



ED RYAN

With more than 4,800 square miles and a population of about 1,200, Garfield County has roughly one person per four square miles. Jordan, the county's only municipality, is home to an award-winning family business that has helped feed the people of the area for 60 years. How is it possible for a business to be successful and grow in such a remote location?

James (Jimmy) and Jessie Ryan purchased the Jordan Meat Market in 1957 and opened Ryan Grocery in 1958. From the beginning, cutting and packaging of farm-harvest animals was central to the business plan. Now known as Ryan Grocery and Processing, the operation has expanded several times and diversified to include an in-house bakery, full-service deli and a state-of-the-art facility for processing and curing meats.

Family

Ed, son of Jimmy and Jessie, currently runs the business. Jimmy, at age 88, still works in the office most days; and Ed's son Reid is fundamental at the processing plant. Like all the Ryan kids, Ed started working at the store at about age five, sweeping and taking out the trash. His brother, who passed away in high school, and three sisters all put in time, as have Ed's two daughters. "It takes the whole family," said Ed. "My mom was very instrumental in making the business work."

Jimmy Ryan grew up in Brusett, 18 miles northwest of Jordan. After serving in the Korean War and working in a Billings packing plant, he found his way home.

Taking over the business from Jimmy has been natural for Ed. "It's great to be able to stay home and make a living. We aren't getting rich, but it's a good life." All the Ryans are still in the region and help when needed.

Ed also credits the support of multiple employees over the years who have become like family. Several crew members have worked for Ryan's for decades. "It's hard, physical work. We try to have some fun with it."

Community

According to the Center for Rural Affairs, having a grocery store is pivotal for a small community. In addition to providing access to nutritious food, the presence of a grocery store makes a community more attractive to newcomers, generates tax revenue and provides jobs. When residents need to leave town for food, they more likely buy other supplies away from home too.

Eric Miller, MSU Extension agent in Garfield County, credits the Ryans for being a solid fixture in the community. "The family efforts to maintain a grocery store and a processing plant are an example of how to hold small communities together," he said. "Ryan's provides numerous job opportunities and has been the first employer of many young people in Garfield County."

The business typically has about 30 employees, eight or nine full-time at the plant and another 23-25 full- and part-time at the store. "We have a lot of kids start working here in high school," said Ed. "I have seven



high school students working for me now. They are all really sharp. They do everything from checking to stacking, all of it. They are really good.”

Garfield County is home to more than 87,000 cows and calves and 17,500 sheep and lambs, not to mention an abundant wildlife population. Ryan Grocery and Meat Processing fills an important need for the area, and Ed Ryan provides leadership and mentorship for many. His community-minded spirit is likely one of the most important keys to his success.

“Our business, and others, are no better than our community,” says Ed. “They depend on us and we depend on them.”

To that end, the Ryans are active throughout the community and region. They cater the local Walleye Unlimited Banquet and other events; offer tours, a carcass show and education opportunities for 4-H and FFA youth; and strongly support the local school.

Montana Meat Processors Association

With no large meat processing plants in Montana, many communities are served by local meat shops. The Montana Meat Processors Association (MMPA) is an organization that brings people together to share knowledge, make connections with other processors and suppliers and work proactively for economic advancement.

Jeremy Plummer of Lower Valley Processing Co. in Kalispell and president of the MMPA, credits his father Wes Plummer, Lyle Happel of Happel’s Clean Cut Meats, and the Ryans with leadership in the industry in Montana. “Because of the mentoring of people like Ed, my dad, Lyle and others, us little guys have a niche and a demand. If you do good work, take pride and stay current with safety regulations, you can make a pretty good go.”

Plummer believes Ed has remained successful by staying current with state-of-the-art equipment and knowledge and sticking with old-fashioned ideals like working hard. “We all look up to Ed. We respect him. As regulations get stronger, we look to Ed’s leadership, especially from the food safety standpoint.”

Plummer also acknowledges the impact of community spirit on a business’s success. “We’ve had our convention in Jordan more than once,” he said. “The Ryans invite everyone in town. Ed makes sure every business is supported. He’s a leader in promoting the economy of the town, and he does the same for the association.”

Excellence

There is no substitute for excellence. Undoubtedly, another factor in the success of Ryan Grocery and Processing is the exceptional quality of their service and products.

Miller notes, “people come from all over the region to have their meat processed at Ryan’s.”

The plant provides custom cutting and packaging for owner-provided animals. Ed says that from the middle of July when Fair season begins, through the end of February when wild game hunting wraps up, his plant is full. Occasionally, they need to turn animals away, though they work hard to serve everyone.

In addition, Ed estimates that about a third of his business is from processed meats made from products purchased from federally-inspected locations. They do very little advertising as positive word-of-mouth about their bacon, sausage, jerky, ham and other meats does the talking for them.

In the 2018 Montana Meat Processors Cured Meats Show, Ryan’s won Champion to Grand Champion awards in six categories of sausage, smoked and specialty meats, and also Best of Show with their Summer Sausage.

Operating a business in remote Montana has a host of challenges, including low population density and limited access to consumers. However, having a committed family, being deeply involved in the local community and working with other professionals in the industry can be ingredients for success. Ed’s advice: “be prepared to put in a lot of time. No one will do it for you. You have to work really hard, and also remember to play a little. Keep it fun and it can be a great life.”

For more information about Ryan Grocery and Meat Processing, contact Ed Ryan at 406-557-2744. ■