

Farming in their Blood

by Cedar Johnson

As long as there have been farms, there have been tensions and joys in transitioning them to the next generation. Farming isn't simply a career; it is a lifestyle that many farm kids would like to perpetuate. The age-old challenges of communication and respect will always be there, but there have also been new challenges facing Iowa farmers in the past few decades that have led many to discourage their children from farming.

The good news: PFI families seem to be encouraging the next generation to return. Many have already taken them up on the offer. Here we visit PFI families who are making the transition, to see what we might be able to learn from each other and how PFI may be able to help.



The Peckumns

Tom Peckum, Jefferson, has wanted to farm since he was a toddler. He took naps on the tractor as his father worked. "I had to work," Tom says with a smile. His father

can attest that Tom still loves to work long hours on the farm. After finishing college as fast as possible, Tom moved back to live out his dream at the

farmhouse in the spring of 2006. His parents, Jerry and Gail, live in town. Tom farms about 130 acres, while Jerry owns, leases, or custom farms a little over 2,000 acres.

Neighbors retiring from farming and renting them land really made it possible for two Peckumn generations to farm. Also crucial: Tom is able to borrow his father's equipment.

The Peckumns have a very clear business and financial agreement. Jerry said this is one of the most important things in making it work. Jerry's experience in banking has definitely helped with this clarity. Jerry left banking in 1997 to farm full-time, which had also been a life-long dream of his. He too grew up on a farm.

The Peckumns aren't the only example we found where the love of farming runs in the family. When their boys were younger, **Jim and Julie Petersen**, Knoxville, told them that if they wanted to come back to farm they had to go to college first. Jim farmed with his parents straight out of high school, and works off-farm at a factory as well. Their oldest son, **Justin**, graduated from ISU in May of 2006 and is now a Petersen farm employee, "not getting paid much, but getting to do what he likes to do," says Jim. Justin owns some livestock, rents some land and has invested in some haying equipment to do custom bailing.

Jim's advice for families bringing children back to the farm: "You have to be sure to listen and be willing to look at things the younger generation suggests, because times are changing and they bring a lot of good ideas back. Be open to looking at things differently."

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Jim and Justin Peterson



The Johnsons

Heather Johnson, Royal, found herself volunteering at Living History Farms as much as possible after graduating from college and finally said, “Why don’t I just go back home and farm?” She now does half of the field work on their conventional corn/soybean operation and works part-time at Clay County Extension.

“I have ideas and I need to convince Dad about them,” says Heather. PFI could help by providing “information on a holistic approach, on the whole system, not just compartments. I know what can be done agronomically from extension, but I need to know: Is it profitable? I’m particularly interested in increasing our rotation with small grains, to lower inputs through green manure.”

Heather’s parents are excited she’s back, but also have concerns. Her father says, “The challenge is, is there an opportunity for the next generation? My dad and grandpa farmed half a section and made a good living. Can Heather make a living on 640 acres? Everything’s getting so big to survive.”



Three of the Seven Wilsons

Dan and Lorna Wilson’s children have given them quite a compliment: Most of them would like to return to Seven Wilson Farm, Paullina. **Torray**, who has added sheep to the operation, is one of them; so is **Faye**, who now helps with farmer’s markets and works at a floral shop. When we asked if there is potential to purchase adjacent land, they said they believe that “adding value to their products and finding niche markets are the best ways to expand, rather than adding more land.”

It is clear that there is a strong family relationship and a real belief that they can make this work. They admitted that it has

been a challenging year because there are a lot of start-up costs to adding an enterprise and lag time before they’ll see profits. Dan commented, “It’s worked well from the standpoint that although it’s a different enterprise it didn’t require any additional facilities.” Torray added, “Basically the only cost was livestock, which will appreciate eventually.”

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Dan mentioned that business planning is crucial, and that this was one area where they could have benefited from some more help. Torray said the Holistic Management training they’ve received is also helpful. “This would be really hard if we weren’t going organic,” Dan said, “because of the money it takes to run a conventional operation.” The mentors in organics that they’ve found in PFI have been a great encouragement.

Torray pointed out a number of times that his main advice is to “live on nothing,” or “live simply,” as he put it. He is very aware that he’s chosen a lifestyle over material things. From what we gathered he couldn’t be happier.

Dieter Geest also has different livestock interests than his parents Ed and Kate Geest, whom he farms with near Davenport. Ed and Kate direct market pork, while Dieter is more interested in beef. Dieter farms most of the field crops now, with help from Ed in the spring and fall. Dieter said PFI might be able to help transitioning families, “Figure out how to work together and not get angry with each other, and how to work out a business plan so nobody feels like they’re getting a bad deal.” He is happy with how that’s gone for him, but knows other families where it hasn’t gone as well.



