

Generations of Knutzens

The family farm changing hands

There comes a time in every grower's life when he knows it's time to turn the operation over. The transition may be easier if it's turned over to one of his children, or in the case of Roger Knutzen, all three of his children.

without flying too far from the nest.

"Our kids are doing a good portion of the farming now and that's the way we want to have it," he says.

FOURTH GENERATION

Roger was the kid taking over in 1960.

He and his wife LouAnn dabbled in college then decided to settle where they felt most comfortable—partnering with his father on the family farm.

"We were just anxious to get into farming. That's exactly where we went and we never looked back," Roger says. "I don't know why, but there's just been no question in my mind. Farming was what I wanted to do. We've stayed with it and I've never been sorry."

LouAnn and Roger's children didn't know anything other than planting and harvesting

when they were young. That's why the Knutzen kids were expected to do two things when they reached adulthood, and neither one of them required working the

family farm. They had to graduate from college and get a job.

Even without the farming expectation, all three of the Knutzen children met the requirements and returned to work all aspects of the family farm.

"I'm very close to retirement. In fact, you could probably say I am retired," Roger says. "I don't like to use that word because it's lonesome. I'm no longer in the midst of everything and there's an adjustment period I haven't gotten through yet. But in the same token, it's a joy to see to our kids successful [on our farm]."

FIFTH GENERATION

Knutzen Farms started in 1890 with Roger's great-grandpa Jess from Denmark. Now more than a century later, fifth-generation Knutzens are working the same rich, river delta soil.

"You've got to have a niche in this day and age and it so happens red potatoes do extremely well in this soil and that gives us our niche," Roger says. "The ground will grow absolutely anything, but the problem is weather. We get an awful lot of rain."

Roger's kids, Kristi, Kraig and Konnie, struggled with rain this spring. Such was similar to what their ancestors faced.

"Every once in a while, when things are tough, you wonder if the generations before you are looking down saying,



Roger and LouAnn Knutzen with their children Kraig, Kristi and Konnie

Roger is a fourth generation farmer in Burlington, Wash. He's turned a few hundred farm acres into a few thousand, served on countless boards, won handfuls of honors and raised a family that thrives

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‘Come on,’” says Konnie. “It’s a lot of pressure, but there’s a lot of pride that goes along with being the fifth generation.”

Kristi is the eldest and she’s in charge of sales and finance. She graduated from college with a teaching degree, but returned home to keep the books. “There are times I’m laying in bed at 2 a.m. and it’s pouring down rain and I have so many semis waiting and I know I’m not going to get the spuds out of the ground,” says Kristi.

“I worry about letting people down and that’s tough, but the positive things so outweigh that. You have to realize Mother Nature is ultimately in charge and she dishes humility out quite frequently and keeps us in check.”

Kraig oversees production and operation. He worked for four years as a commercial fisherman in Alaska before returning to farm in the ground rather than work in the ocean. “You don’t appreciate working for family until you work for someone else,” says Kraig.

“We’ve had the chance to see the other opportunities out there and we still enjoy the lifestyle of the farm. It’s hard work, but with the freedom to take things in our own direction.”

Konnie is the youngest and an art graduate. She handles the packaging, public relations and personnel. “I watch everybody’s back,” says Konnie. “The partnership is wonderful. It’s really, really wonderful. We overlap, but stay out of each other’s way. We’ve been doing it long enough that we just get up and do it.”

All three started managing the farm for Roger almost a decade ago, officially took over Knutzen Farms three years ago, and are already planning for the next hand off.

“Our grandparents never told us how it should be done, just how things are different and how you incorporate the past with the future,” Kristi says. “Just realizing how lucky we are to have that many generations is a bit of pressure sometimes, but you want to do everything in your power to make sure it’s there for the sixth generation if they want it.”

SIXTH GENERATION

The next generation, the sixth, range in age from grade school to college with the same expectations placed on the fifth—go to college and get a job.

Kraig says, “If ag is something they’re really excited about, I will even encourage them to work another farm and bring that experience back.”

Kristi’s son and daughter are both in college and the eldest is close to graduating. “Our son Danny is going to be a senior in ag-economics,” Kristi says. She also indicates that he would like to return to the farm.



If the success of the fifth generation is any hint of what the sixth will bring, Knutzen Farms has a long line of growers in the generations to come.


“I was chairman of the National Potato Promotion Board from 1992 to 1993. I was concerned I shouldn’t do that because of what would happen with our farm,” Roger says.



“It turns out that even with my partial absence from the farm, it was the best year we ever had. It humbles you a bit when you realize you aren’t as important as you thought you were.” ■

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