

Spring 2021

Backbone

STORIES OF PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURE

Passing down the farm

Family farm continuity

Grotz clan a shining
example, now in
sixth generation

Looking forward

After farming for six generations,
Butler County group believes
organic farming is the future

And more stories from
Platte, Colfax, Butler, Dodge,
York and Saunders counties

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SPRING 2021

4 // Platte County	15 // York County
9 // Colfax County	22 // Dodge County
12 // Butler County	25 // Saunders County

DODGE COUNTY, VON SEGGERN FAMILY

This photo was taken at the Dodge County Fair in 2019 when the Von Seggern family received the 150 year heritage award. Back row from left are: Abigail, Kevin, holding Harris, Alex, Don, Becky, Joel and Lisa. Front row from left are: Harper, Amos, Colton and Carter.

COURTESY PHOTO

Backbone

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Backbone is a Lee Enterprises publication produced by The Columbus Telegram, The Fremont Tribune, Schuyler Sun, David City Banner-Press, York News-Times and Wahoo Newspaper.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A year of Backbone

The last year or so has undoubtedly been defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. But, a year ago this month—right as the pandemic started to have an impact on our great state—we also launched Backbone.

Our mission with launching “Backbone” was to highlight and share the stories of people in agriculture throughout our region. We’ve done that with four issues so far, covering a wide-variety of people and stories. Along the way, we’ve also added colleagues and communities to the scope of this publication. Backbone initially started as a collaboration among The Columbus Telegram, The Fremont Tribune, Schuyler Sun and the David City Banner-Press. It’s expanded to include the great teams at the York News-Times and Wahoo Newspaper.



MATT
LINDBERG

With this latest issue, we wanted to look at the farms in our region that have been passed down from generation to generation, or where a farmer dreams of passing on his legacy to the next generation.

Look at Dodge County’s Don and Becky Von Seggern. They’ve continued a rich family legacy on their farm and helped modernize it so that one of their sons and daughter-in-law, and eventually their grandkids, can hopefully take it over and prosper.

In York County, the Grotz family is a wonderful example of what it means to work together and share a love of agriculture. Numerous generations of the family have been part of their success to date. This is our cover story.

There are other fascinating stories

“With this latest issue, we wanted to look at the farms in our region that have been passed down from generation to generation, or where a farmer dreams of passing on his legacy to the next generation.”

of farmers from our region you’ll find in this edition.

We hope you’ll enjoy reading this issue, and that we all can start getting back to some sense of normalcy after a very strange year.

If you have an idea for a story for “Backbone” related to your community, please feel free to send me an email at matt.lindberg@lee.net.

Matt Lindberg is the managing editor of The Columbus Telegram, Schuyler Sun and David City Banner-Press. He oversees the news production of ‘Backbone.’

Three generations of the Behlen family, Bo, left, his father, Brent, and his grandfather, Myron, stand recently in front of the old family barn.

ANDREW KISER,
THE COLUMBUS
TELEGRAM

Family business

Behlen
proud to
be farming
with family

PLATTE COUNTY

ANDREW KISER

The Columbus Telegram

Just north of town, Brent Behlen lives in his family's home that his great-grandfather built more than 100 years ago.

And, like his family before him, Brent, the fourth-generation farmer, has kept up Behlen's agricultural roots by tending to his farm year-round.

These days, Brent lives in his family-built home with his wife, Jaci, and son, Bo, a Lakeview High School junior. Brent currently raises cattle and grows corn, alfalfa and soybeans on his land with the aid of his son.

Brent originally grew up in a home about a mile away from where he lives today. He may not have



Myron Behlen, left, and his father, George, pose for a photo on the family farm back in the day.



Linda and Myron Behlen stand at the family farm many years ago.

COURTESY PHOTOS

Please see **BEHLEN**, Page 6



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Behlen

From Page 5

initially grown up in his great-grandfather's home, but he has several memories of coming over to help his family.

"When I got older, I would help out my great uncle Loren. We used to raise some chickens and I would have to clean out the chicken barn," Brent recalled, with a laugh. "I would help with different things like that."

Those activities ran the gamut. He said he would aid his father, Myron, by sorting and moving hogs, as well as by doing fieldwork and helping out during harvest season. His love of this work can be traced back to when he was younger.

"I always wanted to drive the tractor with my dad and grandpa when I was really little," he said.

But Brent didn't always have plans to come back home and tend to the farm. After graduating high school, he went to college for a couple of years in the hopes of becoming an electrician.

Brent ended up going back to his family farm to help his father. Soon after, Brent got married to his wife and, a few years later, their first child, a daughter, Jocilynn, came along.

Although their family had a history of raising hogs, Brent and Myron switched over into raising cattle when they became business partners in 2014. Soon, Myron semi-retired and passed over the farm to his son. Myron still lives nearby and helps his son with various activities.

"It thrills me," said Myron, about seeing his son and grandson continue to keep up the family farm.

Memories of growing up on the farm can easily come to Myron. He said he re-

Brent Behlen rides his tractor recently on his family farm. Behlen took over the farm in 2014.



"My dad wasn't sure if I wanted to come back and take over the farm someday. But I ended up doing it. I'm very glad that I got the opportunity to come back and do that full-time."

Brent Behlen,
Platte County farmer

Brent Behlen checks on his calf at his family farm. The calf was only a few weeks old at the time.

ANDREW KISER,
THE COLUMBUS TELEGRAM

PLATTE COUNTY

members back to when the home had a sidewalk around the house, and his siblings would race around that track on their ride bikes.

As he got older, Myron also helped with a few chores for his elders. Depending on the season, he came home and put the straw in the barn's hayloft.

Brent also recalled participating in that same activity when he was younger. He said at the age of 4 he would assist his great-grandmother in that, joking back then he was a little too short to actually put the straw in the hayloft.

Myron started working full-time on the farm back in 1970. He helped raise the hogs and a few cattle that were on the land.

"It was a lot of hard work," Myron said. "...

Please see **BEHLEN**, Page 8



Brent Behlen, middle, his son, Bo, and his father, Myron, stand in front of the home built by Brent's great-grandfather over 100 years ago.

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PLATTE COUNTY

Behlen

From Page 7

There weren't so many big operators, it was smaller hog farms back then. Just about every farm had some of those."

Times may have changed over the years, but the Behlen clan's farm remains.

Bo is the fifth generation to assist in his family's farm. The high school junior is relatively new to farm work as he first started helping his dad about two to three years ago. Bo does chores such as raking hay, moving hay bales and sorting cattle.

"It's the bigger stuff that I help out with," Bo said.

Bo was able to assist his dad more last year as Lakeview went to remote learning due to COVID-19. This allowed Bo to check the cattle at 11 p.m., giving Brent the chance to go to bed earlier.

"That was a big help," Brent said. "It's been nice to have him here helping me."

When Bo's in school, he does cross country in the fall. But one of his favorite activities is archery, which he said he does around five days a week. Bo also has a job after school, where he works at a local taxidermist.

Bo, who is over a year away from graduating from high school, said he doesn't have plans to continue at his family farm. He said he's had a few ideas of what he wanted to study in college, but it wasn't until recently he's thought about going into mechatronics.

"I would be working with robots. I've been looking into that a little bit," he said. "(Other) than that, I'm a little bit undecided."

