**INTERVIEW**

**Nick Somers, Plover River Farms, Inc.**

By Joe Kertzman, Managing Editor

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**NAME:** Nickolas A. “Nick” Somers  
**TITLE:** President  
**COMPANY:** Plover River Farms Alliance, Inc.  
**LOCATION:** Stevens Point area, WI  
**HOMETOWN:** Stevens Point/Custer, WI  
**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** “All my life,” incorporating business as a family farm in 1968  
**SCHOOLING:** UW-Stevens Point  
**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board and committee member, and Board President (1977-78); Wisconsin Potato Industry Board Chairman (1987-90); National Potato Council (NPC) Board of Directors, Vice-President and President (1998); Portage County Business Council Board; WPVGA Water Task Force Co-Chairman and many other committees. Supporter of many organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club of Portage County and United Way, and has conducted several experimental and trial projects with the UW-Madison Extension  

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**From the very beginning,** farming has been a family affair for Nick Somers of Plover River Farms, Inc. Having lived on a farm since he was five months old, it is “in his blood,” as they say. He has devoted his entire life to potato and vegetable growing, and has been a steadfast advocate for the industry.

Nick is a recognized and unwavering voice behind such practices as sustainable and eco-friendly farming, as well as the Wisconsin Healthy Grown program, including prairie restoration and organic farming on portions of his own land.

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**AWARDS/HONORS:** NPC Gold Potato Award, Man of the Year and Environmental Stewardship Award; Portage County Farmer of the Year (1980s); WPVGA Integrated Pest Management Achievement Award, Volunteer of the Year, Agri-Communicator of the Year and Industry Appreciation Award; and Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service Certificate of Appreciation Award  
**FAMILY:** Wife, Dianne; son, Doug; daughter, Heidi Somers-Foote; son-in-law, Mike Foote; and granddaughters, Amelia (7) and Leanna (5) Foote  
**HOBBIES:** Travel, photography, sports, golf and biking  

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From his lists (see bio) of organizational activities, board positions, and awards and honors, what’s been obvious to his fellow growers for many years also becomes apparent to anyone paying attention—Nick has spent a lifetime invested in and devoted to the potato and vegetable growing industry.

I understand you are a third-generation grower and the only one in the family still farming. Can you give me a little history

**Above:** Showing off his multi-tasking skills, Nick Somers mugs for the camera as he digs and checks potatoes at Plover River Farms in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.
of your farm? When I was five months old, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. My Mother, Ann Somers, brought my 3-year-old sister and me to her home farm where she teamed up with her brother, Don Cychosz, to make a life for us.

From the beginning, they raised mink, farmed dairy cattle and grew hand-picked green beans, strawberries and eventually potatoes, the latter of which became very promising with the development of irrigation.

Being a very progressive person, my uncle Don was one of the first in the area to buy a pivot irrigation system. In 1968, I joined him and my mother to form Plover River Farms, Inc. I have much to owe to my mother and uncle for this opportunity. It was at that time I married my wife, Dianne, and started a family.

How many acres do you farm in potatoes and other vegetables under the Plover River Farms umbrella? Slowly land became available and our farm grew to the present 3,500 acres, of which 1,100 acres are in potatoes, 1,000 in sweet corn, 400 in green peas and the remainder in soybeans and alfalfa.

Do you have partnerships with other growers? In the beginning, we packaged our potatoes, but in the 1970s, as consumer needs became more sophisticated, we joined our neighboring farm, Wysocki Produce Farm, to form a more efficient packaging shed that could meet their demands.

The business was called Paragon Potato Farms, Inc., in Ellis, Wisconsin. It consisted of three brothers, Louis, Francis, and Greg Wysocki, and myself.

The facility grew and expanded, but in 1999 a huge fire burnt it down. It was at that time we moved to Bancroft, and it has since become one of the most progressive packing sheds in the Midwest.

On January 6, 2009, the ownership of Paragon Potato Farms Inc. entered a joint venture with CSS Farms to form Tasteful Selections, a farming enterprise and packaging facility in Bakersfield, California.

Their focus is on small potatoes and fingerlings. Tasteful Selections has expanded and incorporates watermelons, garlic and carrots into its rotation plans. This has been a very exciting business because the consumer is looking for new potato products that are easy and fast to prepare in their busy lifestyles. Small potatoes fit into that menu.

Do you have multiple locations/fields, and in what towns? We are very fortunate to have all our farmland located within a 50-mile radius that includes four townships, all in Portage County. That helps us to be more efficient.

How many people does Plover River Farms employ? Plover River Farms has nine great full-time employees, and seasonally another 10-40 for planting and harvest. Because of their dedication, I am able to get away for a few weeks here and there throughout the year. They are always there when needed, and I can’t thank them enough.

What are the most enjoyable and fulfilling aspects of potato and vegetable growing for you? I really

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like to watch the crops grow. I am always so excited for spring to arrive, to plant, to see the first sprout appear, the first tubers appear, the plant growth of summer and the challenge of harvest. It is a cycle I never tire of. I also like working with the staff, how they come up with problem solving and getting through difficult challenges.

**How was the 2016 growing season, and how does it compare to past years?** 2016 had the potential of being a great crop until the fall rains came during harvest. That made it an average year.

**How has the farming operation changed over the years? What’s different today from when you first started farming?** Agriculture has changed from intensive manual labor to technical savvy know-how. There are also so many elements in farming today that one needs to be knowledgeable about or have staff that can take that responsibility—cost of production, agronomy, mechanics, human resources, supervision, contract negotiation, crop scouting, machine operation, etc.

