



“I have had employees whose first jobs were on the farm, and they’ve stuck with me.” –Jim Mortenson



INTERVIEW

JIM MORTENSON, owner, Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc.

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

Though steeped in history and tradition, Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc. did not come to fruition in a usual manner. Regardless, it would turn out to be one of the largest potato and vegetable operations in Wisconsin.

NAME: Jim Mortenson
TITLE: Owner, president and working member of corporation
COMPANY: Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc.
LOCATION: Plainfield, Wisconsin
HOMETOWN: Antigo, Wisconsin
TIME IN PRESENT POSITION: 16 years
PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Worked on family farm
SCHOOLING: Antigo High School
ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Family is fond of and deeply involved with the YMCA of South Wood County (the James and Tracy Mortenson Foundation donating money for a new stretching room), as well as with the Immanuel Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Rapids, and in always making sure to get potatoes and canned goods to the South Wood County Emerging Pantry Shelf several times a year.
FAMILY: Wife of 23 years, Tracy, and children, Max (19), Grace (17) and Audrey (14)

HOBBIES: Agriculture, visiting the YMCA, golf and supporting the James and Tracy Mortenson Foundation

Brothers Gary (“Jack”) and James Mortenson owned Mortenson Brothers Trucking and Southside Tire in Antigo, Wisconsin. In the late 1960’s, they hauled potatoes for a farm that could not pay them for their services, so they took over part of the crop.

In the summer of 1968, Jack left Antigo to watch over their new potato investment, and, in 1973, he and James formed Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc.

Today, Jack’s son, Jim Mortenson, is the president, owner and a working member of the farming operation.

“Every one of us kids earned our own money for school clothes. In the fall, from age nine on, we would grade potatoes down near Oxford, in the Plainfield area,” Jim says.

“Around the age of 14 or 15, I started filling seeders, and as soon as

I got my license, my life changed.

I worked full-time summers for my dad from age 15 on,” he says.

“I started counting days until school started again.”

Jim helped in handling the irrigation, turning on and off pivots in the Central Sands soil.

FONDNESS FOR FATHER

“Dad not only taught me, he introduced me to people in the business. I have a deep fondness for my dad who, even before I started my own small company, taught me to interact with people,” Jim remarks.

Above: Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc. encompasses 13,500 acres of cropland, including chipping potatoes, frozen process varieties for French fries, and red and white potatoes for canning. Shown in the family photo, from left to right, are Grace, Audrey, Jim (owner and president), Tracy and Max Mortenson, and Teddy (the dog), in front.



“He was very generous to me, giving me land and properties, but more than that, instilling a good work ethic and teaching me how to interact with people, to know what customers need and want,” he says.

Interacting with adults at a young age and providing quality service to customers is what Jim credits for his success in starting his own farm, eventually acquiring the family farm and merging the two.

“My dad helped me purchase 600 acres and gave me 240 acres right out of the gate when I started farming, by the time I was 23 years old, and that was right around the time I got married, too,” Jim relates.

Jim merged the property his father

passed down to him, which included half interest in the farm, with his own acreage.

When his father, Jack, passed away, Jim bought the other 50 percent interest from his mother, Evelyn, and in 2005, became sole entity of Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc., west of Plainfield.

“I can’t emphasize enough, without my mom and dad, what they did for me, and my uncle Jim going way back, I wouldn’t be where I am,” he allows.

Are you still growing just over 10,000 acres, or has that changed? Still red, white and russet potatoes for processing? Others? Land based, for our total footprint right now, we

Above: Cut Superior seed potatoes are loaded into a Harriston pick planter on Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc. west of Plainfield, Wisconsin, in the town of Rome.

are actively farming 13,500 acres of cropland. That includes chipping potatoes, frozen process varieties for French fries, and red and white potatoes for canning.

In addition, we grow carrots, beets, sweet corn, peas, green beans and a small amount of field corn.

What is your current crop rotation?