Ed and Dieter Geest

The Next Generation

Greg and Kathy Koether's son Scott has also tried adding a



Some (not all) of the Koethers

new enterprise as a way of returning to the family farm. The Koethers, McGregor, purchased a neighboring farm two year ago. Scott set about to add meat and dairy goats to the organic cattle and sheep operation. Though he now holds an off-farm job, Scott is still part of the operation. Greg admits to a lot of challenges in the transition due to the increase in

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his costs and workload. His word of advice to farmers transitioning children onto the farm is to “make sure they’re on the same page when they return from an agricultural college,” speaking to the fact that vision and values must be in sync for a smooth transition.

Autumn and Laramie Ogden moved back to Ankeny this summer to farm with Autumn's parents, **Craig and LaVon Griffieon**. They moved from Colorado, where the “water wars” drove them back to a place where they can at least grow their own food. Right now, Autumn and Laramie are doing “whatever needs done,” but all agreed that it would be helpful to have PFI programming to provide intentional assessment of relational issues, time management, and planning. “That’s probably where farmers get into trouble,” says



Craig and LaVon Griffieon with Autumn and Laramie Ogden

LaVon. “We don’t take time to evaluate. If we were an organization we’d call a staff meeting.”

If not planning, there has been much more energy at the Griffieon Farm this summer, and “things are getting done that would have gone by the wayside.” The family moved and converted an old, unused building into a road-side outlet for their meat products. The general attitude at this initial stage seems to be one of thankfulness for the extra hard-working hands and minds.

Daniel Rosmann said he eased right back into Rosmann Family Farm, Harlan, a couple years ago without adding another enterprise to the farm. For him, the transition was very smooth, but he could see where a lot of families transitioning the next generation could

benefit from workshops, mostly dealing with the economics and transfer of land. “It’s not as hard as it may seem,” says Daniel of his experience, “It isn’t even as hard as I thought it would be.”

Daniel is from a family that understands the importance of farm policy, and he’s no exception. “I believe the most important issue concerning agriculture will be the transfer of land after the older generation of farmers retires,” Daniel says. “The 2007 Farm Bill needs to reflect the importance of this issue through bold funding of programs that establish and sustain new farmers on the landscape.”

Not all new farmers transitioning back to the family farm are fresh out of school. Sometimes it takes a few years,



Daniel and Ron Rosmann

“It’s not as hard as it may seem, from the outside looking in,” says Daniel, “It isn’t even as hard as I thought it would be, but easier.”

even decades, to grow the desire to return home to farm.

Ed Kraklio, Walcott, had no desire to return to the farm as a teen. After pursuing many different jobs in Milwaukee and other

cities, it was farmer's market visits that made him begin to miss home. Disappointed in the variety he was finding at the farmer's markets, he and his partner, Joe Dennis, began dreaming of growing and crafting their own things. The natural place to do it was on the family farm. Ed's type of farming, which he calls "micro-farming" was "nothing like the traditional farming my family was



The Kraklios

used to." They started out renting five acres from Ed's parents by paying them whatever they would have gotten in crops for rent. Now they've expanded the operation to include the family and are hopefully building it to where Ed's young nieces and nephews can take over one day if they want to.

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Jill Beebout and her husband **Sean Skeeahan** also lived the big city life in Houston before moving back to the family farm a couple years ago. They love being surrounded by family, and appreciate all the years of experience present in the family farm corporation. Jill and Sean have avoided many challenges, since their few acres of fruits and vegetables are on a piece of ground her parents, Leo and

Gloria Beebout, had purchased from the family corporation before they expressed interest. Jill said it's been a lot easier since they are "not trying to change or take over an existing operation," or "an area that was being actively farmed." Jill also noted that the ability to borrow or rent equipment and storage from family has been very nice.

Though the family situation has been ideal for their transition, another key to their success is the detailed business plan that they came up with before diving in. Jill and Sean took Penny Brown Huber's class "Grow Your Own Small Market Farm." All the investment they have made in learning from others has probably won some respect from their farming family as well.

Norm McCoy moved back to the family farm last year where his mother, **Miriam McCoy**, lives. Norm worked at Rockwell for years before pursuing an interest and graduate degree in sustainable agriculture. The McCoy's didn't farm the land much as Norm was growing up, due to the threat for decades of Highway 65 possessing their farm. The highway has been built and the McCoy's fortunately did not lose their land. Now Norm is farming oriental vegetables, fruits, and goats. They recommend that anyone getting into farming should either have a very good plan or take things very slowly; they have opted for the second.



Norm and Miriam McCoy

There are themes to the PFI transitioning farm families, which we will leave you with briefly. Work toward your dreams. Plan. Talk to each other. Diversify. Live simply. Respect. Evaluate. Share—ideas and equipment. Go slow. Don't expect things to change overnight, but know that things are changing, and we are the ones directing it.

Next issue: PFI also has many members who have started farming on their own, without a family farm to come home to. If you are one of these, or if you are a family transitioning the next generation to the farm, please contact Cedar at cedar@practicalfarmers.org or 515/232-5661.



Three generations of Beebouts