

A man in a blue short-sleeved shirt and jeans stands in front of several large, tan-colored industrial buildings. The buildings have large white and dark doors. A white truck is parked near one of the buildings on the right.

INTERVIEW

STEVE DIERCKS,

vice president, Coloma Farms Inc.

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

NAME: Steve Diercks

TITLE: Vice president

COMPANY: Coloma Farms Inc.

LOCATION: Coloma, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo, WI

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:

52 years (being 72 years young)

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: None

SCHOOLING: Antigo High School and University of Wisconsin-Madison, Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board of Directors and Wisconsin Potato Industry Board (past president of both), as well as having served on the Water Task Force, and WPVGA Government Affairs and Storage Research and Research committees; the University of Wisconsin College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (serving in many capacities); U.S. Potato Board (Potatoes USA); National Potato Council; Village of Coloma president; and past president of the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Coloma

FAMILY: Wife, Pat, of 52 years; children, Andy and Kate; grandchildren, Jackson and Cameron; and five sisters

HOBBIES: Golf sometimes, snow skiing, water skiing "when I was younger," travel and, "I fool around with Corvettes when I have time," having 1959, 1967 and 1971 models

It would be difficult to think of a father-and-son team more involved in the Wisconsin potato and vegetable growing industry than Steve and Andy Diercks. There are others, and perhaps those just as dedicated, but the Diercks family and Coloma Farms Inc. have been an industry institution, serving and having served on numerous boards as lifelong supporters of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA).

When Andy was elected president of the WPVGA, in 2002, he became the fourth generation in his family to serve in that position. Steve served as WPVGA president, in 1989; his father, Robert Diercks, was president from 1975-'76; and Robert's father, Ben H. Diercks, was the Association's first president in 1948-'49.

In 2013, Steve was the third generation inducted into the WPVGA Hall of Fame, which honors lifetime achievement in the development of the state's potato industry, following his father and grandfather.

Highly regarded for their support of industry research, particularly on sustainability and conservation issues, Steve, Andy and Coloma Farms have been active participants in the Healthy Grown program.

A partnership between the WPVGA, University of Wisconsin (UW) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, World Wildlife Fund, International Crane Foundation and Defenders of Wildlife, Healthy Grown farmers



improve potato production using environmentally sound practices.

Steve was instrumental in arranging industry financing for the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Storage Research Facility at the Hancock Agricultural Research Station, and he has made his own farm available to UW scientists for countless field studies.

As a tribute to his father who began the effort, he worked tirelessly raising funds for the establishment of a

Above: A Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Hall of Fame member, Steve Diercks is a third-generation potato grower working with his son, Andy, on Coloma Farms in Coloma, Wisconsin.

potato research endowment known as the Wisconsin Potato Industry Distinguished Fellowship at UW-Madison.

Proudly hanging in the Coloma Farms office among other plaques are two environmental stewardship awards received from state and national organizations.

Steve, your grandfather, Ben's, original farm, in White Lake—Diercks and Sons—grew seed and fresh potatoes. Why did you and your father, Robert, branch off and start the operation in Coloma, Wisconsin? Did you want to get out of the certified seed business?

The farm started in Bryant and then White Lake. The farther south you go, the earlier you can start growing potatoes, so that is what we did.

My dad split off from my uncle. We got this farm and stayed here, so that was our branch off. We got out of the seed potato business, picked up a couple of chip contracts, and started washing and grading potatoes.

The first year we were down in Coloma, we were all done harvesting and fulfilling our contract by August. That was the last time that ever happened.

We are lucky to have acquired most of our farmland close to our operation. Most of our land is continuous and it has limited the amount of road travel.

My dad used to drive back and forth from Antigo. He would drive to Coloma on Monday, drive back to Antigo on Tuesday, golf and attend a bank meeting on Wednesday, come back Thursday and return to Antigo Friday.

Since this is pre-cell phone era, I learned to make decisions, right or wrong, at a young age.