The oldest Behlen sibling, Jocilynn, is currently studying animal science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and will graduate later this year in December. Brent said she plans on continuing her studies in Norfolk as she'll learn to become a veterinary technician.

Brent said even though his son doesn't plan to continue the family farm, he had the same feeling as Bo when he was his age.

"I wanted to be an electrician basically," Brent said. "That was what I was thinking about doing in that stage of my life. My dad wasn't sure if I wanted to come back and take over the farm someday. But I ended up doing it. I'm very glad that I got the opportunity to come back and do that full-time."

Andrew Kiser is a reporter for The Columbus Telegram. Reach him via email at andrew.kiser@lee.net.



Jaci Behlen holds her the-young daughter, Jocilynn, several years ago while a calf comes up to greet the pair on the family farm. That calf would come up to their home to get bottle-fed every day, according to Brent Behlen.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Brent Behlen, left, and his grandfather, George, pose for a photo on the family farm.



Brent Behlen checks on his horse at his family farm.

COLFAX COUNTY



John and Joe Healy stand in front of their farm machinery.

CAROLYN KOMATSOUKIS
PHOTOS,
SCHUYLER SUN

Like
father,
like
son

Healy excited to take the reins from father

CAROLYN KOMATSOUKIS
Schuyler Sun

John Healy and his son, Joe, sit across from each other in their office on a Tuesday afternoon in late February. Family photos line the windows behind Joe, which show the leafless trees outside. On their farm, around 8 miles northeast of the City of Schuyler, two golden retrievers run out, barking, to greet visitors.

The father-and-son duo sat down, with similar postures, both wearing caps with the same logo. For them, the farm where they raise corn and soybeans is what supports the family. In their lives, family comes

first, and it means a lot that Joe is preparing to take over from John.

"If I had to walk away from here knowing I couldn't come back, sold it to a stranger, (to) drive away and that was it," John said, wearing glasses with a radio behind his head. "That would be emotionally just really tough."

At this point, John has already worked a lifetime on the farm. He rented his first farm in 1976, the year he graduated high school. He grew up one of six kids, the son of parents who started farming in the area after World War II. He always assumed he would farm.

"You put a lot into it," he said, looking off into the distance. "You can't put a dollar figure on that."

Already Joe is dreaming of his own legacy. At the time

Please see **HEALY**, Page 10

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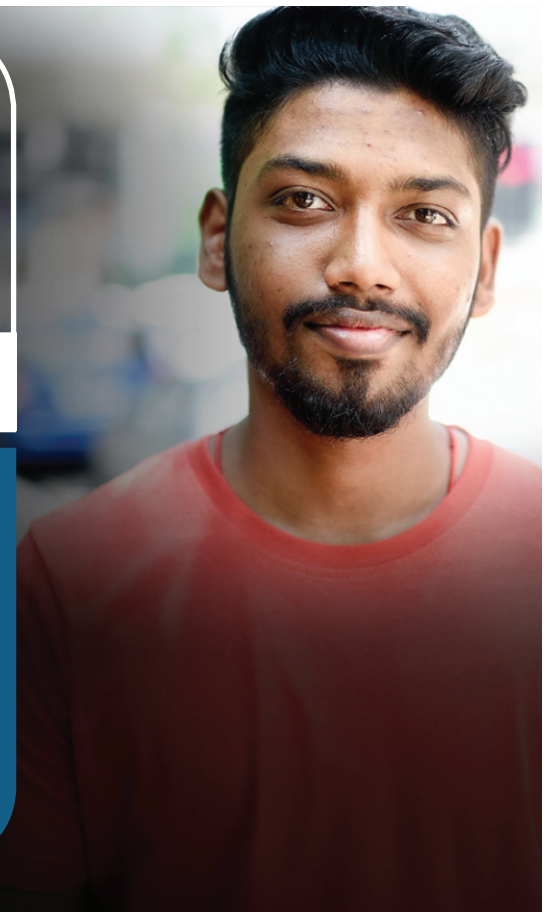
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Healy

From Page 9

of the interview, Joe and his wife, Kiara, were a little over a week away from the due date for their first child.

“They’re going to work on the farm some,” Joe said, in reference to his child. “(It) builds a work ethic.”

Joe has built his work ethic the same way, helping his family. His work on the farm has relieved some of the pressure as his dad has grown older, allowing John to take a day off and know the farm will be OK when he returns.

John said his son had been helping out on the farm since he was little, gesturing about a foot off the floor.

But, he had moments where he didn’t think farming was exactly what he wanted.

“I had friends that grew up in town. I played every sport there was,” Joe recalled. “We, after practice or something, we’d want to go mess around but I had to go help dad irrigate or do something like that. I thought, you know, that’s not the life I want to live. That was when I saw it as work, not a lifestyle.”

After he graduated high school, Joe attended Southeast Community College to become a John Deere mechanic. He worked at John Deere after graduating from Southeast at age 19. But in 2012, at age 20, he quit and didn’t tell his dad of his plans.

“He wasn’t too happy because he wasn’t real sure that there was enough for both of us here,” Joe said. “I was convinced I was going to (help him) and then I was going to work on equipment in the shop on my own.”

Although he had been working at John Deere, he also was putting in hours on the farm.

“I was just getting burnt out. That’s the main reason why. I just couldn’t do all of it,” he said. “I always wanted to come back to the farm anyway, so I was looking for the first excuse I could find.”

Joe soon started working with his dad. In 2013, he started renting his first piece of ground, which he said “wasn’t much.” Since the farm has enough work for about one-and-a-half people, he noted, he also started a trucking business to still earn some money.

Now, in the next five to seven years, Joe will transition into farming the land himself. It’s complicated because the reality is that John needs to be able to retire with an income, to live and to pay down any debts he still has.

“I need to buy everything that he’s ever bought. Nothing’s given,” Joe said. “We’re trying to figure out how that’s going to work. It’s not really set in stone yet.”

Plus, they don’t own much of their land. Since they rent a lot of it, Joe will need to continue a good relationship with the landowners.



John and Joe Healy pose in front of a truck bearing their name. John has farmed for about 45 years.

Joe and John Healy work on machinery on the farm. The father-son duo is in the process of figuring out how to transition the farm.



John and Joe Healy pose inside one of their buildings.



Joe Healy stands in front of the hog barns he put up. The project will help pave the way for the future, he noted.



John and Joe Healy pose next to machinery. Joe is preparing to take over the farm, he told the Sun the week before the due date for his first child. Though he would like his child to take over the farm, he said he doesn’t want to push too hard.

COLFAX COUNTY



A “God Family Country” sign hangs in the shop, next to the door to the office. Family is first, John said, and they’ll shut the machinery off to go to a basketball game. “As far as the kid’s activities, we didn’t miss much,” John noted.

The process of buying out the machinery and equipment and transitioning the farm will take the better part of a decade.

“As I phase out, he’ll phase in ... depending on when he kicks me out of here,” John said, laughing.

People hear the term “passing down the farm,” Joe’s wife, Kiara said, but in reality, he will be buying a business from his dad.

Kiara is from the area but did not grow up on a farm. She works for Schuyler Community Schools as an administrative assistant.

“It was definitely a learning curve for me,” she said. “He would not get home every day at the same time or even at a decent time, some nights...he’s up at the crack of dawn the next day.”

