

Grower Profile



Future Is Bright for Third Generation

By Tim Linden

When 83-year-old Sam McIntyre was a younger man, he didn't think his son Scott should follow him into the business of growing avocados and lemons in California. Today, Sam and Scott have no such reservations as the third generation of the McIntyre family takes up avocado production for a living.

"He wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer," says Scott McIntyre, who is the chief executive officer of Somis Pacific, which is a professional farm management firm based in Moorpark, CA. The company manages 4,500 acres of fruit trees from San Diego to Ventura counties. About 2,000 are avocados and 2,500 are citrus, mostly lemons.

Sam McIntyre was born in 1934 in Anaheim, CA, and raised on a chicken ranch. "My folks had 8,000 laying hens," he remembers. In the early 1950s, the elder McIntyre entered junior college, was drafted and served two years in the military, and then finished his education at the agricultural school at Cal Poly Pomona.

He started his agricultural career working in the chemical end of the business for Standard Oil, which was a large Southern California land owner. Soon thereafter, he was in the lemon business handling pest control issues and living in Somis in eastern Ventura County. It has been his hometown ever since.

By the 1960s, Sam was in the farm management business with a large landowner managing a number of crops including sugar beets, lima beans and avocados. In the 1970s, he was involved with another firm that developed thousands of acres

into 20-40 acre ag parcels that were mostly avocado groves. In those years, Sam was deeply involved in the avocado industry and served several terms on the California Avocado Commission. "I was there in the Angie Dickinson years," he quipped.

Next, Sam and three partners formed a farm management company that was originally called Pro Ag. Sam eventually bought out his partners and renamed the operation Somis Pacific.

Though his dad wasn't certain that farm management held a future for his son, Scott had no doubts. "I wanted to be a farm manager. I knew I'd get a two-way radio, a new truck every year and could wear a cowboy hat. That was good enough for me."

He went to Fresno State University, graduated in farm management and soon landed a job managing avocado groves in Temecula. It wasn't long after that he opened up a division of Pro Ag in Temecula. In 1988, he transitioned the firm to his own control and renamed it Sierra Pacific Farms. He continued to grow the avocado portion of the business, mostly managing other people's groves, but also owning some of his own.

In 2000, the companies reunited as Scott took over day-to-day operations of Somis Pacific. Sierra Pacific is now a subsidiary. Sam has backed away from the table a bit, but Scott calls him the company's water expert as he serves on many water boards and is integral to that very crucial part of farming.

Besides water, Sam says he always focused on the lemon

part of the business and credits his son for greatly increasing the company's involvement in avocado management over the past couple of decades.