We rotate every crop, so potatoes, carrots and beets, those are the higher input crops.

We are on a three-to-four-year rotation on potatoes, four for carrots,

continued on pg. 10

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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 9

peas are on a six-year rotation, beans are three, and we try to do a two-year rotation on corn.

Are most of the fields in the Plainfield area? We stretch as far north as Highway 54 between Plover and Wisconsin Rapids all the way south to Highway 82, west to Castle Rock Lake and Petenwell Lake near Necedah, and east to the Wild Rose and Wautoma area.

How many workers do you now employ, Jim, and are they all full time or seasonal help? Typically, I would say we have 80-90 full-time employees, and sometimes during our heaviest seasons, 140-150 people.

Are your wife, daughters and son working on the farm? I did not marry my wife for her farming attributes. I thought she was the prettiest girl in our school and the most personable. It is a beautiful combination.

My son, Max, will probably stick with me whatever I do in this world. That includes farming, and we do own a small trucking company.



Native Americans ride past the Mortenson family homestead in 1902. This is the oldest picture of the property homesteaded by Jim Mortenson's great-grandfather and his brothers.

My hopes are that all my children will work with me. With the older generation, like my father, the ladies were not really involved. I hope that all my children will be involved with the farm. You cannot always make them, but if I had my dream, they all would.

Right now, duties wise, Max is kind of a redheaded stepchild—he gets all the jobs no one else wants to do. He is planting a little bit of carrots, and from 12 years old on, he has worked

harder than I ever did at his age.

Tell me a little about your outlook for this year, and your fears or hopes. Everybody working in processing potatoes had a bad outlook at the beginning of the season, with the coronavirus closing restaurants and bars before planting started. My contracts, like those of many growers, got cut.

We had a negotiated price, though, and they honored that pre-coronavirus price. I admire that, and they earned a lot of respect in my eyes.

Because of the situation we are in, a lot of the arguing that is typical with farming stopped and we are trying to figure this out together.

The potato customers I work with, because of coronavirus, are having a hard time keeping facilities going at 100 percent. Staffing issues have slowed down the pace. One of my potato customers would like to get more product from me, but people are afraid to come to work.

I am working with them, hauling potatoes a long way. During this time, we rely on neighbors, such as Gene Bula, for nationwide distributing. He is another neighbor I grew up with, our farm touching his.



Jim Mortenson (right) and Todd Shortell (left) load Red Robin oat seed into a Gandy Orbit-Air planter on Mortenson Bros. Farms. They use the carrot bedding machine to establish an oat cover crop and raised bed into which they later plant carrots.

continued on pg. 12

Interview . . .

continued from pg. 10



Even though these are trying times, everyone is trying to do their best. It's funny, come spring, attitudes change. This is redundant with farmers, like a switch going off. You can smell spring in the air, and it is time to stop arguing and get going.

We deal with every major canner in the area, and I have great relationships and do business with several potato farmers.

My dad was always fond of the potato families who migrated down from Antigo to the Central Sands area like he did.

My father was fond of his customers and so am I, and I enjoy doing activities with them outside of farming. I don't want to let them

down just like I wouldn't want to let a friend down. They are also neighbors, like Paul Miller—he has been a great neighbor and unsung member of the community. He has donated so much time and money to the area.

So, how has the coronavirus affected your business? It has affected my well-being. I can't go out for a fish fry on Friday evenings, and I'm a social creature. I am aching for that. It is the one part that is frustrating.

Farmers have enjoyed one thing—since our farms are essential businesses, we can operate our companies and see our employees. We are not experiencing the blues and isolation, even though the coronavirus has hurt us monetarily.

Left: Trying to enjoy his retirement in Florida, Don Clemins, formerly of Antigo, Wisconsin, found a good use for his Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc. shirt that had a hole in it. Don's wife fashioned it into a makeshift mask for use during the coronavirus pandemic.