Joe enjoys what he does, she added. He’s able to see his reward.

“It’s exciting knowing what the future holds for us so we don’t have to worry about that,” Kiara said, adding she is also looking forward to her child working on the farm. “It’s nice to see or to know that our kid will grow up around that environment and have that work ethic instilled in them.”

It’s definitely been a lot of work over the years.

“You don’t quit for the day until the job’s done,” John said.

If they don’t do their work, it won’t get done.

“We don’t have anybody else to lean on to do it,” Joe added.

In the past few years, Joe has tried to set up for his future by building hog barns slightly to the southeast of the farm. It’s his big success, he said.



Joe and John Healy pose by a building on their farm. Joe and his wife, Kiara, were expecting a baby in the week following the interview and were planning to have the kid work on the farm.

After a lifetime, John reflects on success differently.

“I would consider my ... whole career as to this point being a success in the fact that we raised a family of kids on the farm and we’re able to keep foods in their mouths ... now we (have) grandkids,” he said. “Being able to work with family and make it work out.”

Carolyn Komatsoulis is a reporter for the Schuyler Sun. Reach her via email at carolyn.komatsoulis@lee.net.



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The Fendrich family farm home outside of David City on a nice summer day. The Fendrichs moved the house from its previous nearby location more than 15 years ago. Now, Randy and Karen Fendrich's daughter, Ashley Kasik, lives there with her husband and son.

COURTESY PHOTO, ASHLEY KASIK

In their blood

MOLLY HUNTER
The Banner-Press

Randy Fendrich began switching his family's fifth-generation Butler County farm to organic operation in 1991, for his children's sake.

By 1996, he had fully transitioned the operation.

"We started in '91 when my first daughter was born. We just started on the 40 (acres) where we lived because I didn't want any chemicals around," Randy said.

Fendrich family proud of their operation's evolution

Marcia Sabata, Randy's mother-in-law, said the land where the home of Randy's daughter Ashley Kasik and her husband, Klay Kasik, now rests has been in the family for over 100 years.

"It belonged to the railroad. The government gave it to the transcontinental railroad," Sabata said.

Sabata's great-grandfather, Curtis Mack Ball, bought it from Union Pacific Railroad in 1871.

The land and farm were then handed down to Sabata's grandfather, William Ball, and then her father, Herman Ball, Sabata and her siblings, then Sabata's daughter Karen Fendrich and Karen's husband Randy and now their daughter Ashley, too.

BUTLER COUNTY



COURTESY PHOTO, RANDY AND KAREN FENDRICH

Randy Fendrich, right, poses for a photo with his first grandchild and Ashley Kasik's son, Waylon Kasik.

Randy comes from the Fendrich family, another multigenerational farming legacy like the Ball family of which Karen is a part.

Randy's great-great-grandfather farmed and so did his children and their children. Randy has been farming for more than 40 years.

Ashley, a sixth-generation farmer on both sides of her family, is coming up on her sixth year of farming.

These days, Randy and Ashley farm corn, soybeans, alfalfa, oats, peas and popcorn.

"It's all organic," Randy said.

His operation is one of the largest organic farms he knows of in the area.

Randy's family farms approximately 1,000 acres. Anything much past that, he said, and he doesn't think organic farming is possible for a single operation.

"That's basically the limit unless we get more help and equipment," Randy said.

Organic farms are limited because they cannot use pesticides or herbicides to keep weeds and bugs at bay.

Without pesticides and herbicides to rely on, much more of the pest and weed control must be done with equipment, rotation of crops, and manual labor.

Randy admitted that organic farming is more work because of that. They can't plant, spray and forget about their crop until fall, he said.

"We're working with our crop all year," Randy said.

These days, the Fendrichs hire kids to help with weed pulling in the summer. They also need more equipment now.

"I purchased an extra cultivator, rotary hoe, and stuff like that to replace the chemicals," Randy said.

Although he doesn't apply pesticides or herbicides, Randy's crops are still affected by drifting chemicals that his neighbors apply to their crops.

"Dicamba is a really bad one. We're trying to get along with our neighbors as best we can and talk to them," Randy said. "That's been the biggest challenge for us."

Companies like Monsanto sell crops that are specifically designed to withstand products like dicamba, but Randy's crops are organic and do not have that resistance.

Even though it might be more time-consuming and requires more equipment, the number of farmers dabbling in or converting to organic operations is growing. Randy said he expects that to continue.

"There's a high demand for organics," Randy said.

Randy said a lot of his product is picked up right on the farm and hauled away.

"Sometimes I sell it directly to the feed

A group of kids walks along rows of crops and pull weeds at the Fendrich farm. The Fendrichs often hire a group of teenagers to help with weed pulling in the summer.

COURTESY PHOTO, ASHLEY KASIK



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Please see **FENDRICH**, Page 14

Fendrich

From Page 13

mill but this last year I sold it to a middle man. And then they get trucks out here,” Randy said.

His contacts are in Fremont, Council Bluffs and even Missouri. Randy said the alfalfa goes to dairy and goat farmers in Minnesota and other places throughout the country.

“Some of the corn goes to organic chicken and cattle farms,” Karen said.

One year Randy raised yellow peas that were used as an ingredient in organic dog food.

And all of that organic production started almost 30 years ago when Karen was pregnant.

“We had a garden that was affected (by pesticides) really seriously one year. We had a tree die,” Randy said. “This was right from what I was spraying. So I just wanted to get away from it.”

Karen said a couple of neighbors in the Abie area introduced organics to Randy and after that, he started going to conferences to learn more.

“If we get tested we all have glyphosate in our bodies,” Randy said. “Because that’s what we’re eating.”

Glyphosate kills weeds that compete with crops, a use which was discovered by a Monsanto chemist in 1970. Four years later, the company introduced it to the market as Roundup.

Randy’s daughter, Ashley, said it was never a question for her if she’d be farming organically.

Since going organic, Randy has encouraged a couple of his friends to try organic farming and has helped others get started with it.

But, switching to organic farming is no small thing. It took Randy several years to do.

“I grew alfalfa in those years and that’s how I transitioned. Alfalfa’s a good crop and it’s good for the ground,” Randy said. “You want to make sure you diversify and have a proper rotation schedule.”

That way, you’re not growing the same thing every year and depleting the nutrients in the soil.

“If you don’t have the nutrients and minerals in the ground, the ground becomes depleted and the crop is depleted as well. You have to be a good organic farmer to replenish the soil with minerals,” Randy said.

And you must be a good steward of the



Doris and Herman Ball pose for a photo in 1967. Doris was as a teacher and Herman was part of his family’s third generation to farm the land his grandfather, Curtis Mack Ball, bought from Union Pacific.



Randy and Karen Fendrich’s three children, Miranda, Nolan and Ashley, pose for a photo years ago endorsing the family’s organic popcorn.

land in order to do that. Part of that means implementing sustainable farming methods.

“We’ve done terraces, we’ve built ponds, dams, put in grass waterways. We do all that to conserve the soil,” Randy said. “My dad (Galen Fendrich) and I built most of them ourselves.”

Karen said they have made those changes because they believe it can produce better food and be better for the environment. She said good stewardship is important to make sure the water is clean and the soil is rich for future generations.

