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## Pioneer Family Honored at Annual Potato Festival



Descendants of the Perris Pioneer Family of Frank and Martha Starnes are pictured June 9 at the annual Potato Festival at the Orange Empire Railway Museum.

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The chance for a new life brought Frank and Martha Starnes from their home in Tennessee to Southern California.

Their love of farming brought the couple to the Perris Valley.

There they raised five children and built a thriving potato, alfalfa and cattle business that lives on through their grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great great-grandchildren.

About 30 descendants of Frank and Martha Starnes attended the annual Potato Festival June 9 where they were honored by the Perris Valley Museum and Historical Association for their contributions to Perris' agricultural heritage and legacy.

"Agriculture helped put Perris on the map and the Starnes family played an important role in establishing this legacy through hard-work, skill and determination," said local historian Katie Keyes. "It's important to honor your past and the great families who made the City and the region a vital cog in feeding the nation."

Sisters Pam Brand Stanton and Liz Brand recounted memories about their grandparents and the legacy of life-lessons they left that resonate with the family decades later. Grandpa, they said, was a "serious guy" who awoke before dawn every day to inspect the fields and walk through the potato grading and packing sheds, which during harvest season employed 40 to 50 people. At night he checked the irrigation pumps. To supplement the family's income, Frank Starnes drove a school bus. Martha worked at the Post Office.

Grandpa Starnes possessed a soft side too. When the girls would become sad and cry, he was there with a coffee cup and offering "to let me catch your tears."

The values passed on from the family's patriarch and matriarch remain timeless: hard work, self-reliance, thrift.

"It was the most wonderful way to grow up," Brand said. "I am very glad I got to experience it."

### Tragedy, then triumph

The saga of the Starnes family begins in the small town of Greeneville, Tenn., named in honor of Revolutionary War hero Nathaniel Greene. The community also is near the birthplace of legendary frontiersman Davy Crockett. The couple originally relocated to Riverside, where Frank worked for an orange-packing company and later purchased property to start three of his own orange groves.

The Great Depression wiped them out.

Down but not out, the family moved to Romoland in the Perris Valley where Frank put his use of wells and irrigation to work at a local water company.

After a few years, Frank and Martha Starnes purchased 20-acres, planted alfalfa and raised cattle—an enterprise that eventually grew to more than 400 acres and included potatoes. Potatoes eventually became the biggest cash crop. Grown, graded, washed and iced down to keep them cool, railroad box cars loaded with prized White Rose potatoes left Perris for destinations throughout the U.S.

Frank and Martha Starnes remained major players in Perris Valley agriculture until 1952, when Frank fell ill with heart problems. He downsized the family's operation to 80 acres, growing alfalfa, pasture feed and cattle until his death in 1958. Martha Starnes died in 1987.

### Great memories

Family members came to Perris from as far away as Oregon to attend the Potato Festival ceremony.

For Stanton and Brand, the gathering was a trip down memory lane—to a time when roads in Perris were mostly dirt and lined with pepper and eucalyptus trees, when 75-cents an hour to grade potatoes was good pay and when grandkids like Stanton and Brand could always stop by grandma and grandpa's house, get a hug and enjoy a humungous breakfast of homemade biscuits and gravy, pancakes, bacon and sausage. Oatmeal cookies for snacks later in the day.

The passage of decades haven't dimmed their memories of the couple who provided life rules to live by while establishing a legacy of agricultural excellence in the Perris Valley.

"It's a part of our lives we need to share," Stanton said.



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