

## **Being Bob Evans**

### **A Legacy of Giving Back**

By Lynn Wasnak

Bob Evans, founder and retired president of the 440-store restaurant chain that bears his name, lives on a farm near Rio Grande, Ohio (pop. 1,036) where his career began. He knows he's been lucky, ever since he bought his first restaurant in nearby Gallipolis for nothing down and \$500 every six months, back in the 1940s. "People helped me, and I feel an obligation to give something back," he explains.

Since retiring in 1986, Evans, 82, has applied the energy and goodwill that made his restaurant chain a success to helping other people in southern Ohio succeed. "I'm busy all the time," he says, sitting down to a meal at the nearby Bob Evans restaurant. Right now he's interested in a program that encourages high school students to attend college. He's introduced local cattle ranchers to more efficient grazing methods. "We're going to help educate these Appalachian kids," he says, "...and we're going to save the family farm."

Born in Sugar Ridge, Ohio in 1918, Evans spent most of his life in Gallia County. He and Jewell, his childhood sweetheart and wife of 60 years, raised their six children on the original company-owned farm. Though Evans and his wife moved to a different farm after the children grew up, thousands of people visit the original Bob Evans Farm annually for horseback riding, canoeing, and other events.

The real "Bob Evans" had to overcome shyness when he became a media star, doing commercials for his business. Today he greets the local folks with his good-ole-country-boy charm. He's such a draw, area fundraisers feature a 'Breakfast with Bob Evans' to bring in the donors, says Karen Dempsey, a weaver and caretaker in the restored log-cabin village at Bob Evans Farms visitor's site.

Evans rarely says "No" to fundraisers. "Only two things I don't do," he says. "I don't ask people for money, and I don't judge a queen contest. There can't be more than one queen, and everybody else wants to burn your barn down!"

But his laughter turns serious when he considers his neighbors' plight. "You go down through the hills here, see poor little kids sitting on the front porch, their father on welfare. The only thing that will break that welfare thing down is education."

Ten years ago, as a member of the Ohio Board of Regents, Evans challenged presidents of colleges in Ohio's 29-county Appalachian region to increase the college-going rate. By summer, 1993, the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE) was up and running. It encourages students to finish high school and take advantage of further education, then escorts them on visits to colleges and advanced-training schools, and helps them get

scholarships. College-attendance rates at participating schools have soared, in some cases to 80 or 90 percent of graduates, well-above the national average.

Wayne F. White, executive director of OACHE, calls Evans an outstanding motivator. "It's wonderful to see the excitement when students hear Bob Evans himself say that in his day hard work, a pick and a shovel would get you there, but now hard work alone won't do the job." Evans' positive attitude is contagious, too. "If I could talk with him 15 minutes a day, I could work 24 hours a day," White claims.

Evans' second challenge, besides keeping kids in school, is teaching New Zealand's year-round grazing techniques to Ohio's hillside farmers. "It's the biggest thing I've seen in my lifetime to change things for the better," he says. With this method, cattle don't eat hay or grain; they eat fescue, cereal rye and turnips right out in the field in winter. "They love the turnips. It costs just 19 cents a day to feed a 1,000-pound cow in the wintertime. We can raise cattle here cheaper than anywhere in the U.S." Without traditional feed lots or grain storage, "You don't need labor--one woman can run the place, just move the electric fence every few days. The grass grows here, the sun shines, and we've got water." He looks out the window toward the fields, old eyes a little dreamy. Once these techniques take hold, he figures, "This hill country is going to be worth as much as high-priced land."