“I want to see as much organic ground as possible,” Randy said.

Molly Hunter is a reporter for The Banner-Press. Reach her via email at molly.hunter@lee.net.



Ashley Kasik, left, Randy Fendrich, middle, and Karen Fendrich, right, pose for a photo together with Randy’s Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) 2020 #1 Nebraska Farmer of the Year award. He received an international award from OCIA a few days later. Randy has been certified by the OCIA for more than 24 years.

COURTESY
PHOTOS, RANDY
AND KAREN
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BEAUTIFUL LEGACY



The home place is where Duane and Brenda Grotz raised their family and still reside.

COURTESY PHOTO

STEVE MOSELEY
York News-Times

YORK – An agribusiness that has evolved from cow/calf production, feedlots and even a Grade A dairy over the generations of a single family has transformed into a successful, ultra-modern grain operation southwest of York raising corn and soybeans.

How many generations? Remarkably, the answer is six. The four sons of brothers Duane and Delton Grotz, strapping young farmers at the sunrise of their ag careers, are all heavily involved in their family's separate-but-equal,

Grotz clan a shining example of family farm continuity

neighboring operations.

Duane, his wife Brenda and son Darren with wife Cara farm together as do Delton, wife Renee and sons Daniel, Rodney and Brent. Darren's brother Tyler, who Duane said was born to farm and loved it deeply, died in a tragic on-farm accident on July 3, 2012.

Duane said Darren and Tyler's sisters, Brianna and Tonya, "Were a huge help on the farm until they were married and moved away." Brianna and husband Brianna are in the construction business in Kansas. Tonya and her spouse, Collin, moved onto an Idaho potato farm.

Together the fathers and sons stand for the fifth and sixth generations. The fourth, Duane and Delton's father Carl Albert, 90, retired to a comfortable home and remains in the Grotz neighborhood with wife Doris. Duane and his

Please see **GROTZ**, Page 16

YORK COUNTY

Grotz

From Page 15

wife, Brenda, occupy the striking Victorian on the home place. The house was built in 1916.

"We moved here in 1992," said Brenda.

Delton and his bride, Renee, reside nearby on their branch of the family's joint farming enterprise.

The Grotz family documents a lineage of farmers dating back to the late 1800s. The quarter-section where Duane and Brenda live today was originally purchased by William and Elizabeth Waldron in 1905. The quarter where Delton and Renee live was acquired by Joe Prohaska in 1908.

Delton and Duane started farming in 1979 and 1983 respectively. They, in turn, split the operation to streamline succession and to allow each dad to farm alongside his own sons.

Their father, Carl A., seated on the 1961 Oliver tractor in the ac-



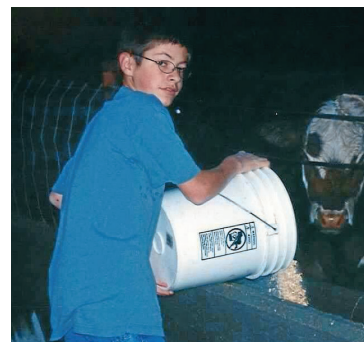
The fifth and sixth generations of the farming Grotz family gather around their 1961 Oliver tractor for a photo on the heels of a historic snowstorm in Nebraska. Grandpa Carl A. sits on the 1961 Oliver. Standing are brothers Duane and his son Darren (left) and Delton behind his sons Daniel, Brent and Rodney.

companying photo, began farming in 1948, left for two years to serve in Korea, then returned. He farmed 60 years until handing the reins to Delton and Duane in 2008.

Duane said his grandparents,

Carl F. and Merle Grotz, lived on what is now his place and farmed until his death in 1983. Merle continued to live there until her passing in 1993.

"I milked cows," Carl A., the son



In his youth Darren Grotz had cattle to feed, but no longer. All grown up now and married to Cara, Darren raises corn and soybeans with his dad, Duane.

of Carl F., said in comments for this story. "We had a Grade A dairy until '69." Prior to that he operated a cattle feeding operation until 1974. That same year Delton fired up a cow/calf business he ran over the next two decades.

Harkening to prior generations, it was Grandpa Waldron who dug the second-ever well in York County ... by hand down to a



Back in the day, Carl A. Grotz, now 91 and retired, used this Oliver and planter to get his seed in the ground.

death-defying 130 feet. The family described how one brave man would be lowered down with a shovel. Each bucket he filled was lifted out using tractor power. How did the poor soul at the bottom of the hole protect himself? By holding the blade of the shovel over his head. That was it.

That very well remained in use, said Duane, until 1992 when it was finally taken off line and filled in.

From such beginnings fraught with danger, York County, though much smaller than many in Nebraska by size, developed into the

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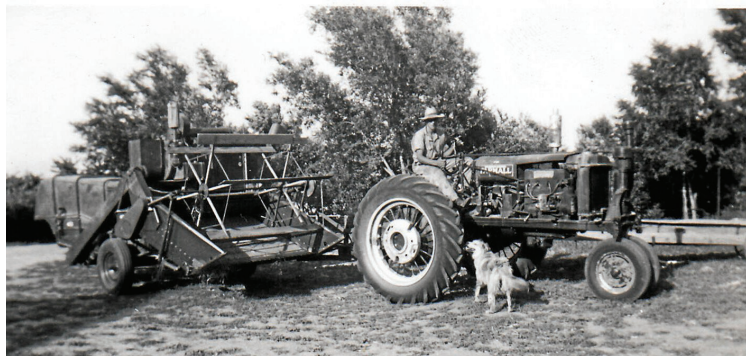


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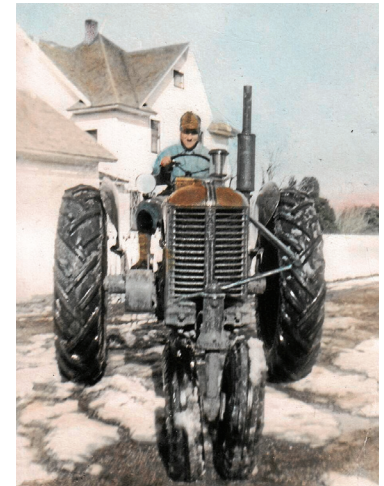
YORK COUNTY



Duane and Delton's grandfather, Carl F. Grotz, shows off the tractor he brought with him when he came from Colorado in 1936.



This CC Model Case tractor, originally had all-steel wheels but later was mounted with rubber tires, was purchased by Carl F. Grotz at a sheriff's sale in 1939. It is driven here by Carl F.'s son, Carl A. The price? Two-hundred dollars.



Carl A. Grotz, the family's fourth generation, is shown in 1948, the first of his 60 years spent astride tractors tending crops and livestock.

county in which the most irrigated acres in the state are to be found.

As Duane's boys grew up there were beef cattle endeavors and Tyler, especially, liked to feed cattle.

What keeps the Grotzs so unwavering in their dedication to farming? A deep and abiding, shared faith for one. "We embraced the faith handed down from the Waldrons," explained

Daniel, and unabashed passion to enjoy a rural lifestyle together for another.

What of town folks who say they 'don't get' the attraction of farming. "When corn was \$3 a bushel, we didn't get it either," Duane answered, sparking laughter from everyone seated around the dining room table. "It's a way of life," he continued, "we sure don't want to move to town."

