

INTERVIEW

KEVIN SIGOURNEY, owner/operator, Sigourney Farm

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

Building and maintaining relationships are the two things that Kevin Sigourney credits for carrying him a long way in his career as owner/operator of Sigourney Farm in Coloma, Wisconsin.

NAME: Kevin Sigourney

TITLE: Kevin and Jackie Sigourney, sole proprietors

COMPANY: Sigourney Farm

LOCATION: Coloma, WI

HOMETOWNS: Hancock (Kevin) and Coloma (Jackie)

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 28 years

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Green Giant, starting out at age 16, working way up to manager of Green Giant, and making the choice to do something different when Seneca bought out Green Giant

SCHOOLING: Tri-County High School and a year at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Town chairman of Colburn in Adams County for 20 years, recently retired, and two terms on the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Board, including three years as president

FAMILY: Wife, Jackie; two kids, Claire, "who lives in Hancock and is a stay-at-home mom, which I'm very proud of," and Ethan, who works for TSA in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and one grandson, Shia (6)

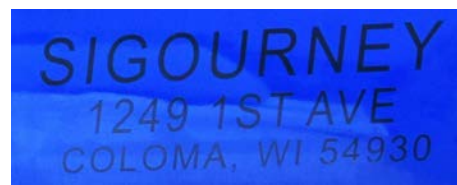
HOBBIES: Two dogs (Miss Frankie and Finn), fishing, and snowmobiling

Unlike many of his fellow potato and vegetable growers in the area, Sigourney is not a second-, third- or fourth-generation owner, but instead the first of his family to grow potatoes for a living.

"We had a farming background, but not to the extent as the farm is now. The farm was settled in 1850 on one side of the family, but they lost it during the Depression," Kevin remarks.

"The banks couldn't sell it, so it just stayed there, and after the war, two of my uncles bought a portion of the land and started a Christmas tree farm," he says.

"My Uncle Frank died when he was 60 years old and never had any kids, so I ended up buying 80 acres of the land," Kevin relates. "An interesting part of the story is that I wanted to put irrigation on it and needed money."



"I went to Hancock State Bank," he continues, "and the lender said, 'Kevin, you need to put irrigation on that farm.' I didn't have two nickels to rub together, but he trusted me, and we've gone from farming 80 acres then to working 2,700 now."

When I asked if you wanted to do an interview with me, Kevin, you said, yes, that the timing was right. Why is that? As you grow older, things

Above: What Kevin Sigourney of Sigourney Farm in Coloma, Wisconsin, takes most pride in is that he started out as a little kid growing up in Hancock, and later in life, built a very good farm that provides a living for a lot of local families.

change. It's time. We're reinventing our farm again. Though we started growing big potatoes for the fresh market, we eventually devoted our efforts and made a change to the little potato world.

A lot of people helped me along the way. Everything is about relationships. Jeff Sommers of Wysocki Family of Companies and I talk about this all the time. Now we're in the process of another change, and it's kind of exciting, though we'll continue growing little potatoes.

You were a field rep and area supervisor for the Green Giant Company in the 1980s. Why did you decide to go into potato and vegetable growing? I've lived in this area my whole life. I grew up getting to know and seeing guys who were making money in this industry, so the decision was made.

I parlayed a group of people to help me out. One of them was the late George Zettelmeier who owned Plainfield Trucking. They did the trucking for us when I worked at Green Giant, and George was a good friend of my parents.

He helped me to get my first potato contract, or I should say, he and Ron Meddaugh. And I worked with Dennis Schultz for numerous years after that.

You've been involved in the Wisconsin potato and vegetable industry for a long time, including



stints on the WPVGA Board and Vegetable Committee. What makes you want to be involved and stay in this industry? Well, first off, you have a great organization. I like it and you do a good job, but to answer your question, relationships.

If you don't have solid relationships, you'll never succeed. Sometimes relationships can get strained, but we're all neighbors, and we all try to help each other. Sure, we are competitors, but we all respect each other.