I know Andy didn't grow up on the farm, having lived in town, but did you spend a lot of time on the farm growing up? I lived in town, too. My dad always told us that we needed



Harvested potatoes are sorted as they come down the conveyor—a welcome sight at Coloma Farms, which participates in the Wisconsin Healthy Grown Program. Healthy Grown is a partnership between the WPVGA, University of Wisconsin (UW) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, World Wildlife Fund, International Crane Foundation and Defenders of Wildlife designed to aid farmers in growing produce that is economically profitable and ecologically sound. @UW-Madison University Communications, photo by Bryce Richter

to get away from the farm at the end of the day or we would have people knocking on the door all night, if a truck came in late or if something went wrong or needed fixing.

What was it like working with your dad? It really was quite interesting. My dad farmed with my grandfather, so the farm and tradition were passed down a couple times. One

time, it didn't go very well; my dad wanted to do it differently from when he and his three brothers were working the farm.

Just like my dad and his father, if I did something and my dad came back to check on it a couple days later and didn't like what happened, well, that's how I learned.

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Andy and I have worked much the same way. You keep giving them rope so they learn, letting them make decisions. That is the hardest part; accepting that the way you do things is not the only way to do them.

While my dad had three brothers, I had five sisters. At the time, my sisters weren't very much interested in the farm, but I enjoyed it because you could learn a lot and I've always viewed farming as an interesting profession.

While Andy would rather work on precision equipment and the marketing end of the business, I

enjoy growing crops, and it works out well. He had to learn it all because no one is around forever. He knows that and has learned more over the last number of years.

Many grower members of the WPVGA have done a fine job of transitioning their operations from one generation to the next. They have a good handle on it.

I believe that you farm about 2,700 acres. Is it still potatoes, corn and soybeans? Those crops make up about two thirds of our acres. We also rent land to Seneca Foods, Heartland Farms and Heath Farms

Above: Potatoes are harvested on Coloma Farms, Inc., September 2017, in Coloma, Wisconsin. Images by Pierce Johnson

every year to grow peas, snapbeans, peppers, pickles and other specialty crops.

We occasionally work with Paul Miller on carrots, and there is a heifer operation that we grow alfalfa and corn silage for.

What potato varieties does Coloma Farms grow? I guess we grow roughly 15-20 percent chipping varieties, and processing potatoes for McCain Foods.

Our potato acreage changed recently, with The Little Potato Company coming to Wisconsin. We used to grow 400 acres of fresh potatoes, and now that is more like 150-200 acres, with little potatoes being around 300 acres. We don't go to fresh market with the little potatoes, but rather contract directly to The Little Potato Company.

We grow Red Norlands, Superiors, Goldrush, Algiers, these are mostly

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fresh, and four different varieties for The Little Potato Company. Ringle and Burbank are varieties for McCain's.

What kind of rotation are you on and with what other crops?

We are on a three-year rotation. Starting with potatoes, the second year is corn. With all those other crops I mentioned, we like to rotate soybeans ahead of potatoes. We like the way a soybean crop leaves the soil—soft and easy to work, and we don't have to put nitrogen on them.

Do you have storage and shipping facilities?

We can store about

350,000 cwt. (hundredweight) of potatoes. We put up a pretty nice shed across the street from the farm and converted a couple of other buildings to Little Potato storages.

Like everyone else, we pack in 5- and 10-pound bags, 3's and 1's, and cartons. We have a pretty extensive background in fresh packing.