Carl's explanation for his decades of longevity was more succinct. Shrugging he replied, "I loved it I guess."

"He threatened to quit lots of times," said Duane. That brought another spontaneous group chuckle ... but no denial from his dad.

"It's pretty rewarding," said Carl, "to watch it (a crop) come up and grow."

Despite a quantum leap in technology, the improvement with the most impact on his farming, said Carl, was when he went from handling ear corn to a picker/sheller combine.

"My wife pushed that one," he admitted, a twinkle in his eye. Nearby, Doris just smiled and nodded in confirmation.

Delton's son Daniel, himself recently appointed to the York County

Board of Commissioners, added, "Farming hasn't always been glamorous, but we're grateful to Grandpa (Carl) as far as sticking with it and giving us an opportunity."



Congratulations to the Grotz Family!

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Walkups' 150-year legacy continues on



Wendell Walkup's visitors are greeted by family farm longevity award plaques, proudly posted by Walkup's front door.

YORK COUNTY

“Of course, Wendell Walkup begins at the beginning: great-great grandfather David Walkup. It was 1870, York County at that time not even hinting at what it would become. The prairie of York County was unbroken, topsoil packed solid with thick native grasses, roots stretching deep breaking rich prairie soil.”

JESSICA VOTIPKA
York News-Times

YORK COUNTY — Catching bluegill in a little countryside pond is easy. Keeping a farm in a family for 150 years is not, yet is as natural as fish to water.

In a house dwarfed by its acreage, Wendell Walkup leans forward in his recliner with a handful of small papers with hand-written notes balanced carefully in his farm life-worn hands. The light-colored carpet bears streaks from a fresh vacuuming; framed pictures of various incarnations of the acreage rest in the plush beige carpet. Behind the recliner, which is draped by a tractor-themed throw, more photos. Colorful posed portraits of grandchildren, their captured smiles beaming down on Wendell.

Please see **WALKUP**, Page 20



Wendell Walkup reclines in his chair, sharing his memories of the Walkup family's farm, which has been owned by the family for well over a century.



Years of the Walkups' family farm have been captured in photos, but the memories of the farm's beginnings and persistence are captured in stories passed down.



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Members of the Walkup family were presented with the Aksarben Heritage Farm Family Award recognizing 150 years of family farm ownership. Pictured are family members (left to right): Sean Walkup (grandson) holding Wendell Walkup's great-grandson Liam, Wendell's son Ross Walkup, Wendell Walkup, Linnea Williamsen, Wendell's daughter.

Walkup

From Page 19

Of course, Wendell begins at the beginning: great-great grandfather David Walkup. It was 1870, York County at that time not even hinting at what it would become. The prairie of York County was unbroken, topsoil packed solid with thick native grasses, roots stretching deep breaking rich prairie soil.

Perfect for a sod house, but not exactly

begging to become a prolific farm.

Breaking ground – breaking sod – was likely back-breaking, and certainly not an undertaking for the weak. Breaking David was even less easy; before his arrival to York County, David was enlisted in Company D, Nineteenth Iowa Infantry. But a few months following his August 1862 enlistment, his company found itself embattled in the American Civil War's Battle of Prairie Grove (Arkansas). While that battle between the Union and the Confederates ended inconclusively, the casualties on both sides were considerable. Following the battle, Union forces alone reported

1,251 casualties: 175 dead, 813 wounded, and 263 missing.

David was not among them.

Soon the war sent David and his fellow soldiers further south into Red River, Louisiana. Considered by historians a campaign of Union failure, it ended in a Union retreat and numbered roughly 1,600 casualties on each side. David himself was wounded Sept. 29, 1863 – so much that he was discharged March 24, 1864 while in New Orleans. Wounded and considered by the military disabled, David found himself back in Iowa, still unbroken.

Somewhere along the line, he decided it

was time to move on. Wendell is unsure exactly why, but by 1871, David had settled in York County. David's son, John, had served with him in Company D. Father and son arrived in York County around the same time, John joining his father in what would become well over a century of agricultural and family adventures and trials. John built a frame on Section 12 of Lockridge Township, and sod was broken to fill in the spaces between the wooden bones, settled on 160 acres of generations-worth of possibilities.

Some farm-family children feel a sort of obligation to keep farming. It's been so long – they don't want to be the ones who

YORK COUNTY

fell the farm. Maybe a few of the Walkup generations felt that way? Wendell looks perplexed. It was natural, from David to Wendell and likely beyond to even more children and grandchildren (when asked, his daughter Linnea Walkup Williamsen nods her head vigorously – the grandkids have their eyes on 200 years, she says). The family farm just is. Why would it be any other way?

Since David and John settled, and those following them wounded physically and financially, no one has broken, always rising from the sod. John's sod home, however, has disintegrated and returned to the topsoil. The memories – the stories – have not. As he tells the bones of his family's story, later filled in by military records and written accounts of family history, Wendell shuffles the papers but uses them very little. The papers are but a formality and safety net, should memory come short. A few times he glances at them, reshuffling to find his place. Linnea shuffles through her own sheets of carefully-assembled papers, occasionally prompting her father with details – dates, names, places ancestors scattered.

Those are what the conversation are hinged on: facts – solid facts, hewn and restored through the years by pen, ink, photocopies, printers and minds. Solid as unbroken sod.

More fluid was the progression of crops and livestock occupying the acreage over the generations. In its early years, David and John – like many farmers of that era – focused their endeavors on self-sufficiency. There was a herd of cattle for meat and milk, and a little extra beef for added income. Hogs for meat. Chickens for meat and eggs. Workhorses, animal and familial. Now primarily con-



In this 19th-century photo, four generations of the Walkup family – including original settler David Walkup – pose together somberly for a portrait.

sisting of modern crops like corn and soybeans, much of it cash-rented out, still some cattle, all commodities have been housed by buildings of some form. Wendell describes one of them, which he retrofitted to accommodate modern farming. Still, others have fell in upon themselves, crumbled, hauled away and remnants returned to the soil.

Does seeing those buildings break and disintegrate bother him? Wendell shrugs. Not really. The history, the memories aren't like livestock and crops; they aren't housed in buildings – or even on pieces of paper. They're housed in hearts, minds and back-breaking work – 150 years' worth, commemorated in static by a shiny plaque posted near the little modern house's front door. Summer 2020 the Walkup family assembled in front of the white gazebo tucked in the middle of the York County Fairgrounds. In 1970 the family was recognized with the Aksarben

Pioneer Farm Award for 100 years in the family; the legacy has lasted long enough to reach the next Aksarben milestone of 150 years in the same family by 2020. They were presented with praise and a plaque.

Which will last longer: the house or the plaques? Chances are that memories and the farm itself will last far longer than the official notoriety posted on the house or the freshly-vacuumed carpet – even the smiling photos of grandchildren watching over Grandpa.

Memories of trips to a little pond filled with fish.

"Do you remember?" Wendell asks his daughter as he sets the papers aside. "We had a little pond, half-mile west. The pond had bluegill. They'd bite on anything."

