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City Celebrates Fred T. Perris Day



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas (right) and Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley present a proclamation to Larry Smith, a member of a Perris Pioneer Family, during the annual Fred T. Perris Day celebration on January 28.

Media Contact

Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-943-6100
jvargo@cityofperris.org

Honesty, integrity, hard work, a can-do-get-it-done attitude.

Those characteristics exemplified Perris Valley pioneers John Wesley Smith Sr. and Susie Burchill Smith, who arrived nearly 100 years ago and established a family-farming tradition that, over five generations, produced prodigious amounts of potatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa and wheat.

Descendants of John and Susie Smith were on hand Jan. 28 as the Perris Valley Historical and Museum Association honored them during its annual celebration of Fred T. Perris Day, naming them Pioneer Family for 2017.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley were on hand to present proclamations of support and thank the Smith family for its contributions to Perris and the Perris Valley.

"We come here today to honor those who have made a contribution to our City," Vargas said. "It is very important that we continue to acknowledge and celebrate the history of our City. I hope for many years to come the City Council continues its support for the history of Perris."

Ashley called the Smith family "an important part of this Valley for a long, long time." He said events like Fred T. Perris Day—named in honor of the chief engineer of the California Southern Railroad who surveyed portions of the City—unite today's residents with the pioneers who planted the roots of a great community.

"Many residents to the Perris Valley are relatively new," Ashley said. "People want to identify ties with their community. They want to understand the history of their community and become part of it."



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and his wife, Julie, look over a display about the pioneer Smith family inside the historic Depot Building.

Seeking healthy environment

John Wesley Smith and Susie Burchill Smith were natives of Ontario, Canada and Minnesota before moving to Garden Grove, when Susie's health took a turn for the worse. Doctors advised the couple to seek a drier climate. By 1923 the couple decided to move to Nuevo in the Perris Valley and sold their Orange County property, which was used to build Garden Grove High School. They purchased property at Nuevo and Dunlap roads.

The couple had seven children, five boys and two girls.

Over time, the family worked hundreds of acres of land in the City. By the 1930s, potato farming had become profitable, said Larry Smith, a grandson of the pioneer couple who helped compile the family history for Fred T. Perris Day.

Larry Smith said life in Perris as a kid was "full of good memories." Teen-agers raced their jalopies down San Jacinto Avenue. The Y-Not was a popular hangout for teens and families looking for drive-in food fare. Movies at the Perris Theatre provided entertainment.

For groceries, Kirkpatrick's Grocery Store at Fifth and D streets was the spot to shop. Just a block south, every farmer shopped at Reynold's Hardware for needed agriculture supplies. Schroeder's Machine shop at Seventh and D served as a fix-it shop for almost anything.

"Life was simple, life was easy," Larry Smith said. "There was no Internet, no computers. You were lucky if you had a radio. Television offered only five or six channels. You spent most of the time outside."

By 1951, the Smith family owned and operated their own packing house.



Larry Smith, a grandson of Perris pioneers John and Susie Smith, relates episodes in the family history as relatives listen during the annual Fred T. Perris Day.

Words to live by

Larry Smith said the key to the family's success was simple: never give up. He said the informal family motto was "keep going and don't look back."

"You could not find a more honest bunch of a family with more integrity than the Smiths," he said. "We were hard-working and none of us knew the meaning of the word 'quit.'"

Most of the family property was sold over the years to make way for homes, business and other development. The new Orange Vista High School, at Evans Road and Orange Avenue, stands on former Smith farmland. Although no longer active in agriculture, Larry Smith said the family will never forget its time in Perris and is grateful for the honor bestowed on it.

"Our heritage and roots are still here," he said. "It's a good day for the Smiths. We're honored to be here and receive this recognition."

Preserving Perris history

Katie Keyes, a local historian and author, said she is glad the City of Perris is committed to preserving its past. The annual Fred T. Perris Day takes place in the restored 1892 train Depot, which Keyes called a "treasure."

The City also has restored the former Bank of Perris building which serves as a City archive center. The City purchased the art deco Perris Theatre and hopes to return the building to its 1930's glory. Several businesses along historic D Street have undergone façade improvements that returns their exteriors to the look of yesteryear.

"Perris is a great city that takes care of its history," Keyes said.



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and local historian Katie Keyes chat during Fred T. Perris Day at the historic Depot Building.



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Perris, CA 92570

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