

**Brevard County Farm Bureau
2010
Farm Family of the Year Award**

The Rodney and Mary Jean Thompson Family are the recipients of the Brevard County Farm Bureau 2010 Farm Family of the Year Award.

The roots of this family run deep in Central Florida's sandy soils. Before the Civil War, Rodney's great grandfather, Louis Thursby, moved from New York City to Blue Springs to establish a trading post on the St Johns River.

Louis planted the first orange groves in the area which became Orange City. Some members of the Thursby family moved to Merritt Island and planted citrus there. Another group of Rodney's forefathers moved to Titusville from South Carolina to help build Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railroad.

Mary Jean's mother, Grace Hart came from Mayo, Florida at the age of 16 to teach school in the one room schoolhouse in Shiloh on north Merritt Island. Her father, Herman Wattwood came to Titusville to be the Postmaster, a position he held for decades.

Mary Jean's parents were devout Methodists and their children and grandchildren have followed in their footsteps. They belong to two local churches, Merritt Island Methodist and First Methodist of Titusville.

At the age of 16, Rodney purchased the tax deed on an old orange grove in north Titusville. Rodney and Mary Jean became high school sweet hearts.

In 1949, a new concrete bridge over the Indian River neared completion. Rodney's father, Herbert and the Titusville mayor persuaded the Army Corp of Engineers not to destroy the western span of the first bridge built over the Indian River. Herbert then leased the old wooden bridge and he and Rodney built a bait shop out over the water. Many of you may remember that Herbert and Fay Thompson proudly advertised their endeavor as the "World's Longest Free Fishing Pier".

In 1950, Rodney married Mary Jean and entered the Air Force. When he returned to Titusville, he helped his dad expand the Pier and began dredging and filling the riparian waters that came with his orange grove. In 1953, the first of four baby boomer children was born. Rodney and Mary Jean's growing family included two girls, Laurilee and Sherri, and twin boys, Tim and Tom.

In the late 1950's Rodney started building and racing plywood boats. After hearing about a new substance being used in boat manufacturing that was stronger and longer lasting than wood, Rodney eagerly learned to work with fiberglass. His fascination with the new space-age material yielded three companies that built high quality boats.

Small in-shore recreational boats were manufactured in Rodney's old orange grove at T-Craft. Across the railroad track on the property Rodney dredged and filled, the Off Shore 30 company produced a larger recreational boat line and Thompson Trawlers turned out a variety of commercial fishing vessels.

The Thompson children started working for their parents when they were very young. Sherri worked in the office running payroll. Laurilee, Tim and Tom worked out in the boat plants. It was not unusual to see the entire family sanding the plugs that became new molds as Rodney increased the variety of boats he built.

It is interesting to note that in 1967 Rodney built a 72' trawler which was at that time the largest single piece fiberglass boat built in the western hemisphere. Rodney also had a vested interest in two restaurants, Sand Point Inn in Titusville and Pelican Point in Cocoa Beach. He developed Ponce Seafood, the shrimp processing plant that satisfied our community's taste for Rock Shrimp. Rodney's partners in the restaurants and Ponce Seafood were Walt Johnson and Ed Shumers.

In the late 70's, the financial climate turned perilous for boat manufacturers and Rodney bailed out. It was during this time that Laurilee and Sherri became more closely involved in the family business. Rodney borrowed the money to purchase the last Thompson Trawler built while he still owned his boat plants. Laurilee named the boat after her mom and took it fishing. She was the first lady long line skipper in the southeast.

Rodney began his next venture, a 30-seat diner at the intersection of Garden Street and the Old Dixie Highway in Titusville. Mary Jean christened it the Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant. Laurilee stayed on the ocean for ten years, providing cash flow and grouper for the family's restaurant operation. In 1987, she came ashore to help manage the ever expanding eatery.

Sherri carried on her accounting work in the family's office, which was now located in Rodney and Mary Jean's home. Dixie Crossroads continued to grow, increasing its need for exceptional local seafood products. In the early 1990's the family started Cape Canaveral Shrimp Company at Port Canaveral, giving them the ability to control the quality of the product they off-loaded from fishing boats.

Back in Titusville, the shrimp cleaning operation at Dixie Crossroads grew too large to contain in the kitchen. A freezer with a processing room was added in the parking lot. That facility was quickly outgrown and a seafood processing plant was developed in a nearby reconvered shopping center. Rodney built a freezer inside an old grocery store that could hold a half-million pounds of product. He began selling large amounts of seafood products to other wholesalers.

In 2004 the family started selling seafood to the general public, capitalizing on increasing interest in healthy "wild caught" product. Sherri's friends Mike and Jeanna Merrifield joined the operation and The Wild Ocean Seafood Market was created. Cape Canaveral Shrimp Company continued as a wholesale operation. A second Wild Ocean Seafood Market was added dockside at the Port Canaveral facility.

Laurilee and her partner Clay Townsend bought Dixie Crossroads from Rodney and Mary Jean in 2006. The iconic restaurant continues to draw visitors from around the world.

Laurilee serves on the Brevard County Tourist Development Council and the Brevard County Planning and Zoning Board. She founded the Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival, sits on the Boards of the Brevard Nature Alliance and the Merritt Island Wildlife Association and is a member of our Agriculture Extension Marine Advisory Committee and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Seafood Marketing Committee.

When asked "What do you like most about being in this business?", Laurilee stated that she loves talking to people about the unique outdoor activities and history of our area. She is often asked about her fishing past and says that reality shows like the **Deadliest Catch** and **Swords** have been good for raising awareness about American fishermen and their noble industry.

Sherri and Mike and Jeanna Merrifield purchased the Wild Ocean Markets and Cape Canaveral Shrimp Company from Rodney and Mary Jean in 2009. They remain the main suppliers to Dixie Crossroads and their business continues to expand. They now sell to outlets all over the country. High end chefs praise their premium products. One such user recently won the highly acclaimed Seafood Cook-off culinary event at the Louisiana Restaurant Association Food Show in New Orleans.

The boats that fish for Cape Canaveral Shrimp Company are independently owned and operated. Some have fished for the Thompson Family for decades. They have one boat remaining in their own fleet, the 57 foot long-liner "Top Tuna".

Sherri's son, Joshua runs the boat unloading operation at Port Canaveral and manages the Top Tuna. Mike and Jeanna's younger sons Chris and Michael Jr. both work at the Wild Ocean Markets. Their oldest son, Jeremy handles marketing.

Tom Thompson lends a hand to both of his sisters whenever asked. Tom's wife, Lisa works in the office and the carry out window at Dixie Crossroads. The main restaurant office in Rodney and Mary Jean's home is still there, administrated by long-time book-keeper and friend, Patti Volner. Patti has been with the family since the days of the boat plants.

Sherry McCoy is President of the Southeastern Fisheries Association. She is one of only two women to ever be President of that organization. Along with partners Mike and Jeanna, Sherri works every day to ensure that American fishermen continue to have places to fish and locations where they can sell their products.

Her biggest challenges are dealing with the proposed implementation of catch shares and other government regulations. Because of impending rulings, it is nearly impossible for young people to enter American fisheries. Competition from foreign imports make it difficult for American fishermen to get a good price for their seafood.

She believes that some imported products are necessary because they fill a demand for high volume cheaper seafood. Domestic fishermen meet the needs of discretionary diners who desire superior seafood with great flavor.

Sherri offers this advice “Good seafood isn’t cheap and cheap seafood isn’t good.”

Again, I am pleased to introduce Rodney and Mary Jean Thompson and their extended Family as the Brevard County Farm Bureau 2010 Farm Family of the Year.