



featured

Coming home, dreams, and

By Maureen Meagher

Marion Robinson, a 35-year-old fourth generation agronomist, grew up working on the family farm/ranch in Bedford (Star Valley), Wyoming. He left home after high school with dreams to change the world and no thought of permanent return.

Dreams can change.

This is his story of returning home to live a new dream.

Returning Home

In 1993, Marion left the valley. He married his high school sweetheart, DeeAnne Call, and received a bachelor's degree in human resource management. After he worked several years in the corporate sector, the Robinsons returned home in 2002 to be closer to their aging parents. Marion remembers, "There were not many human resource-related jobs in Star Valley. I began questioning my

foresight and reevaluating what I wanted to do when I grew up."

New Dreams

In 2003-2005, Marion participated in Wyoming's agricultural leadership program – L.E.A.D (Leadership Education and Development). "Prior to L.E.A.D, I had no hope for the future of agriculture on a small acreage," Marion explains. "L.E.A.D was a life-changing experience teaching me there are opportunities in agriculture if you are willing to be creative. A small fire started inside me, and I decided trying to farm would either put out the fire or fan the flame."

The Robinsons recognized that, to be successful in agriculture, they would need to start small and be creative. A new dream – Robinson Family Farm & Ranch (RFFR) – began to be realized. They identified and built their agricultural philosophy on the values of integrity, community, education, and self-reliance. Their commitment yielded fresh, high-quality, chemical-free produce.

"Working the family farm made a big difference for me. Suddenly, I learned what it meant to truly have a relationship with the land."

DeeAnne Robinson

Farmers market and community supported agriculture (CSA) concepts furnished the Robinsons with a sustainable model for small-acreage farming. CSA is a win-win relationship between community and farmer. Community members purchase or earn a share in the farm's produce providing the farmer with operating income, labor force, and a guaranteed market.

2006 – Year One

The first year was a huge "growing" experience for the Robinsons. The family farm was leased to a neighbor, so they partnered



Tender tomatoes are transplanted in the protection of the high tunnel at the Robinson Family Farm and Ranch.

landowners

returning to agricultural roots



Three generations of Robinsons work together on the Robinson Family Farm and Ranch. They are, clockwise from bottom, Soren, Joyce, Bruce, Marion, Anson, and DeeAnne. Marion is the son of Joyce and Bruce, and Soren and Anson are the children of Marion and DeeAnne.

with Curtis (another L.E.A.D fellow) and Karen Haderlie to start their CSA program with 3 acres of vegetables approximately 8 miles from their home in Bedford.

The Robinsons provided produce for 14 CSA members and sold excess vegetables at the Jackson Hole Farmers Market. They soon learned time and labor requirements were too great to manage away from

home, so, in 2007 they moved the 3-acre CSA from the Haderlies to their home in Bedford.

2007 – Year Two

CSA membership increased to 23, sales at the Jackson Hole Farmers Market almost doubled, and natural grass-fed beef and pastured poultry programs were added to the operation. Extra labor needs were met by four

work shares, six teenage family members, and Marion's parents.

DeeAnne comments, "Working the family farm made a big difference for me. Suddenly, I learned what it meant to truly have a relationship with the land."

On a Jackson market day, Marion was introduced to Bob Arnt, owner of Jackson Whole Grocer. Arnt

was interested in providing locally grown produce in his store. The Robinsons negotiated an agreement with Arnt to sell him excess produce.

Arnt stated, "Robinson Family Farm & Ranch has become a partner with Jackson Whole Grocer to bring local produce to the market. Our aim is to give RFFR an easy market to sell their product. We value the partnership."

2008 – Year Three

The Robinsons tackled season 2008 with increased confidence bred by experience. The CSA grew to more than 50 members with 16 work shares to help meet increased labor demands. Sales at the Jackson Hole Farmers Market increased by another 25 percent. RFFR joined efforts with other locals to start the successful Star Valley Farmers Market. They continued to supply Jackson Whole Grocers with as much excess produce as was available. Another plot of land was cultivated increasing



Pastured poultry at Robinson Family Farm and Ranch.

vegetable production to about 4 acres. The grass-fed beef and poultry programs continued to expand, and pastured pork was added to the menu. Everything was looking up.

2009 – Year Four

Tragedy struck early in 2009 as heavy, wet February snows collapsed the Robinson's largest high tunnel. Uncertain of how to finance a new greenhouse, the Robinsons held back on marketing the CSA. With help from the Wyoming Specialty Crop Grant program from the Wyoming Department of Agriculture, they were able to build a high tunnel but available greenhouse space was decreased from 7,680 to 5,760 square feet. Using black plastic and row covers, the Robinsons were able to make up for the loss of covered space.

The season was successful, and they expanded to almost 5 acres of cultivation. The CSA provided

for 41 members including 14 work shares. Sales at both farmers markets held strong. Excess produce sales to Jackson Whole Grocer were better than ever due to the implementation of a midweek farm-to-market program spotlighting fresh local produce at the store's entry every Wednesday.

The Robinsons also began working with the Haderlies to provide healthy, locally grown snacks for the five elementary schools in their county.

"Marion and DeeAnne have demonstrated initiative and perseverance as they work to grow a wide variety of vegetables for their CSA customers and the two farmers markets they support," notes Curtis Haderlie. "They are eager to share vegetable growing tricks and techniques with their work shares and with fellow farmers. Our community is fortunate to have them."

Amori Erickson, a 2007-2009 youth intern, states the internship was a "fun experience where I met new people and showed me a different way of living." She developed a new slogan for the farm, "We don't only grow produce. We grow family and friends."

Future Dreams

Five years ago, the Robinsons started what they thought was a risky venture.

"In today's unstable economy, I feel more secure than ever," says Marion. That security is found in sustainable

self-reliance. "I am grateful for the dream that has returned me to my roots and cannot imagine ever leaving again. I am living my dream, and I hope this dream never quits growing!"

Marion continues, "Our vision for the future is to take self-reliance to the community level. I would love to someday see a Star Valley Agricultural Center where local farmers and ranchers provide local produce to a local market."

For more information, contact Marion and DeeAnne directly at (307) 880-RFFR (7337).



Marion Robinson weighs vegetables for a customer at the Star Valley Farmers Market.

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DeeAnne and Marion Robinson install pea fence.



R E S O U R C E S

Natural Resources Conservation Service

- ❖ www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov
 - High tunnel cost-share assistance
- ❖ www.usda.gov/wps/portal/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER

Wyoming Business Council

- ❖ www.wylead.org
 - Wyoming L.E.A.D Program information
- ❖ www.wyomingbusiness.org/ag/ag_farmersmarket
 - Community-supported agriculture information
 - Wyoming farmers market locations and information

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service

- ❖ www.uwyo.edu/barnbackyard/
 - High tunnel hands-on workshop locations and times
- ❖ www.uwyo.edu/barnbackyard/info.asp?p=10071
 - Article on how to build a hoop house

Wyoming Department of Agriculture

- ❖ <http://wyagric.state.wy.us/>
 - High tunnel grant information
 - Scholarship program for Wyoming agriculture producers