

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Treasures, History, Legend Spark Rural Reality Shows

By Erik Ness

The Iowa Farm Bureau's "Renew Rural Iowa" initiative covers a lot of entrepreneurial territory, recognizing farmers and associated businesses that have turned ingenuity into commercial success stories.

From a custom feed wagon manufacturing business, to a hit reality television show, the program presents the "Renew Rural Iowa Entrepreneur of the Month Award" as well as providing support for new and existing businesses.

Iowa Farm Bureau's RRI initiative is simply a good idea that recognizes good ideas.

One of the recent recipients of this recognition is very recognizable himself as one of the stars of the History Channel's hit show "American Pickers." Mike Wolfe and his company Antique Archeology are based in LeClaire, Iowa, where he and sidekick Frank Fritz "travel the back roads of America looking for rusty gold." Holding down the fort is their delightful, tattooed muse Danielle, who deftly vectors them around the countryside via email and sometimes joins in on a pick or two.

Most of the scavenger hunts for American antiques and artifacts take place in the barns, basements and outbuildings of rural America. Mike and Frank use terms like "farm fresh," referring to some of their finds that cover the gambit from visible (glass top) gasoline pumps to classic pinball machines. At the end of the day they prefer high-quality, American-made items that have survived the decades in dark and dusty spaces.

Wolfe accepted the RRI award during Iowa Farm Bureau's annual meeting.

"We've been on so many farms and acreages and find a wealth of treasures to repurpose every day," Wolfe said. "We're proud of this great state, farmers like you and organizations that recognize the value entrepreneurs bring to our communities."

A commentator on National Public Radio recently speculated that this trend toward rural-based reality shows may have its genesis in the tough economic times. It's also interesting and entertaining when the pickers uncover a real piece of American history that is totally unexpected.

This legitimate cultural shift in the landscape of cable, satellite and over-the-air broadcast television first surfaced in 1979 with the advent of the PBS series Antiques Road Show.

The cable networks are currently churning out a backwoods barrage of some 20 shows with rural roots such as "Swamp People," "Swamp Loggers" and "Ax Men." Other chapters of rural American history are unraveled on "History Detectives" on PBS and Larry the Cable Guy's

“Only in America,” where our stand-up hero traverses the country racing soapbox derby cars or mushing dog sleds.

There’s also aquaculture in the offing as “Swamp People” features the colorful Cajun alligator hunters of the Louisiana bayous. Their French/English-based language led to the producers running “English” subtitles for folks who are not familiar with this lilting lingo or have never heard of the feared swamp creature known as the Rugarue.

And where else might you learn that Alexander Graham Bell invented the air boat that skims the swamp at souped-up speeds?

It’s also fitting that the show-proclaimed “King of the Alligator Hunters,” Troy Landry, recorded a memorable promo for the series that features him sitting on a stump in the swamp looking straight into the camera and delivering the perfect line: “See ya later, alligator.”