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By Darren Dunlap

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MARYVILLE — If you're looking for John Keller, you won't find him by the phone or in the house.

Look to the fields of Kelmont Farms instead, among the crops and cattle off East Brown School Road in Maryville.

Keller, 72, has spent his life running this farm, and doing it well enough to draw recognition this year from the University of Tennessee Extension as the Tennessee Farmer of the Year.

"If you had to pick someone as an example — someone exemplary of farming in America — I couldn't find anyone better than John to represent Blount County and Tennessee farmers," said John Wilson, director of Blount County UT-TSU Extension.

Wilson said Keller has been farming successfully for more than 50 years and is a leader "held in high regard" by Blount's agricultural community.

"There's lots of operations that are bigger," said Keller, a third-generation Blount County farmer. "(Wilson) nominated me last year. Didn't win. John persevered. He said, 'We'll do it.'

"I said, 'You need a better candidate.' He said, 'No, no. My track record is good.' He succeeded this time."

If there's such a thing as agricultural royalty in Blount County, John Keller and his family qualify. He and his wife, Susan, work on the farm full time, and have for decades. Susan Keller's family began farming in Blount County before John's. She's a fourth-generation farmer.

"There is just nothing better than driving a John Deere tractor," she said. "I just turn my cellphone off, nobody can call me. I have the radio on. And you just go back and forth, and it's fantastic. As long as they bring me fuel, I could disc up the country, you know."

Their third partner in the operation is their son, Sam Keller. He is now vice president of the family-owned corporation and lives and works on the farm with his own family. The Keller's daughter, Margaret, is a food research scientist with Nestle in Solon, Ohio.

“Sam farms with us full time,” Susan Keller said. “We couldn’t do what we do without him.”

The Kellers farm almost 800 acres and oversee 70 cattle. John Keller’s grandfather bought the first 112 acres of the farm for \$1,200 in 1890. He and Susan are both UT graduates.

The Kellers grow corn, wheat, soybeans and hay. They raise and sell cattle to individuals who want farm fresh beef. Landscapers and retailers also purchase straw from the farm.

“Sometimes it’s rather hectic,” John Keller said. “In the fall, for about 90 days there, when we’re trying to supply stores with straw and corn stalks and still do our routine farming as well, it gets a little hectic.”

The Kellers will tell you that they don’t have hobbies. They work year-round, but they find time to participate in community events and are active in their church.

John Keller is a longtime member of the Blount County Farm Bureau, Foothills Farmers Cooperative, Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association, Blount County Mutual Fire and Blount County Livestock Association. He also is a member of the Farm Credit Advisory Board and a Blount County 4-H Volunteer Leader. The Kellers have hosted Leadership Blount, too.

Last week his church, New Providence Presbyterian in Maryville, recognized him for singing in the choir for 50 years.

“He and his family are engaged in the community,” Wilson said. “They give back to the community and take an active role in educating the public about agriculture.”

When asked why he still farms, John Keller looked out at his fields and thought of what his father told him.

The two were harvesting wheat one day, his father standing on the platform of a combine.

“And it was a real, real good crop of wheat,” John Keller said. “We were going down through there, the wheat was going up in the combine. He made the comment, ‘Other people just don’t understand this, the satisfaction of a good crop.’ The satisfaction of harvesting a good crop is real rewarding.”

