovich, a Fresno Democrat.

He walked precincts handing out jars of peach jam labeled "He Makes Sense." For six hours a day, morning and night, Mr. Smittcamp, his wife, and sometimes other family members, hit precincts around the 16th state Senate District.

This time, the end result was much closer — but still a loss for Mr. Smittcamp. Zenovich captured 52% of the vote to Smittcamp's 46%.

Richard Lehman was a 22-year-old campaign manager for Zenovich. Lehman went on to become a congressman and a lobbyist, and he got to know Mr. Smittcamp.

"He lived the American dream," Lehman said. "He was a very successful businessman with a brand that is known all over the country. I think he did a lot of good things."

Mr. Smittcamp was appointed by President Richard Nixon to the White House Conference on Food and Nutrition in 1969 and served as chairman of the Federal Farm Credit Board in 1971. He was on the California State Board of Agriculture from 1970 to 1972 and in 1976 was appointed to the U.S. Advisory Committee on Regulatory Programs.

Mr. Smittcamp was named Clovis' Outstanding Citizen in 1962 and named outstanding alumnus of Fresno State in 1980. He was also the 1993 winner of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce's Leon S. Peters Award.

In 2005, Mr. Smittcamp was inducted into the Frozen Food Hall of Fame, which includes the likes of Clarence Birdseye (the man credited with figuring out how to mass-produce frozen food) and Gerry Thomas, the "father of the TV dinner."

The Smittcamp family chuckle at one of their father's many positions — acting disaster governor of California. He was sixth in line, Bill Smittcamp said, but "he could have been our governor."

Helen Smades of Fresno, who has served on various boards and known Mr. Smittcamp for 55 years, said he always wore nice jackets and cuff links: "We called him 'Dapper Earl.' All the women tried to convince their husbands, 'Why don't you dress like Earl?' He was a great dancer."

But perhaps one of Mr. Smittcamp's most valued roles was sitting on the Fresno State foundation board and helping the university grow. Mr. Smittcamp graduated in 1939. He received an honorary doctorate in 1995.

Mr. Smittcamp led the fundraising efforts for Beiden Field baseball stadium and was involved in getting Bulldog Stadium built.

In 1998, he and his wife gave \$2 million in land and cash to the university, which launched the Smittcamp Family Honors College and the Smittcamp Alumni House.

Part of that gift was invested by the honors college, and together with other donors has paid the tuition and dorm room fees of 875 graduates — at a price tag of \$11,000 a year. The program also provides honors-level classes for the students, who are among the top-performing students in their high schools.

The flags at Fresno State will be flown at half-staff Friday in honor of Smittcamp's impact on the university.

"This honors college is the envy of the other CSU honors programs," said Smittcamp Family Honors College director and chemistry professor Saeed Attar, noting that honors programs that also pay for classes are unusual.

Attracting top students and keeping them here was a goal of Smittcamp's, one accomplished by offering those free rides to Fresno State, he said. Many successful doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals working in the Valley today are Smittcamp Honors College alumni, Attar said.

The gift also led to the construction of a 10,000-square-foot house that is home to the Fresno State Alumni Association and provides space for events. Having a physical presence on campus gave the association a big boost and a better connection to its 200,000 alumni, said executive director Jacqui Glasener.

More than a donor, Smittcamp was a friend and "like a dad" to Glasener. He often traveled with the basketball team, she recalled.

"He was truly a Bulldog," she said. "He epitomized what it meant to be connected to your alma mater."

Barry Bedwell, president of the California Fresh Fruit Association, was saddened to hear of Mr. Smittcamp's death on Monday.

"Earl Smittcamp was many wonderful things, a visionary farmer that understood the benefits of value-added products, a successful businessman that knew how to make a company prosper with teamwork, a philanthropist that realized the value of supporting the community and our educational institutions," Bedwell said. "But most telling is the fact that he was a true family man and gentlemen who was admired and loved by all who knew him."

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