



Parks Wells honored for roll in festival

Soybeans are not glamorous. They don't grab attention like amber waves of wheat or the great green of corn, says Parks Wells executive director of the Tennessee Soybean Promotion Council. But, he underscores, soybeans are food, fuel, paints, plastics, cleaners. And, since 1994, the focus of the Tennessee Soybean Festival in Martin.

Wells has attended every festival and has plans to be there for the 25th.

Wells, as a then relatively new CEO having assumed the Council's leadership role in 1991, witnessed the beginning days of the festival when in 1993 Dr. Jerry Gresham from the UTM School of Agriculture and Martin Mayor Larry Taylor first began discussing a community event recognizing the impact of the soybean.

"There were numerous rural festivals that worked well across the state and since we did not have a county fair they thought something in agriculture would be the right ticket," explained Wells. "Jerry thought soybeans would be the best fit, and he and



Mayor Taylor approached me with an invitation to meet with community leaders at the Weldon Public Library."

A Martin resident since 1972, Wells was pleased that Kenneth Moore, a Dresden soybean producer and fellow Weakley County, was then Council Chairman. After meeting with the planning group and recognizing the promotion potential, Moore was able to convince the other directors at the soybean office in Jackson to invest funds.

Wells says Gresham, the director of the festival, called the initial check of \$2,500 from the Council

"seed money."

Those funds from the soybean producers and other local entities, helped birthed the event that now welcomes between 40,000-50,000 each day.

"We really had a humble beginning, but we also had the expertise from the University, the City of Martin, and from Soybeans, and we have never looked back," said Wells whose advocacy and education efforts has sent him around the world promoting soybeans as a needed protein source. "It was a group effort from numerous people, and the soybean growers greatly appreciate having such a successful event named after soy."

Wells notes that each year the festival expands and improves. He remembers when the Council decided to take on a greater role in addition to providing facts on soybean farming and markets.

"We increased our participation in 1995 or '96," he recounted. "The Friday night in the park and BBQ contest was always a favorite so we started our group cooking chicken and

ribs. We do that behind the caboose. Cajun Cookers out of Jackson comes, and we feed over a thousand people most Friday nights during the festival."

Wells, with wife Janice, a retired schoolteacher from Union City schools, are not only soybean enthusiasts they are also farmers, with three farms in West Tennessee. Farming and family life – they have two children Jack and Anne and three grandchildren – as well as membership in First United Methodist in Martin, have been the means by which they have invested their lives in the community. Both children went to Westview and Jack graduated from UTM and works at MTD while Anne received her first degree from UT Knoxville and went into geophysics. She now resides in San Diego, California.

"I don't fish or hunt or play golf," Wells says. "After work and tending to the farms, I just want to relax."

And, each year, have a bit of fun, talking about his favorite, not-so-glamorous subject at its very own festival.

PAST GRAND MARSHALS

1994	VIRGINIA WELDON	2006	MARTIN BEAUTIFUL COMMITTEE
1995	JAPAN'S SOYBEAN REPRESENTATIVE	2007	COACH JASON SIMPSON AND UTM SKYHAWK FOOTBALL TEAM
1996	JERRY GRESHAM	2008	COL. BOB SMITH
1997	LARRY TAYLOR	2009	AUDREY ROBERTS
1998	DENNIS SUITER	2010	ROY AND BARBARA WRIGHT, K&N ROOTBEER
1999	PHILLIP CONN UTM CHANCELLOR	2011	JOH PRITCHETT AND SOUTHERN MILLING
2000	MARTIN MIDDLE SCHOOL CHEERLEADERS	2012	THE VINCENT FAMILY
2001	NICK DUNAGAN	2013	DAVID MURPHY, MURPHY FUNERAL HOME
2002	FIRE DEPARTMENT AND MILITARY	2014	UTM NATIONAL MEN'S RODEO TEAM
2003	NED MCWHERTER	2015	DOROTHY ALEXANDER
2004	NICK & CATHY DUNAGEN	2016	MARY VOWELL, JACKIE VOWELL AND VOWELL & SONS
2005	PAUL TINKLE & CHRIS BRINKLEY	2017	UT-MARTIN