



Cattleman, farmer Frank Smith added to hall of fame

By Carlos E. Medina / Correspondent

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Frank Smith loves his job. Even after decades of hard, dirty and sometimes dangerous work, the Marion County rancher/farmer still revels in the daily routine, including the early-morning chore of feeding hundreds of head of cattle.

“I feel sorry for the man getting dressed and going to work in an office. I wouldn’t do it,” said Smith, who is the latest inductee into the Marion County Agricultural Hall of Fame. Smith will be inducted during a banquet in his honor today evening at the Marion County UF/IFAS Extension Service Auditorium at 2232 NE Jacksonville Road.

The extension service created the hall of fame in 2003 to recognize members of the community for advancements in the county’s \$1.2 billion agriculture industry.

The 70-year-old Smith has worked in agriculture all his life. His father, disillusioned with teaching, returned to Marion County in the 1950s and to his roots as a farmer. Smith is a third-generation Marion County watermelon producer.

“Farming and agriculture is not easy, and it’s not for everybody. Liking agriculture is not good enough. You better love it or find something else to do because lots of times agriculture will disappoint you,” Smith said.

Smith also runs more than 1,000 head of cattle on more than 3,000 acres in Marion, Lake and DeSoto counties. He still works the land his father and his mother’s family worked before him.

“I live about a quarter of a mile from the spot where I was born,” Smith said.

While he does not produce as many watermelons as he used to, it’s not because he is slowing down, but rather that cattle is more lucrative now.

“I’m not going to retire. I love it too much,” Smith said.

Through the years Smith has seen plenty of changes to the industry, some of which he likes and some not so much.

“As far as watermelons, all you needed was a tractor, a few school boys and a trailer,” Smith said. “Nowadays, you have inspected packing houses and everything is in cardboard boxes and on wooden pallets.”

Still, he said, he sees the added upfront cost of materials can save time and therefore money in the end. Now, when a truck driver pulls up to the packing house, their trailer is full in 15 minutes,

instead of the hours it once took to lay out hay and stack watermelons inside the trailer by hand.

“That way, you don’t have to hear all those truck driver stories,” Smith said with a grin.

Harvesting the melons, however, hasn’t changed much. That is still done by hand with a line of workers tossing melons in fire-bucket-brigade style until they are loaded on the trailer.

“Every young man should work at a watermelon field at least one summer. It will show them what they are made of,” Smith said.

One thing he struggles with is the highly-commercialized farming of chickens and hogs.

“If you are in the chicken business, you have thousands of chickens. If you are in the hog business, you have hundreds of hogs. It’s like an assembly line now,” Smith said.

The beef business has resisted that model, he said, with producers of only a handful of cows still able to sell their product on the open market.

“People can raise three or four cows on some land they have and have it go to food production. You don’t see that with chickens or hogs,” he said.

Smith has served as president of the Marion County Cattlemen’s Association and director of the Florida Cattlemen’s Association. He is a longtime Ocala Bull Sale grader and has supported the annual Southeastern Youth Fair for more than 50 years.

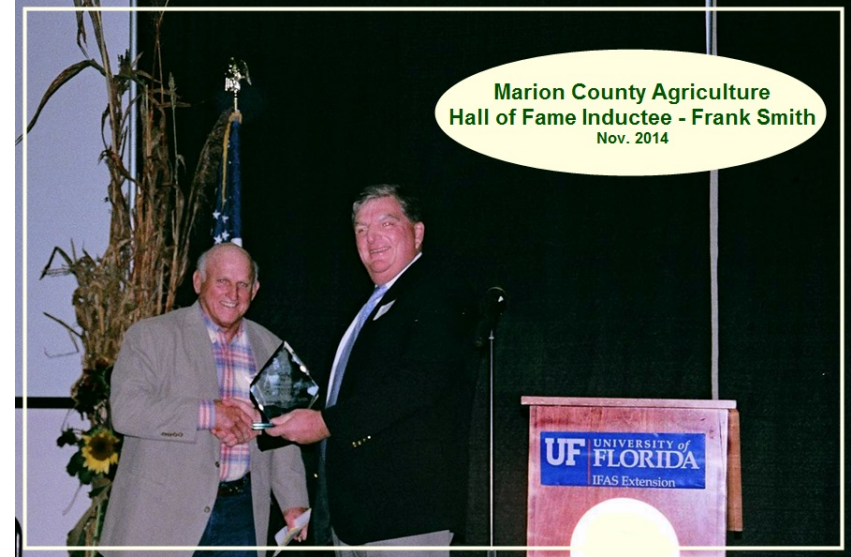
A bronze plaque with his photo and biography will be added to a permanent exhibit in the main lobby of the extension service auditorium, which recognizes 31 previous inductees.

David Holmes, Marion County extension director, said Smith was selected for the hall of fame based on his decades-long contributions in helping feed the country.

“It’s a very challenging thing to produce a crop, especially watermelons. He’s been very successful for a long period of time,” Holmes said. “He has been able to adapt with technology and improvements to where we produce watermelons using less water and less fertilizer. He hasn’t been successful for a few years, he’s been successful in doing that over a lifetime.”

For Smith, the honor is the most important recognition he has received in his career.

“I’ll tell you, in 2006 I was named the top cattleman in the state of Florida, but that’s not nearly as important to me as when the home folks call you to the front. That’s pretty special,” he said.



Marion County Agriculture
Hall of Fame Inductee - Frank Smith
Nov. 2014

Last of the Cracker
Cowboys
&
Mrs. Kay Johnson
Boyer

LWHS ALUMNI



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Don

Family
Friend

John

Maynard
Harris

Gene