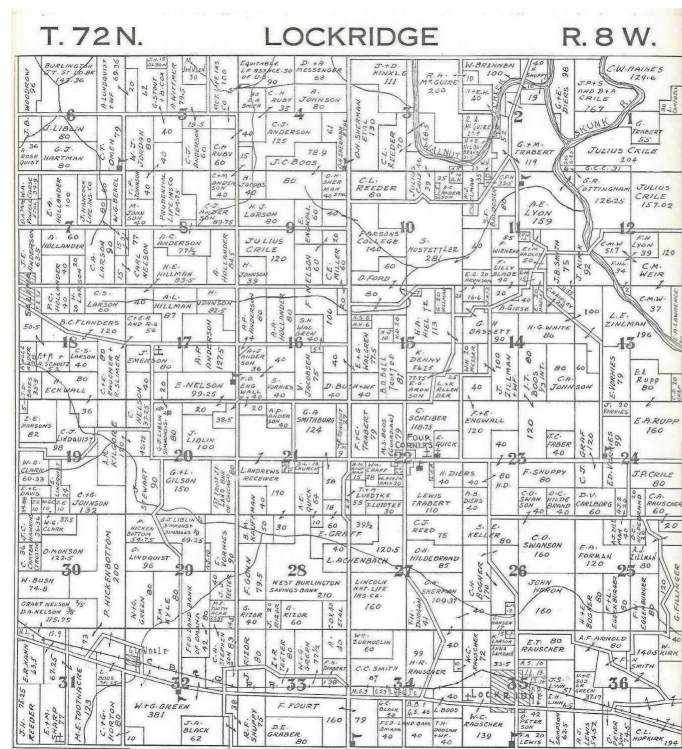
"Of course, we tried to fish and we baited – and caught some. Before the day was over, why, we could just put a little leaf on a hook and throw it in and get some."

"We had a lot of fun that day."

It was easy.



John Walkup stands proudly in his American Civil War Union soldier uniform. Walkup served alongside his father David. Eventually the father and son settled in York County, Neb.



The Walkup family farm, which has been in the family since the 1870s, is located in Section 12 of Lockridge Township. The township is adjacent to the city of York to the northwest.



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Don Von Seggern, left, and his son, Joel, look over papers in an office on the farm northeast of Scribner.

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN,
FREMONT TRIBUNE



ALL IN THE FAMILY

Von Seggerns look to the future

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
Fremont Tribune

Don Von Seggern politely refrains from talking about his spouse's muddy mishap on the farm. That's OK. Von Seggern's wife, Becky, will share the story. The cattle yard was incredibly muddy when Becky was helping her husband load the animals onto a truck. Her overshoes sank into ankle-deep mud and manure.


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DODGE COUNTY

Don Von Seggern, left, and his son, Joel, stand near containers of seed on the farm northeast of Scribner.

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN, FREMONT TRIBUNE



TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN, FREMONT TRIBUNE

Don Von Seggern stands near a truck on the farm northeast of Scribner.



COURTESY PHOTO

Don Von Seggern of rural Scribner is shown with his grandsons, Colton and Carter.



Colton Von Seggern stands near a field on the family farm in rural Scribner.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Carter Von Seggern stands near a field on the family farm in rural Scribner.

“My boots got suctioned into the mud and my feet slipped right out,” she said. “I walked out of my boots into the mud.”

Von Seggern began laughing. His wife was not amused.

“I was furious, because I slipped and fell on top of it, so I was covered with mud from head to toe and the truck driver stood there and laughed — standing out there on the hard ground outside of the cattle yard,” she said, adding, “We never had that truck driver back again. He made me so mad.”

Bruised pride heals and the mucky mess greatly contrasts the solid foundation of faith and perseverance on which the Von Seggers and farmers like them have built their lives for generations.

Homesteaded in 1869, the Von Seggern farm northeast of Scribner has been in the family for more than 150 years. Family stories include those of hail and fire, hard work amid hardship, sacrifice and success from settlers who broke prairie sod to modern technology that includes satellite-based GPS and auto-steer in tractors.

As Don and Becky plan to pass down the farm, they reflect on the family’s heritage and look to the future.

Don’s mother, Mildred Bachman Von Seggern, wrote about the family’s history.

Arend Von Seggern emigrated from Germany in the mid-1860s. He settled 80 acres in Dodge County on April 15, 1869.

Farmers like Arend worked hard from

sunup to sundown, breaking prairie ground and cutting down trees to make fields to farm. Many hours were spent splitting wood for firewood to keep houses warm and big families needed huge gardens to have food throughout the winter.

Arend’s wife, Catherine, came from Germany in July 1872 and they married that December. The first of 13 children was born a year later.

Arend was 49 when Don’s grandfather, Bernard, was born in April 1891.

In March 1900, Arend died, stating in his will that his daughters should be 21 before they wed. His oldest daughter married that November and took as her dowry a milking cow, some hogs and possibly a team of horses.

Bernard met Bertha Havekost through church activities and they married.

Back then, corn was picked by hand. Getting two acres of corn picked in a day — at 40 bushels an acre — was a good day, Don said.

In the mid-1920s, Bernard and three neighbors went together to buy a threshing machine for \$1,000. It was shipped by railroad to nearby Hooper and pulled home by four horses. A thresher was used to remove the small grains, like wheat and oats, from the stem — basically a stationary combine they had to haul shocks to, Mildred wrote.

Bertha and other farm women canned homegrown goods like corn, tomatoes,

apples, cherries and meat, and took care of chickens. When outside field work was needed, they helped with milking and hay-making.

Mildred wrote about her own early years. She remembered her dad, Jacob, paying two-fifths of the crop for rent.

In 1934, they had no crop because of drought and two years later a severe hail storm occurred before grain could be harvested.

Houses had no insulation. On cold mornings, everything in the kitchen would be frozen. Snow often sifted in through the windows and sat undisturbed on the sill.

Mildred believed the Von Seggers, who owned their land, probably fared better.

But the work was still hard. Horses were used for all field work and daily chores included getting them hay and grain. Bernard’s first tractor was a Wallis with a Case three-bottom plow.

Bernard was 29 when Clinton was born. During World War II, Clinton was a medic in the U.S. Army Air Corps, based in England. Don said his dad helped wounded flight crew members when they returned from missions.

After he returned from the war, Clinton Von Seggern took over the farm. He had indoor plumbing installed, which meant no more hauling water from a cistern and no more outhouses. He had electricity put in as well.

He and Mildred married in August 1948. They built a home that’s presently on the farm in 1956.

When he began farming, Clinton Von Seggern started plowing terraces. Terracing is designed to prevent rainfall runoff that causes field erosion. He practiced no-till farming to preserve moisture and top soil.

In 1952, Von Seggern was elected to the Soil and Water Conservation Service, a program launched by the government after the Dust Bowl years. He served on that board until 1972.

In 2004, he received the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Award, which culminated 50 years of soil and water conservation activities on county and state levels.

Mildred and Clinton had four children, Sue Olson of Wayne, Marilyn Von Seggern of Pullman, Washington, Don of Scribner and Glenn, who lives in Omaha.

Clinton was 38 when Don was born.

Don graduated from Scribner High School and returned to the farm after graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. About 1 1/2 years later, he and

Please see **VON SEGGERN**, Page 24



Joel Von Seggern of rural Scribner and his sons, Carter and Colton, look at ground in a field on the family farm.