Twenty years ago, you were growing 1,600 acres of vegetables in Adams and Waushara counties, including 350 acres of potatoes. How has that changed? We grow 750 acres of small potatoes for one company, 1,000 acres of seed corn, and then we rent out cropland to Seneca for

Above: Here are some of the guys who make it all happen on Sigourney Farm, including, from left to right, Brad Norquist, warehouse manager who's been with the farm for 30 years; Kevin Sigourney, owner and proprietor; Paul Bertotto, a field hand who's relatively new to the operation; and Bob Horacek, a tractor operator and field hand for the past couple years. The gentlemen all went to school together, with Brad and Kevin being first cousins. Finn, Kevin's English Labrador Retriever, is between him and Brad. Not pictured are Jason Gold, who has been with Sigourney Farms for 20 years, Jim Gold and Al Schmidt, who've each worked there for 10 years, and Maryann Hensel who holds down the office.

snap bean acres.

We grow seed for DSP (Diversified Seed Producers, LLC), and have built a good working relationship with Fred and Tracey Kaltenberg in the process.

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Are you growing potatoes for the fresh market? It's all fresh now, including potatoes and vegetables.

What major advancements have you seen on your farm? Look at the building, number one, the sorting and storage shed (pictures herein). The technology for tractors has also changed significantly. It's hard to keep up with that, especially as you get older. Young people can do that.

Autosteer has been the biggest thing that's helped us on our farm, and a good crop rotation. We're always on a four-year rotation of potatoes, snap

beans, seed corn, and for a while we put alfalfa in as a rotational crop. Fields that were junk previously, after we planted alfalfa into them, they were fantastic.

What are you most proud of as far as your business and its longevity? Starting out as a little kid growing up in Hancock and building a very good farm that provides a living for a lot of families.

Do you have a favorite time of year on the farm? The last day of harvest—harvest was good this past season. We had a nice, dry year. The

guys would tell you the same thing, that their favorite day of each season is the last day of harvest.

Now we've added H-2A workers to help during planting, harvest, and the growing season. We employ two H-2A guys for eight months, and more, all from Mexico, who help in the fall. They are the most fantastic workers you're ever going to get.

We go through a broker whose name is Pedro, a fantastic man, who helps us out through the U.S. Department of Labor's Temporary Agricultural Program.



Up to 500 acres of potatoes can be stored in the state-of-the-art facility at Sigourney Farm, which uses all box storage for the little potatoes that the operation grows and that can bruise easily in large piles.

How many full-time and seasonal employees do you have on the payroll? There are six guys here who work full-time, and as far as seasonally, it's 16 during the height of harvest.

How many potatoes can you store and for how long? We can store 500 acres of potatoes in our building, using all box storage. That's unusual around here, but box storage is necessary for little potatoes that can bruise easily.

We can store potatoes until a month before we start planting, until July 15 or July 30. That is the goal of box storage, period.

Do you have a shipping arm of the business? We ship our own down to Sun Prairie, but not anywhere else, not intrastate.

This is our planting issue. I assume planning for the 2024 planting season is well underway. Have you ordered fertilizers, other inputs, machinery? Oh yeah, that stuff

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– Kevin Sigourney

always happens steadily. You're planning halfway into next year from the year you're currently in.

What's the biggest focus on the upcoming planting season? Timing and weather are always the most important things. The only thing we must do long-term is make sure seed is taken care of—bought and ready for planting. I think Schroeders

Bros. Farms does a fantastic job with certified seed up in Antigo.

Are you doing anything different this year, or do you have any new machinery? We do a lot of different things business-wise. When you're young, you have a high tolerance for risk, but as you get older, that kind of changes.

