

This summer, I had the opportunity to travel to Michigan to make a presentation and attend the National Extension Tourism Conference. Ted Eubanks, president and CEO of Fermata Inc. and Great American Trails, both involved in sustainable recreation and tourism, was one of the keynote speakers for the conference.

In his remarks, Eubanks encouraged people to tell stories and provide a memorable experience to tourists. He further added that using this approach will help foster, shape and direct your tourism program.

Some great examples of tourism operators using these principles can be found nearby. If you have ever purchased peaches from Mitcham's Peach Orchard in Ruston, you probably have heard their story. The orchard began in 1946 through the efforts of J.E. Mitcham, Sr. and son, Joe, still operates the orchard.

I can remember from my childhood going to the peach shed to wait for peaches to be boxed, then loading them up and taking them back to share with family and friends. Many times the peaches were shipped or transported out of state to family and friends. Although the peaches are delicious, it's the story of the Ruston peach that keeps people fascinated.

Dairyman and agritourism operator, Jerry Simpson, began his operation, Papa Simpson's Farm in Arcadia, in 2003 after declining dairy prices threatened the dairy industry. Realizing that school age children needed a place to learn about farming, he and his family converted part of their operation into agritourism educational field trips. They celebrated ten years in October, 2013 and average 10,000 visitors to the farm yearly.

A visit to their farm includes a history lesson on how the land was obtained in the 1800's by their ancestors. For six generations their families have valued the land that God created for them. The Simpson's insist that they are merely caretakers of God's creation and want to share it with God's people. This is a story people travel to hear.

Further down the road is Landry Vineyards. Owners, Jeff, Libby and their four sons; Ethan, Kohen, Noah and Micah, established the vineyard in 1999 in Folsom, LA. Hurricane Katrina played a significant role in moving their operation to North Louisiana. As you may recall, the 2005 hurricane was one of the five deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history and the most costly so far.

During their evacuation time, they found a church home and friends and decided to make the move to West Monroe permanent. Now owners of twenty acres in Ouachita Parish they operate a vineyard, winery and tasting room. They are open for special events too. Their story of hurricane survival and relocation are part of the history of Louisiana.

What is your story? One does not have to have experienced peril or come from traditional agriculture, but your tourism draw must be authentic. What can you offer tourists? Can you provide them with a real experience?

The answers to these questions will help you shape your venture. Our state is known for its people, food and places. Just look at the Robertson clan who are a nation-wide success. Their Duck Dynasty series tells a story about a family that enjoys the great outdoors. They were duck hunters long before the show began. They enjoy duck hunting, fishing, walking in the woods and playing pranks on each other. They are authentic and they have an experience that they share every week on television with viewers from across our nation.