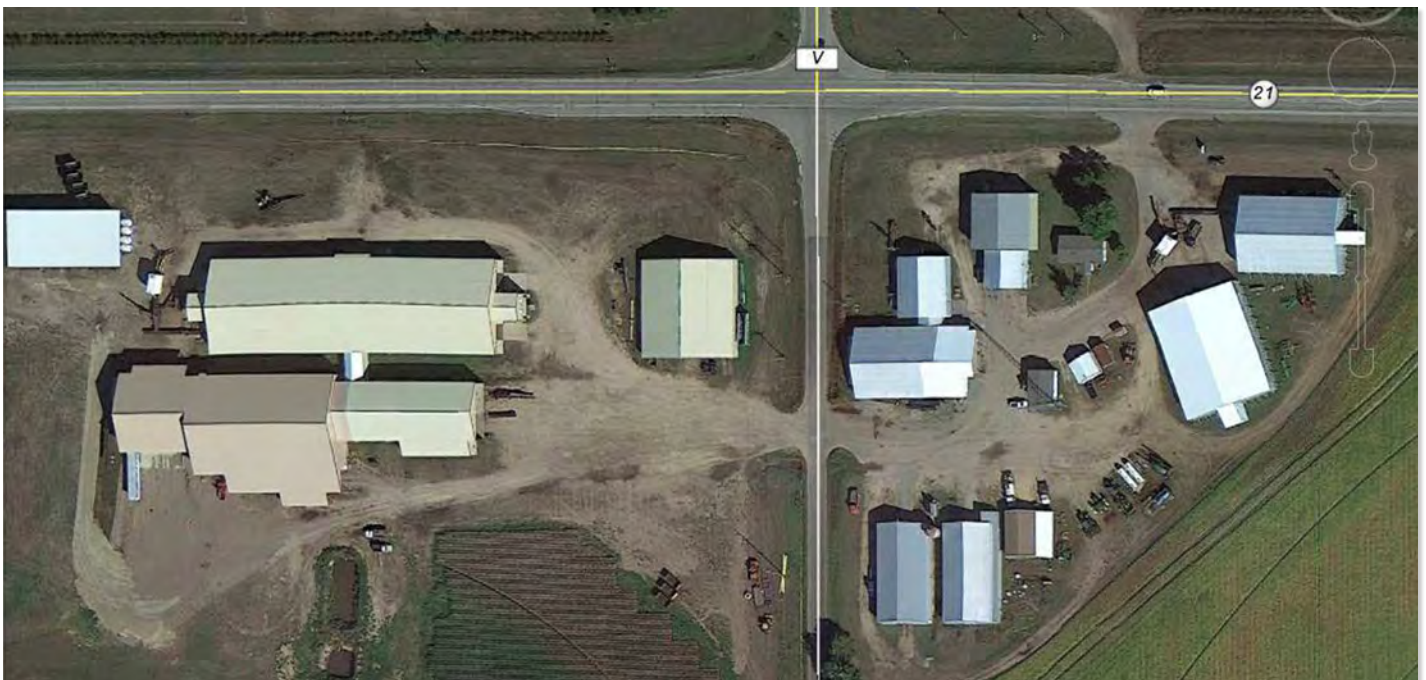
I remember packing potatoes forever when I was young. The growers down here do a good job of packing, and most potatoes are sold through large shippers—Bushmans' Inc., RPE, Inc. and Alsum's.



Left: Steve Diercks, third from right, facing camera in blue shirt, leads a tour of a potato storage facility on Coloma Farms.

Right: Generational supporters of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association, Andy (left) and Steve (right) Diercks pose with Ron Krueger and Steve Rosenthol at the 2019 Spud Seed Classic, a fundraiser for the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association, which, in turn, puts money back into the industry.

We don't have enough volume to do the 365-days-a-year thing and don't want to compete on that stage. We like to be done by Thanksgiving or Christmas.



An aerial view of Coloma Farms shows the layout of the office, barns, sheds and storages.



We still have little potatoes left right now, so we don't get much of a break. The crew gets smaller after harvest, and that's when I try to take my vacation, but there's always things to do, that's for sure.

Andy has an agricultural engineering background. How does he use those skills on the farm? He put together the whole packing line, laid it out. It is really quite efficient. He has taken over a lot more responsibilities in everything from planting to harvest.

I like to help out, driving tractor, doing what I like to do. Sons can't holler at their fathers if they take a day off. We've earned it.

What is your favorite part of the day or what do you most enjoy? I like the tractor and sprayer. I just like looking at crops. Spraying allows me to see what's going on while the crops are growing. I like fall because that's when harvest takes place, and you see how well you have done.

How did planting go this year? It went well. We plant half the potato crop in April and don't start the other half until the middle of May or even into June when we plant little potatoes. In between, we have time to get our corn and soybeans planted.