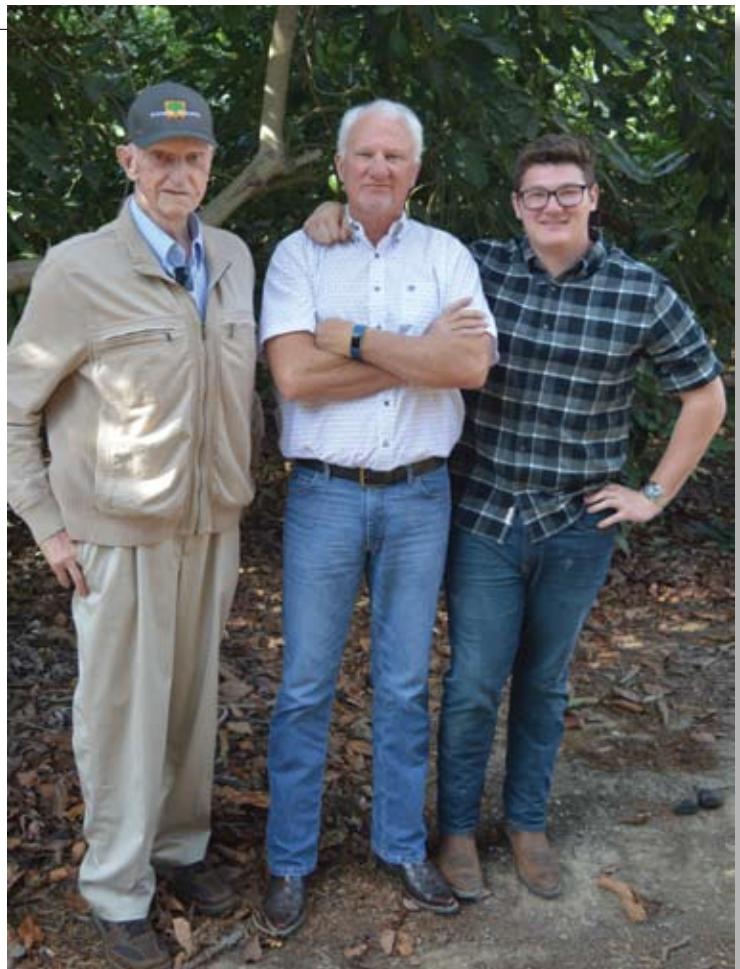
While Sam didn't encourage Scott to get into the business, the two admit that Scott's son Hayden has been brainwashed to become the third generation of McIntyres to be in the farm management business. Hayden is now 19 years old and going to San Diego Mesa College. He plans to transfer to a four-year college soon and study ag management and viticulture. Hayden has been working in the company since he was 16 and spends most of his spare time learning the business. He said he is focused on avocados but wine grapes also interest him. In fact, Scott's brother Steve is a wine growing expert in the Central Coast region operating a firm called Monterey Pacific, offering professional expertise and services to growers in that area.

All three of the Somis Pacific McIntyres believe wine grapes may offer some opportunities in the future, but they are very bullish on California avocados. Scott points to the more than two billion pounds of avocados that will be consumed in the United States this year as proof that the commodity has a bright future. And he says as the only locally-grown product in that sector, the California avocado has a marketing advantage. He expects California avocados to be sold very close to home where that locally grown moniker resonates with consumers and commands a premium.

With water being virtually all-important, he predicts that within a few years, only groves with access to less expensive irrigation will survive commercially. He said it's just a matter of dollars and cents. Rising water rates in many parts of the state – especially San Diego County – are causing and will cause growers to abandon their groves. He said as water costs per acre get up to \$12,000 it's impossible to make a living. As such, he expects some acreage to go out of production and for a 400 million pound crop, like the one expected in 2018 – to be a high water mark. "I don't think we'll ever see 500 million pounds again," he said, speaking of California's total avocado production.

But he believes the fewer pounds will create a great marketing situation for California's fruit. Already, he credits the California Avocado Commission for keeping the industry so vibrant over the past several decades. "It's all about marketing," he said. "I'm a very big fan of Jan DeLyser. As long as the Commission continues to promote, I think we will do just fine."

But on the other hand, he believes the industry needs to continue to make a commitment to production research. "There is a lot we don't know. Pruning is still unknown. We still don't have it down," he said, referring to his belief that there needs to be more information that gives a blueprint for best pruning techniques.



Sam, Scott and Hayden McIntyre

While there is a lot of talk about high density plantings, Scott says Somis Pacific is moving in the other direction. "We are looking at 20 by 20 plantings."

He opines that because of increased knowledge, it's possible to grow avocado trees bigger and faster. He said it's all about the canopy...the more canopy per acre, the more avocados you are going to produce, regardless of the number of trees. And fewer trees mean less water and reduced water costs.

It is the topic of water that causes Sam McIntyre to survey his years in the business and note that the most important change to avocado production was the introduction of drip irrigation. That technological advance allowed for greater concentration of water in the right spot and allowed the industry to survive soaring water rates for so long.

Scott believes technology will continue to advance the business of farming and help solve problems and avert disasters. He points to his cell phone and notes that when it's time to turn on the wind machines because of a looming freeze, he now gets an alert via his cell phone telling him the machines have automatically been turned on. That surely beats the phone calls in the middle of the night that the first generation of farm manager McIntyres would get from a field man so he could go turn on the machine manually. 