Right: The 2019 aerial shot at Mortenson Bros. Farms shows a green dig of Ranger Russet potatoes that went straight to the McCain Foods processing plant.

It is one perk we have experienced; we have been able to carry on our businesses.

What are you most thankful for being a Central Sands grower, Jim?

I'm thankful that I had the farming community, customers and neighbors helping me out after my father's death.



Left & Above: Cut Superior potato seed is planted on Mortenson Bros. Farms in the spring of 2020.

There have been some pivotal people in my life who took the time to help me out when I was a young man. They made sure I had potato contracts and that everything worked out for me.

How has the planting season been for you? This has been the easiest spring I have had as far as potato planting goes. I had three bad springs, this is the fourth year, and we are done planting in record time.

Even if our contracts wouldn't have been cut back, we'd still be done planting by now. We haven't planted any carrots or beets yet but are starting to do that. I have high hopes for the season.

I thought we could never have three bad years in a row. We didn't have a bad year last year, just a short crop with yields being so low.

I would hate to have someone say it can't happen four years in a row. When you are a farmer, every spring



is like Groundhog Day—open your eyes, and there you are doing it all over again!

Has technology helped you become a more efficient potato and vegetable grower? We have all the current technologies, but in the last

continued on pg. 14

Above: Standing on the catwalk in a Mortenson Bros. Farms storage building are, from front to back, Melissa Ohlrich, biologist, Jessie Adams, ag engineer, and Grace and Audrey Mortenson. Jim Mortenson said he strives to impress upon Grace and Audrey the importance of women to the farming industry, saying he deals with lady CEO's, purchasing agents and schedulers who fill integral roles in agriculture.

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few years, what has made the farm more efficient is my current CFO and farm manager.

Between the two of them, they have been looking at the workforce, utilization of equipment, monetary capital and how we handle bookkeeping. They've changed the way I look at farming.

How has your farm progressed as far as technology and machinery goes?

For all farmers, it is the same. We are all using the same stuff, probes for soil moisture, GPS for tractors, most of us have center pivot irrigation and everybody has either converted to or is trying to go with low-pressure irrigation.

We use lower horsepower motors, electrical efficiencies, and sample our soils so we can input fertilizer in smaller amounts or know where we need heavier amounts.

Above: Five Case tractors pull duty during potato harvest on Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc.

Below: Jim Mortenson bought the carrot bedder, shown, during a mini vacation in Florida three years ago.

It has all become industry standard. We are all trying to do our best to manage inputs and costs of inputs, with technology not just benefiting the pocketbook, but our own eyes, noses and throats, our well-being.

What are you most looking forward to in the coming growing and harvest seasons? I have a fondness for the growing aspect of farming, and that is what I really look forward to.

This is something I have been planning since 2010 when I built my first big warehouses, storage facilities and racks.

I was a younger man then. I'm only 46 years old now, but I have someone handling money and someone handling crews, and I have fallen back in love with growing the food and working with young agronomists on the crop. They are my motivation for





getting up in the morning.

That is where I am finding enjoyment, growing crops again and working with some younger people—young agronomists and scientists. They make it worthwhile to come to work.

It is gratifying when you can teach someone something that will benefit their future. I have had employees whose first jobs were on the farm, and they've stuck with me. They are

building their first houses and having their first children.

What do you hope for the future of Mortenson Bros. Farms? A good year monetarily and that we pull it off without any injuries. Agriculture is a dangerous industry. Even the guys who fly the airplanes over our field—I am very fond of people who do specialized work for us, but it is a dangerous profession. Anyone

Left: Jim Mortenson's son, Max (left), and John Faldet, agronomist, are pictured in front of a carrot and beet planter on Mortenson Bros. Farms.

Right: As the sun sets on another day, a Mortenson Bros. tractor pulls a crop cart borrowed from Bula-Gieringer Farms.

getting hurt is sad, and it hurts, too, personally.

So, I look forward to a successful, safe and speedy crop. **BC'T**



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