Joel Von Seggern of rural Scribner is shown with his sons, Carter and Colton, all of whom are part of a farm family legacy that extends for more than 150 years.



Joel Von Seggern of rural Scribner is passing down a love of the farm to his sons, Carter and Colton.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Joel Von Seggern of rural Scribner and his son, Carter, are part of a family farm legacy that's more than 150 years old.

Von Seggern

From Page 23

Becky were introduced by a mutual friend. Becky grew up in Fremont, where her parents owned the Coast to Coast Hardware Store.

In the summer of 1982, a big hail storm swept through the farm.

"It wasn't a very wide path, but it did severe damage to the crop," Becky said.

Another hail storm occurred a few years ago.

"That is a sick feeling to be sitting in the house and there is absolutely nothing you can do except watch the hail stones pile up," she said.

Don and Becky married in July 1983 during the farm crisis.

"In the '80s when I started, there were a lot of foreclosures and it (farming) didn't look very bright at that time," Don said.

Becky recalls those years as well.

"It was never really a topic of conversation, but you knew there were lots of farmers that were struggling to hold things together," she said. "There were many people that picked up off-the-farm jobs to supplement their income, including the stay-at-home moms."

Becky added something else.

"Sometimes there is a disconnect with the farm economy and the nation as a whole," she said. "In the '80s, the nation as a whole was doing well, but the farm economy was in trouble."

Times improved. Becky said she and Don have never lived beyond their means.

"You learn to conserve in the tight years and catch up when things are better," she said.

The family has faced sadness.

One night in December 2010, Mildred called Don and Becky to the Fremont hospital.

Clinton died a couple hours later and Don and Becky got home at about 2:15 a.m.

"We were getting ready for bed and looked out the window and the shed was on fire," she said. "There was nothing when we got home and 15 minutes later it was a very big fire. By the time the fire department got here, we were hoping they could keep the fire from spreading to the garage and house."

A loader tractor was lost in the fire.

"The guys who had taken Clinton to the hospital at 11 were at our house until 6 putting out a fire," she said.

The Von Seggerns are grateful for the Scribner Volunteer Fire Department, all of whose members had to go to their paid jobs after extinguishing the blaze.

"We are lucky to have such dedicated people," she said.

Don and Becky Von Seggern demonstrate dedication, too. They are involved at St. John Lutheran Church, Cuming County Line. Don coached baseball and basketball through the Fremont Family YMCA.

Due to costs, the Von Seggerns quit feeding cattle in 2012, but continue to raise corn and soybeans.

The Von Seggerns have three sons, Kevin, Joel and Alex. Kevin lives on the farm northeast of Scribner and is involved in financial services work. Alex is a business major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Joel and his wife, Lisa, and their sons, Carter and Cole, are the next generations of Von Seggern farmers.

"Joel loves it and he's very good at it," Don said.

Like his dad, Joel has had an interest in farming and believes it's a good way to make a living.

"It's always has been interesting to go out and plant crops and take care of them and harvest them in the fall," Joel said.

Don can relate.

"It's a pretty darn good feeling when you can harvest a good crop in the fall — a whole year's work and planning and watching it grow and then in the fall it all comes together and it's a really good time of the year," he said.

There are other benefits. Joel talks about the peacefulness of the farm and minimal traffic. Don talks about seeing deer and pheasants and hearing meadowlarks.

"A lot of times we're out checking crops or taking a walk in the evenings and you really feel God's creation out there. The scenery is beautiful. It's great being a small part of that," Don said.

Don said the family has had a corporation since 1978, which is how his father passed the farm down to him.

Joel already is making many management decisions, such as buying seed and

fertilizer, deciding which crops will go into certain fields and marketing grain.

"The technology has increased dramatically from when I started," Don said. "With auto-steer and the GPS in the equipment, it has really changed a lot — and the size of the equipment. When I started, I was planting with a four-row planter and now it's a 16-row planter."

Joel agreed.

"There's basically computers in the tractors now," he said. "It tracks where you've been and what you're doing. If you get it set up, it will steer itself through the field."

Don notes other technology.

"Genetics have improved so much that we have better hybrids that give you a better chance to have a good crop at the end of the year," Don said. "Our average yields have doubled since I've started."

Farmers can't control the weather and take a gamble on when to sell crops to get a decent price.

"Last summer, we were wondering how low they were going to go," Don said.

There has been a turnaround.

Becky adds that farmers are optimists and the Von Seggerns look to the future in a positive light.

"It's been a very satisfying feeling knowing that your business that you've worked with is going to continue and that your family's going to benefit," Don said. "Joel's got two boys who are super interested in it. In 20 years, if they're farming with him and their grandparents that would be a very satisfying feeling."

Inherited determination



From left, Andrea Benes, Devon Benes and Mitch Benes work to vaccinate newborn calves on Feb. 5 in Valparaiso. Their portion of the Benes Cattle Company is strictly a charolais cattle bloodline and has about 110 cows that will have calves each year.

ELSIE STORMBERG, WAHOO NEWSPAPER

ELSIE STORMBERG
Wahoo Newspaper

VALPARAISO — Everybody that knows Mitch Benes, knows he is his father's son. At age 8, Mitch purchased his first heifer with money he had saved from winning different show competitions. He said he remembers feeling nervous walking out of the Oak Creek Valley Bank in Valparaiso with five \$100 bills he withdrew from his personal savings.

Mitch bought the heifer from his grandfather Ermin

Benes grows business back after loss

Benes for \$500. It was a smart purchase because the cow's very first calf became a champion bull at an open show. The purchase also was his first step to owning a stake in his family's cattle business, Benes Cattle Company.

"That brought a pretty good return for me back then,"

said Mitch, who is now 42.

His mother, Lona Benes, remembers 8-year-old Mitch being adamant about buying the heifer from his grandfather himself instead of later paying back Lona and his father Melvin Benes.

"He was all-business and very grown up at 8 years old," Lona said.

Lona said his determination and maturity was inherited from his father.

Please see **BENES**, Page 26

Benes

From Page 25

“That will and that drive – it’s inherited and it was modeled,” Lona said. “He’s old enough to remember because he was 15 when his dad passed away.”

Melvin Benes, Mitch’s father and Lona’s husband, died suddenly from a brain aneurysm while checking cows out in the pasture in 1994. Mitch’s brother Lee was out with his father waiting for him to return from the creek near their property where Melvin was making sure no cow was stuck in the creek.

“He was doing what he loved – he was out in the pasture checking cows,” Lona said.

When Melvin didn’t come out, Lee went in and found him. First responders tried to alert a medical helicopter, but because it was too foggy out that day, Lona said, so an ambulance came instead. On Oct. 16, 36-year-old Melvin died at Bryan Memorial Hospital in Lincoln.

After a standing-room only funeral at Sts. Mary and Joseph Catholic Church in Valparaiso, it was time to discuss the future of the family’s stake in the Benes Cattle Company. Lona knew that she wanted to continue to do what she and her husband had done since they married in 1976, but wanted to speak with their five children – Melissa, Mitch, Lee, Martin and Mathew – before she made any decision.

“I knew in my heart that I wanted to continue doing it but I wanted to know if that was something that the kids wanted to do and if they were interested,” Lona said.

Their response was an immediate, “Of course.” Lona said she wanted her children to have a say in what they wanted instead of forcing them into it because “that’s what [their] dad would want us to do.”

