

# Simmons Catfish Turns 25



Photo by Vernon Sikes

Simmons Farm-Raised Catfish President Harry Simmons credits the company's success during its first 25 years of operation to the management team. Pictured with Simmons are some of the employees he recognizes as being key to the company's success. They are, from left, Seger Collier, operations; Mark Henderson, sales; Delores Hollowell, accountant; Jim Moore, human resources; Simmons; Bill Meeks, sales; Hardy White, plant manager; and B.B. Crisler, shipping and inventory control.

## After a quarter of a century, Simmons remains focused on quality

By VERNON SIKES  
Herald Correspondent

*"Every time a shipment of Simmons Farm Raised Catfish goes to a customer, my name is on it. I guess the whole thing boils down to this: I'm proud of my family's good name. I won't put it on a product that doesn't deserve to be called Simmons."*

— Harry Simmons, president of Simmons Farm Raised Catfish

Last month, the Simmons Farm Raised Catfish team celebrated a quarter century of catfish processing. After so many years in the business, company President Harry

Simmons' commitment to producing a quality product remains a guiding force in what he does.

"We're doing about 450,000 live pounds (of catfish) per week now," Simmons said recently. "Last year, we did almost 23 million pounds for the year."

Those figures stand in stark contrast to the statistics derived from the company's earlier years. With the construction of their first processing building in 1982, their initial production goal was 10,000 pounds a week. But after about a month of tweaking the process, they upped that figure to 10,000 pounds a day. Twenty-five years later,

the 240-employee plant produces some 90,000 pounds of farm-raised catfish every single day.

"Our goal when we first started was to try to do 10,000 (pounds) per week and 2,000 pounds per day," he said. "We were just getting into the catfish farming business. And then we had grown some fish, so we were trying to market them, so we built this first little building here that we've added to probably six times."

While the company's original intention was to sell the production of 10,000 pounds of catfish to local markets, including Yazoo City, Jackson and Vicksburg.

Today, their largest retail

customer is in Los Angeles. Additionally, Simmons Farm Raised Catfish supplies all the catfish for one division of Cracker Barrel Restaurants.

"We do stretch out a little bit, but 80 percent of our sales is within about 500 miles of the plant," Simmons, 56, said.

The company works with a company in Jackson that does some exporting. Among the countries importing the Yazoo County catfish are Belgium, Japan and Germany.

Asked for his reflections on the company's first 25 years, he said at first, "I was just glad we survived another month or year, but once we got our management crew in

place and we got some experience, then when we weren't afraid we were going to go out of business every month, it started to gel and now, we're running pretty hard right now. Sales have been good. We probably couldn't sell much more than we're doing now without adding some equipment or adding some people and different things."

The demand for catfish continues to increase. When Simmons went into the catfish business, the catfish industry sold 30 millions of catfish.

"We've (the catfish industry) been declining the last three years, but we've worked up to 660 million," he said. "I think

that was in 2003. Demand has been good and has continued to increase. We have an industry, the Catfish Institute, that does generic promotions. I think that's played a big role of improving the perception of catfish and increasing the demand."

The company has a payroll of some \$6 million annually. Simmons owns 75 percent of the plant and John Phillips, Chat Phillips and Will Phillips own 25 percent. The Phillips have about 2,000 acres of catfish ponds and the Simmons, some 1,500 acres. Together, they have another

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Photo by Vernon Sikes

Harry Simmons holds one of the boxes his company uses to package its farm-raised catfish. The quality assurance statement at the bottom right is on every box. It reads "We, at Simmons, are totally committed to producing the absolute best U.S. Catfish. After all, my name is on every box." For 25 years the Yazoo County company has taken pride in producing a quality product. Those who have been with the company since the beginning have seen many positive changes as the industry has grown.



Photo by Vernon Sikes

Simmons Catfish employees on another busy day of work at the company's processing plant. Workers begin collecting live fish from the ponds at 5:30 a.m. each day. The fish arrives at the processing plant at 7:30 a.m. and the processing runs until around 4:30 p.m.



Special to The Herald

Harry Simmons (right) is pictured with his father Harry D. "Red" Simmons Sr. on the day the processing plant in the background opened in 1982.

### Simmons (from page 3B): Strong employees make for a strong company

800 acres and a 400-acre operation that grows only fingerlings to restock the ponds. "We were all new in the catfish business," Simmons said in an article two years ago as he described his entry into the business. "We had built ponds on the farm and were growing catfish but really no place to market them. There were about 12,000 acres of catfish ponds in Mississippi at that time (1982), and now there are over 100,000 acres. During the early '80s, it expanded pretty quickly from the 12,000, so the industry was growing some fish, but really no way to market them."

In the early days, most of the fish was sold to distant processors. The closest catfish processor was in Belzoni and Indianola. That's when Simmons built a small building on the present site to process the fish. Today, workers begin collecting live fish from the ponds at 5:30 a.m. each day. They are transported and arrive alive at the processing plant at 7:30 a.m. and the processing runs until 4:30 p.m. or so and then the clean-up crew works all night cleaning and sanitizing the plant. Even during the day, production lines close down for a complete scrub down every two hours.

The sterile environment of the Simmons plant far exceeds prevailing industry standards for cleanliness and hygiene.

"I think our challenge now is to try to determine what we're going to do in the future," Simmons responded when asked what's in the company's future. "Some of the people who work here are nearing retirement or the slowing down age. Trying to determine what we are going to do. Some strategic planning. Do we continue to add things to the production process so that we can continue to grow sales, or do we just focus on what we have and the quality and try to make it where another management crew might ease in?"

One factor to be considered in the company's future is the availability of a reliable workforce.

"I guess that's what limits what we may do in the future ... what the labor pool (status is)," he said.

One of the reasons for the success of Simmons Farm Raised Catfish is the management team. He gives special recognition to 12 employees, some of whom have been with the company for 25 years. They are:

- \* Delores Hollowell, accountant
- \* Hardy White, plant manager
- \* Jim Moore, human resources
- \* B.B. Crisler, shipping and inventory control
- \* Bill Meeks, sales
- \* Mark Henderson, sales
- \* Seger Collier, operations
- \* Butch Smith, truck driver
- \* Dean Sartain, truck driver
- \* Jan Williams, quality control supervisor
- \* James Bryant, assistant plant manager
- \* Anna Jones, filet and trim supervisor

With that team in place, Simmons said he feels comfortable in taking a little time off.

"I've never taken two weeks off, but I'll take a week off. I like what I'm doing, so when I take off, I'm really wishing I was back."