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Pioneers laid the foundation for success at Hoff Bros.

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James and Bob Hoff with wives Darla and Joan. *(Photo courtesy of the Hoff family)*

As with most longtime farming operations, a business is built upon the foundation that was laid by previous generations. At Hoff Bros., this is the case both literally and figuratively.

“We started raising potatoes here in 1910 and built two potato storages in 1910 and 1912. They have been upgraded over the years, but they are still on the original foundations,” said James Hoff, a fourth-generation family member who handles day-to-day operations at the Idaho Falls, ID-based grower.

In the figurative sense, Hoff Bros. was built upon the grit and determination of Mr. Hoff’s great-grandfather, Rasmus Hoff, who came to the United States from Norway in the late 1800s and in 1903 bought a farm in Idaho Falls from Sam Taylor, an original homesteader.

Rasmus Hoff died in 1916, leaving behind his wife and children, who worked the land and maintained other properties the family acquired. His two sons, Mark and Phil, successfully continued the farming tradition as second-generation family members and eventually welcomed Mark Hoff’s sons, Bob and John, into the business. When Mark and Phil Hoff died in the late 1960s, Bob and John Hoff took over operations, with a sound foundation in place and a desire to move the business forward.

Like the family members from the generations before him, farming is the only life Mr. Hoff has ever known.

“I remember playing on the farm as a young child — it was a great way to grow up,” said Mr. Hoff. “I don’t know what it’s like for other people because I have never known anything else. I really didn’t have much interaction outside the farm with sports or other activities.”



James Hoff and his father, Bob, in their matching Boeing Stearman Staggerwing airplanes. The men are both certified aircraft mechanics and restored their own planes, which they use to inspect their fields. *(Photo courtesy of the Hoff family/Thomas Hoff)*

Mr. Hoff said that his work on the farm began in earnest as a boy of about 12, when he was given the duty of changing irrigation lines. He gradually took on more responsibility with planting and harvesting, and worked during summers through college.

Upon graduation from Idaho State University in 1990, Mr. Hoff joined the farm full time. After his uncle, John, moved away several years later, Mr. Hoff bought his share of the farm and joined his father, Bob, as a partner in the business.

Being involved with a family business is a challenge to be sure, according to Mr. Hoff.

“You have to work through the dynamics of being a family,” he said. “We have never had a rift or anything, but you have to be able to put the business aside at the end of the day and be a family. On the farm, you are busy all day farming. You actually run the business at the end of the day when you make your business decisions and make your plans. I had an advantage of seeing how that works when I was growing up. I learned all those skills observing through the years.”

Mr. Hoff learned other skills, too, such as the ability to fix almost any piece of equipment on the farm.

“My grandfather was a very mechanical individual, and that passed on to my father and then to me,” said Mr. Hoff. “Working on the farm, you really learn a lot of life skills, and you must be able to repair anything and be self-sustaining. That translates to a lot of other things we do in life.”

Both Mr. Hoff and his father use their mechanical abilities for more than just fixing tractors. Both men are part of a family of collectors of a wide range of antique airplanes, automobiles and motorcycles, which they have amassed and restored themselves.

“My grandfather started flying in the 1930s and my grandmother started flying in the 1940s, and they were both very active in the Flying Farmers of America,” said Mr. Hoff. “All of their children flew — my dad, uncles and aunt — and now it was passed along to my generation as well. I have been flying since I was 16, which is the minimum age to solo.”

Mr. Hoff explained that back in the day, 120 acres was a large farm, and flying is how farmers got around to check the fields. But while the ratio of farmers to pilots dropped over the years as farmers began using other means to monitor fields, Mr. Hoff and his father believe that nothing beats a bird’s eye view.

“We actually rely on our airplanes to look at our crops from the air to see what’s going on,” he said. “It’s a great tool to have in our back pocket. You can tell immediately what is happening with the crops from up there. You can tell if you have a lot of wind skips or plugged rotators on pivots.”

Mr. Hoff and his father also are involved in aviation beyond farming applications as well. The elder Mr. Hoff started an aviation business, AeroMark, in 1984, which caters to pilots and provides fuel for aircraft on the field as well as commercial airlines and corporate aircraft.

The Hoff family has amassed an impressive collection of airplanes, beginning with a 1946 Cessna that was first owned by Mr. Hoff’s grandfather and is currently undergoing a restoration. Mr. Hoff’s father bought a 1939 Beechcraft Staggerwing in 1971 and spent four years making it airworthy. And this summer, Mr. Hoff finished restoring a 1943 Boeing Stearman, similar to the 1941 model his father restored 15 years ago.

“[The Stearman] was a primary trainer during World War II,” said Mr. Hoff. “When I got it 20 years ago, it was just a handful of parts and tubing. I didn’t work on it for the first 10 years, and then I eventually got going on it. I put in a lot of time over the last couple of years and was able to finish it this summer.”

The father-and-son team occasionally takes their Stearmans out together, according to Mr. Hoff.

“My dad says they are good for nothing because they have a large engine, a small fuel tank and only

hold the pilot and one passenger, but they are fun to take out on a warm, sunny day,” he said.

The family also maintains an eye-opening collection of antique cars and motorcycles.

“My dad and my Uncle John always enjoyed antique cars,” said Mr. Hoff. “Dad has a 1946 Lincoln Continental, a 1929 Model A Ford and a 1946 Willys Jeep. And he still has the first new car he ever bought — a 1965 Ford Mustang. My first big project in high school was restoring a 1965 Mustang of my own, and my brother has a 1965 Mustang convertible.”

Regarding the family’s love of motorcycles, Mr. Hoff said that his grandfather would not buy his children cars, but instead got them motorcycles.

“It started in 1948 with two Harley Davidson 125s,” he said. “My Uncle Jim got a 1950 Harley Davidson Panhead, which we still have, and my dad got a new Harley Sportster in 1958, which we still have. And I have restored a 1956 Harley Racer, which belonged to one of my uncles. As only one of 13 ever built, it is one of the rarest pieces we have.”

The Hoff family enjoys showing off its collection of antique vehicles, according to Mr. Hoff.

“We have hosted Ag in the Classroom quite a bit,” he said. “That program is designed for schoolteachers that need credits, and they travel across the state for a few days to visit various agriculture operations, such as dairy, barley and potatoes. My mother is into catering and does a lot of it for corporate airline clients, and she makes the food for when Ag in the Classroom comes to our farm. And we set up the dinner in the hangar and they enjoy seeing our collection there.”

Mr. Hoff is thankful for all that he has been afforded by previous generations.

“I’ve grown up an Idaho potato grower, but if it hadn’t been for my dad and his brother and my grandfather and his brother paving the way, we wouldn’t be where we are now,” he said. “It’s a privilege to be part of something as big as the ‘Idaho’ potato brand.”

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