

Bertie Humane Society has pets ready for adoption.

Details/2A



Roanoke-Chowan NEWS-HERALD

©2009 Roanoke-Chowan Publications, L.L.C. All rights reserved.

Thursday, March 26, 2009

www.roanoke-chowannews-herald.com

Vol. 13, No. 143 50¢

Bertie business celebrates 90th year

Powell & Stokes has been an agricultural mainstay in Windsor since 1919

By THADD WHITE

Staff Writer

WINDSOR — Powell & Stokes celebrated 90 years in business Tuesday.

The nine-decade old company did so by continuing one of their long-standing traditions — hosting a fish fry for their customers and welcoming them into their facility.

“We have video that goes back as far as 1990, but we were doing this 10 or 12 years before that,” said co-owner Jack Powell. “We like to see our customers and thank them for what they’ve done in the past year. We also want to see them one more time before they get into the field.”

Tuesday saw approximately 200 people walk in, grab a plate and enjoy a taste of herring, navy beans and corn sticks. All the while, co-owners Jack Powell and Bill Powell mingled with their clients and enjoyed the afternoon.

Charlie Harden, who operates Harden Farms, said he appreciated Powell & Stokes recognizing their customers.

“My family has been doing business with them about as long as they’ve been here,” Harden said. “With the way times are now, to have people you can trust is important. For them to also take time to show their appreciation with an event like this is nice.”

Harden said being a ninth-generation farmer himself, he appreciated seeing Jack Powell’s son, Jon, and Bill Powell’s son-in-law, Jamie Forehand, returning to be a part of the business.

“It means a lot when you see the younger folks coming back to be a part of the operation,” he said.

While they celebrated 90 years Tuesday, Jack Powell admitted he wasn’t sure exactly when the business started.

“We know it began in 1919, but we haven’t been able to find records showing us exactly what date that year,” he said. “We decided we would celebrate the same way we do each year.”

Powell & Stokes began as a partnership between Jack Powell’s grandfather, William Luther Powell, and his great uncle, Jonathan Tayloe Stokes.

“They were brothers-in-law,” he said. “They decided to go into the fertilizer business together, but they also bought peanuts and a little bit of cotton.”

Powell and Stokes began their operation on the Cashie River and shipped peanuts on barges. The fertilizer also came in via barge in 200-pound burlap bags.

In 1935, Powell & Stokes moved to a new facility on King Street. There they had built a new warehouse that was used for more than 40 years. Then, in 1978, Powell & Stokes moved to its current location on U.S. 13.

Also shifting during those years was the business itself which kept up with industry standards throughout the time it has been in opera-

tion. Jack Powell said peanuts changed in the early 1960s, going from stacks to peanut trailers.

“Back in the years before that, people would spend all day picking peanuts by hand and bagging them,” Powell said. “At 5 o’clock, our business and ones like it would send out a truck and two men would pile the bags on the back of the truck. That’s when men had to be men.”

That changed with the introduction of peanut trailers.

Also morphing at about the same time was the fertilizer business, which went to bulk. It began in 200-pound units and then moved down to 100 and 50 pound packages.

“Fortunately 99 percent of our fertilizer business is in bulk,” Powell said.

Another major change for the company came with the addition of the Bertie County Peanuts arm of the business. That more prominent component of the business happened almost accidentally, according to Powell.

“Well in about 1992, we decided since we are setting right here on U.S. 13, it made sense to sell peanuts,” Powell said. “We began selling raw peanuts in old burlap bags.”

Powell said when it began, the bags were actually sewn by hand, but added with a smile that “it didn’t last very long.”

“During the peanut growing season, you would take some out of each trailer that came in to be graded,” Powell said. “When you were done, you’d be left with two or three pounds of good peanuts.”

“Daddy got a popcorn popper and some oil and would fry those and then spread them out on a newspaper and sell them,” Powell added. “Everybody loved them so much he would continue doing it even after the season.”

Jack Powell said the delicacy became so popular that many of the salesmen and others told them they should sell them, so they began doing just that.

“I still have that popcorn popper,” he said.

The peanut business, though still only about 15 percent of Powell & Stokes’ business, has led to a vast internet presence that has Bertie County Peanuts being shipped worldwide.

“We started with just a presence, but you couldn’t order from the site,” Powell said. “We learned quickly that wasn’t the way to do it. It’s been a steep learning curve.”

Now the business ships peanuts all over the continental United States. They have also shipped them to Italy, England, Japan and Australia.

“The peanut business, I believe, is our future,” Powell said. “Fertilizer is still our backbone, but I believe that will be our future.”

While the business was changing, those leading it were changing as well.



Staff Photo / THADD WHITE

Powell & Stokes employee Greg Todd (left) piles on the food served Tuesday in Windsor where the nine decade old company celebrated its 90th year in business. Approximately 200 people turned out for the annual fish fry.

After Powell and Stokes started the business, it was handed down to J.S. Powell and L.W. Powell. They were both in service in the United States Armed Forces and then returned to the business in the 1940s. They operated the business until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Jack Powell went to North Carolina State University and returned to the family business in 1964. He worked with his father and uncle for four years and then went to work with Royster Fertilizer as a salesman.

“I really enjoyed that, but there came a time after four years when I was ready to come back home,” Powell said.

Jack Powell returned to the family business in 1972 and Bill Powell returned later that year.

“Our fathers began to take a less hands-on approach and gradually turned over the operation to us,” Powell said. “I imagine we’ll do the same things when the time comes.”

That next generation is already on staff with Jon Powell and Jamie Forehand. “We’re thrilled to death to have them here,” Jack Powell said. “It’s a sense of satisfaction to have the business passed down, but also of trepidation. I don’t know what the future holds.”

Powell said the abundance of chicken houses in Bertie County hurt the fertilizer business and that was a concern.

While he is concerned, he is also offering a new hi-tech service to farmers that he believes will save them money. The service will allow Powell & Stokes to use Global Positioning System equipment to allow farmers to know what type of fertilizer or nutrients is needed in certain areas of a farm rather than having to spread it over an entire farm.

The times have changed and Powell & Stokes has always stayed ahead of that curve. They have also remembered from where they came and continued to show appreciation to their customers as they did Tues-



Staff Photos / THADD WHITE

Above: Jamie Forehand (left), one of the next generation of ownership at Powell & Stokes, serves-up a piping hot bowl of Navy beans at Tuesday’s anniversary celebration. Below: Howard Harmon displays his unique skill as he retrieves a hot herring from the cooker.



This photograph shows the original owners of Powell & Stokes, William Luther Powell (left) and Jonathan Tayloe Stokes, standing on the dock of their first place of business.

Area Deaths

- Carolyn Spence
- R.T. Edwards Jr.
- Lila D. Godwin
- Edrie W. Miller
- Henry Simmons
- Edward Byrd
- Mildred Bell

Obits - Page 6A

INSIDE TODAY

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Editorial.....4A | Health Dty.....3B |
| Sports.....1B | Area Scene.....2A |
| Obituaries.....6A | TV Listings.....6B |
| Church News.7A | Weather.....2A |
| Classifieds.4-5B | NC Lottery.....2A |

TODAY’S WEATHER

Showers
High: 71°
Low: 62°

Roanoke-Chowan NEWS-HERALD.com