The company was established in 1967 by Melvin’s parents Ermin and Dolores Benes and has been strictly a Charolais breed cattle production for 54 years.

Melvin was about nine years old at the time and worked on the farm with his brothers, Fred, Myron, Dan and Mike. Melvin was the second to youngest of Ermin and Dolores’ children.

According to Melvin’s brother Dan, the company was established when Dan was 15 years old. He also said that the Benes family has over 100 years of history owning cattle starting with his grandfather, Mitch’s great-grandfather, in the early 1900s.

At the time of Melvin’s death, Lona said the couple had been working on expand-



ELSIE STORMBERG PHOTOS, WAHOO NEWSPAPER

Mitch Benes gets ready to feed his heard on Feb. 24 in Valparaiso.

ing the business and had just bought about 80 acres of land. She and her children still tilled and planted on the land.

“I was bound and determined to show the kids that we can manage this and we can get through this,” she said.

When Lona and her children were making that decision, she also mentioned that she wanted all of them to go to school and get a college degree under their belts. Because her kids weren’t around as much to help, Lona said they had to downsize the family’s herd despite still receiving help from her brothers-in-law.

“My mom encouraged me to go to college, which I was dead set on not (going),” Mitch said. “She said pick something that you want to go into, but maybe not cattle because you’re going to end up there anyways.”

After Mitch completed his schooling for auto collision repair work, he worked in two different body shops over a period three and a half years. Lona had also gotten a job as a paraprofessional at the elementary school in Valparaiso. During this time, Lona said she began to conduct a roll reverse with Mitch to see how he would do with managing and guiding their daily work.

Later, it was recommended to Lona to become a teacher so she made a decision to go back to school at 42 years of age to receive a degree in teaching. In 2003, about two years into Lona’s teaching degree, Mitch and his wife Andrea purchased Lona’s cows and took over their share of the company.

“He’s grown the stock to a point where it’s proved that he did make good deci-



Mitch Benes feeds his charolais cattle herd on his property in Valparaiso on Feb. 25. Benes moved back onto the property he grew up on and has been in the family for multiple generations seven years ago when his mother Lona moved to Lincoln for work.

sions,” Lona said. “We’re very proud of him.”

In 2014, Lona moved to Lincoln to teach at Huntington Elementary, and Mitch moved his family onto the land he grew up on about a mile outside of the Valparaiso village limits.

While Mitch took over the family company, two of his siblings continued with agriculture and two siblings went on to other things. Mitch’s brother Lee now ranches with his wife’s family and owns Lee Benes Farms and another brother Martin sells livestock feed and ranches. His sister Melissa Jelinek is a teacher in Columbus and his brother Mathew is an architect in Omaha.

Along with ranching, the family also

farms corn, soybeans and hay for feed, some of which he farms with his uncles. Mitch’s uncle Mike does not have cows anymore and his uncle Dan has commercial base cows, so Mitch and his family are 100% owners of their portion of the Charolais cattle bloodline the company has cultivated over the years.

Mitch and his family are primarily a cow/calf pair production. They currently own about 110 cows that will have calves each year. They breed purebred Charolais for breeding stock bulls and heifers and then also raise and sell crossbred calves for both breeding and for 4-H and FFA projects.

Like Mitch and his siblings, Mitch’s children Taylor, Carlie and Devon all have had stakes in the Benes Cattle Company since they were very young by purchasing their own cows. Mitch said he likes to be able to mentor his kids, but also gains perspectives from others when it comes to breeding and decision making.

Mitch said the main aspect of the cattle business he tries to teach his kids about is providing quality customer service to repeat customers because it’s where they have had success so far.

“I’m just trying to continue on that integrity,” Mitch said. “There’s some aspects of the cattle business where integrity gets lost unfortunately, and I just keep telling them that quality sells.”

Mitch’s uncle Dan said that Mitch’s kids are a pleasure to work with and they likely have a bright future with whatever career path they choose. Dan said a big part of being in the cattle business is having the desire and drive.

“There are some pros and cons,” Dan said. “I think the nice thing about having your own cattle business is it gives you a little more independence, and then on the flip side, it puts more pressure on you to make the right decisions.”

While it was a struggle to rebuild the family’s portion of the business, Lona is still proud of what she and her children were able to accomplish over the past 26 years.

“We enjoyed it because it still gave us great comfort knowing that this is what he (Melvin) loved and this is what he helped to build,” Lona said.

Mitch continues his inherited determination in his children and the future of the Benes Cattle Company.

“It’s great to help and guide them (his kids) in the right direction,” Mitch said. “Obviously, (I’m) 42 years old I probably got a few years left, but I feel like we’re going to be strong.”

Butler County Health Care Center

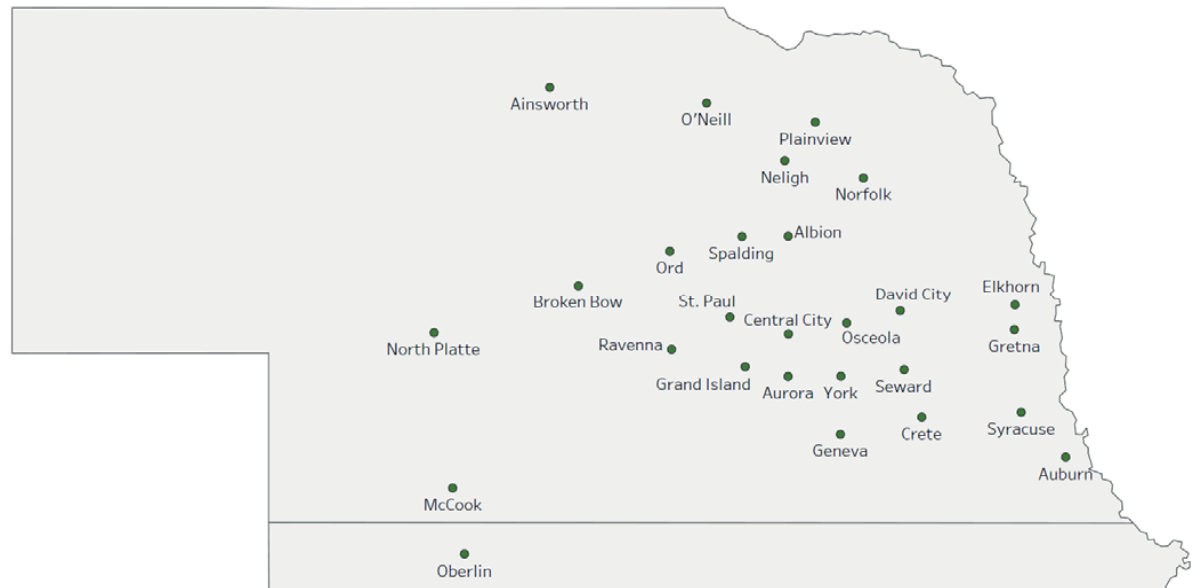
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Dr. Jery Inbarasu

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- Back and Leg Pain (Even After Back Surgery)
- Headaches
- Arthritic Pain involving the Knee, Hip and Shoulder
- Sacroiliac Pain
- Radiculopathies (Cervical, Lumbar)
- Spinal Stenosis (Cervical, Lumbar)
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