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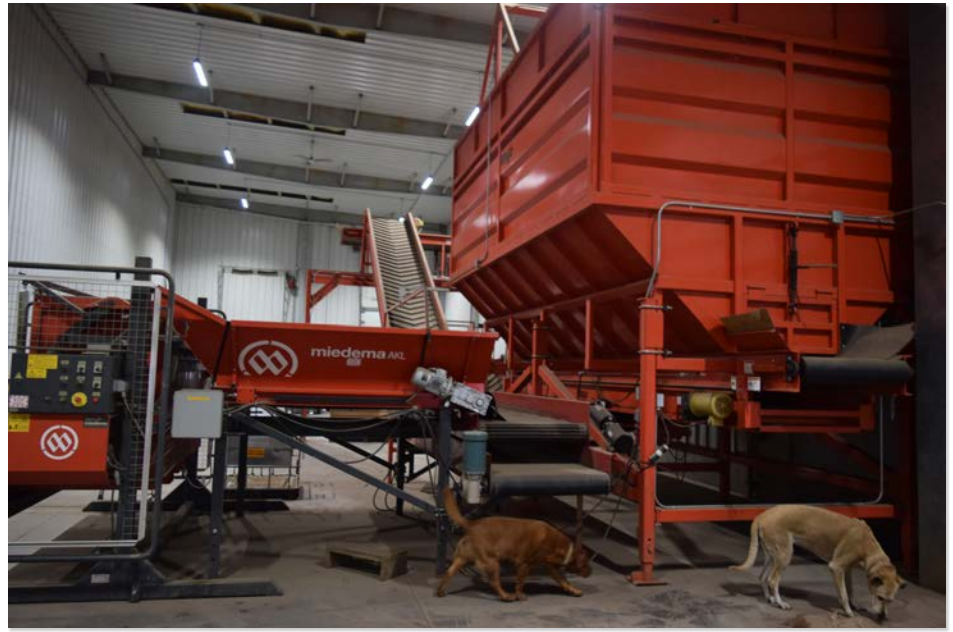
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As business evolves, it becomes easier to grow the business, but difficult to maintain it. If you're doing things right, you build up a lot of equity through the years. I'm a numbers guy.

Most people think you make money out in the field and, yes, you do, but it's got to start in you as a person and as a business owner, and you need a good group of people surrounding you.

There's more than one potato grower in the Coloma and Hancock area. What do you enjoy about being

in the Central Sands potato growing community? We just have good neighbors. Everyone seems to work well together, which is important.

What do you see as your biggest challenges now and in the future as a potato and vegetable grower, and can you do anything to prepare?

Relationships, being able to talk to people face to face. Me, no, I can't prepare for that other than maintaining the relationships I have and building on them.

What do you hope for the planting season? I think this has been

Left: Paul Bertotto is at the wheel and Bob Horacek in the passenger seat of a big rig on Sigourney Farm, which ships its own potatoes down to Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, but not intrastate.

Right: The Miedema AKL Box Tippler by Dewulf is the load-out portion of the storage line used for bulk and seed potatoes. Kevin Sigourney's dogs, Finn (left) and Miss Frankie (right), secure the area.

a challenging, warm winter with no deep freeze. It will be interesting to see what happens in the spring. I never like to see an open winter like this because of the overwintering bugs.



An automatic boxer, the Miedema ME 80 with wide, troughed conveyor belt, was purchased from T.I.P., Inc., of Custer, Wisconsin.



The John Deere 8220 was the first John Deere Tractor on Sigourney Farm.

Are your kids, Claire, and Ethan, interested in taking over the farm?

No, but maybe at some point they will be. Five years ago, I wanted to retire. Now, I'm going to run it out. I have a great group of people, and if I want to leave for some reason, on vacation, a trip or just to be at home, I can do what I want. They can pretty much take care of the farm.

Who knows what will happen five or 10 years from now? I don't know. Ethan worked here for five years, and though I doubt it, you never can tell, he might want to take it over someday. You can never predict the future and should never burn a bridge. It really is about relationships. **BCT**

Right: The John Deere tractors, harvester, and windrower are all ready for harvest on Sigourney Farm.



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