It has become very complex and challenging to manage all these functions and responsibilities. It is not simple anymore.

**How has technology played a role, and has it helped?** Technology has made farming less brawn and more brain. Tractors that steer themselves are commonplace. Cell phones stop, start and monitor irrigation equipment. It’s not unusual to have four computers in a tractor cab.

We feel we are more accurate in how we farm, using the land more efficiently, using less inputs, using machinery more wisely, but it is more challenging. Our farm employees have had to learn how to operate all this sophisticated equipment that monitors almost everything we do.

**I understand you’re a Healthy Grown grower. What does that mean to you and why is it important?** I have been a Healthy Grown grower since its inception. In the 1980s, I gave a speech at the NPC convention on how we, the NPC, work with the Environmental Protection Agency. Following it, the University of Wisconsin introduced its new product for sprout inhibition. I think it is a very beneficial thing for the industry. It is not just the environmental aspect, it is also food safety, food quality, shelf life, etc.
software program, Wisdom.

The director of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) heard the presentations and approached Wisconsin as to how we could collaborate with each other. Thus, we began a partnership with Healthy Grown. We formed a committee that set standards for reducing pesticide inputs, using softer chemicals and encouraging better farming practices that would make us more environmentally sustainable.

The WWF was so excited about the direction we were going that they let us put their panda logo on the consumer bags. Healthy Grown is a concept that makes us more aware of the environment in our farming practices. It’s important because it makes us more sustainable, and I will continue to be involved with the program.

I also understand you have returned portions of your farm to wetlands

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Above: Proud parents and grandparents, Nick and Dianne Somers (front and center) are surrounded by, back row, left to right, their son-in-law, Mike Foote, daughter, Heidi Somers-Foote and son, Douglas Somers, and front row, left to right, granddaughters, Amelia and Leanna Foote.
and prairie. Why is this something you wanted to accomplish and how many acres have you dedicated to natural growth? We have a natural native wetland on our farm that we have continued to protect. Over the past 10 years we started around 30 acres of prairies, located throughout the farm. It’s amazing how many bees and butterflies are attracted to these areas.

How many acres of certified organic potatoes do you grow and why? We got into growing certified organic when a nearby landowner had organic land for rent about five years ago. It was like going back in time and it brought back memories of the way we used to farm. It has been a challenge, but we are learning and getting better at it, improving quality and yield. We grew 40 acres of potatoes organically this year, along with sweet corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Next year we will have 320 certified organic acres.

Are you growing potatoes mostly for the fresh market, chip market, others? About a third of our potato production goes to McCain Foods for processing and the other two-thirds goes through the Paragon packaging facility to the fresh market.

I see you are and have been a member and on the boards of several WPVGA committees, currently the Water Task Force, Government Relations Committee, Promotions & Consumer Education and the Research Committee. Why is it important to you to be involved? It is extremely important to be involved in our industry for the future of our businesses. I have been active in the NPC and in the WPVGA and currently I am Co-Chairperson of the Water Task Force.

If we don’t speak up and present our facts, who will? Agriculture is in a small minority of our population. Most people have never been on a farm and don’t understand our needs and concerns. We need to speak up for ourselves, otherwise we will become burdened with the unnecessary controls that are put on us by those who are uninformed.

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science, not emotion. The committee has also formed a stewardship program with the Department of Natural Resources where we are developing a point system of practical methods to conserve water. Even many small practices can save water. I believe we must be proactive to protect farming for the future.

Our marketing endeavors have become very important to the potato and vegetable industry. The Spudmobile, the new mascot, Spudly, the triathlons and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP) Spud Bowl are opportunities to promote our products and agriculture. They give us the chance to rub shoulders with the community, talk to people and show them that we care and are passionate about being good stewards of the earth. The Spudmobile, which is on the road almost daily, reaches a vast number of people through events, including children via visits to schools, educating them about potatoes and vegetables.

At the Spud Bowl, we hand out free baked potatoes and fries and present five scholarships to students attending UWSP who come from rural areas. This good will is invaluable to the industry. We must all support these programs for the future of our industry.

Why is potato farming in Central Wisconsin so important and dear to you? I grew up in Central Wisconsin and love it here. I love the people and the community. It is a very special place to live. It is one of the most ideal places to farm because of our abundance of water and our sandy soil.

**Current Page:** When you have a lot of acres, you need a lot of high-tech tractors, and that's what Nick Somers got when he purchased four 8R's, one 9R and one 9RT high-performance John Deere tractors from Faivre Implement in 2012. Nick is shown (center) in the close-up image flanked by four of his crew members in front of one of the tractors. *Photos courtesy of Ruth Faivre.*
If you had to choose the number one thing you’d like readers to know about Plover River Farms, what would it be? Plover River Farms is a team. We all work hard and care about each other. My wife, Dianne, and I are grateful for their dedication.

What do you think the future holds for not only Plover River Farms, but also for potato and vegetable growing in general? I believe the future looks very exciting. Technology is moving at a faster pace than we can absorb and sometimes understand. We must always move forward, otherwise we will get behind. It will be interesting to see where the future takes us.

Do you have anything you’d like to add, Nick? I think agriculture is a very rewarding career, and Dianne and I are so grateful for all the opportunities and for all the friendships we have had because of this very special industry.

Above: From left to right in front of the Spudmobile, Paula Houlihan, president of the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary Board, Nick Somers and WPVGA Executive Director Tamas Houlihan offer potato samples to fans, such as the gentleman at right, attending a Green Bay Packers game.