It was as dry of a spring as we've seen in a while. Most people would rather have it too dry than too wet. We always have something to complain

about. You should know that by now.

Does Coloma Farms still employ seven full-time and 8-10 part-time employees? We still employ the same amount of people but are always looking for new employees. I think there are four of us who are pushing 70 years or older. Everyone that age who works here enjoys it or they would have quit a long time ago.

It is a struggle to find good help—people who want to work on the farm. Those we find are older, 50-60 years on up. We have some younger guys, in their 40's, and others have

Left: Coloma Farms donates five semi-loads of potatoes a year to Ruby's Pantry, a charitable organization providing food to families in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Right: Andy Diercks (center) attends a retail promotion that includes a potatoes display and Harley-Davidson motorcycle giveaway at Trig's grocery store, in Rhinelander, along with, from left to right, Dana Rady, Paula Houlihan, Tamas Houlihan and Spudly, the WPVGA promotions mascot.

been working for us 30 or 40-plus years.

We're trying to work less, to spread it

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out and work fewer weekends if we can, even though everyone is putting in 10-hour days. You have to realize that people have life outside of work.

Technology helps a lot, the GPS's and newer equipment make it easier to sit in tractor all day. You're not constantly looking backwards. The new equipment to remove foreign material from the crop going to storage is a real labor saver as well.

Andy mentioned that you are running lean and extremely busy—is that by choice or is the labor market that tight?

We are not in a place, Coloma, where we get a huge influx of people. Even though we're on Highway 21 and Interstate 39/51, it's a lot different when you don't have grocery stores and clothing retailers. We still have a school, which helps, but Coloma is 430 people and there has not been a big jump in population. It has been that way a long time.

Andy is a member of the WPVB Board, as have you been, and four generations of the Diercks family have been presidents of the WPVB Board of Directors. Why is it a family tradition to be so involved with the



WPVGA? I think we want to give back to the industry. It's been good to us and a lot of people for a long time.

I remember when I was just a little kid, my grandfather would stop and measure the depth of a river in the area. They put a gauge in the river, and I don't know what it was for, but it impressed me that he was checking the water level.

There have been some interesting WPVGA annual meetings over the years. When I first got out of college, we had some annual meetings with 200-plus people. One year the meeting was in Stevens Point and the

Above: Steve Diercks, second from right, leads a public tour of Coloma Farms.

next year it was Antigo.

There were some interesting, lively discussions. The industry has gotten a lot more mature; growers have cooperated with each other more than ever before. They found out they couldn't dominate the industry. Of course, there were a lot more growers back then.

Andy has always had some interest in politics, the DATCP Board and other things he's been on. I like it, too, but I'm getting a little tired of it. I like things that will help the industry, and



Potatoes are shown in trucks, going into storage and packed in sacks on Coloma Farms. Each sack holds 2,000-2,400 pounds of spuds.

people who have gotten involved with the WPVGA in recent years seem to like doing it. That is a good sign of things to come.

Coloma Farms is a Healthy Grown grower—why is that important?

Healthy Grown is a great idea that came out way too early. It was ahead of its time, and with great people like Jeff Wyman involved. We were ahead of the curve and kept getting copied. They say that is the best form of flattery, right?

We have done a lot of research, learned things like more sustainable ways of farming and created positive publicity. It would be great if we could get a premium for Healthy Grown potatoes, but it seems like there won't be anything monetarily.

Being part of the Healthy Grown program is a great thing. It entails a little more paperwork, but they have streamlined a lot of it. It is a great group of people, a lot of fun. You get good people helping when you have problems, from the university to other growers.

Any new machines or machinery purchases?

I don't think we've bought anything new. That's terrible, isn't it? We made some upgrades to packing equipment, but no big, fancy new harvesters or anything. We converted some harvesters over four or five years ago when we started growing little potatoes.

Speaking of harvest, how do you foresee it going for you?

I'm looking forward to having enough people around. It always gets stressful when you are shorthanded. Things get tough. On the other hand, with enough help, things get done in a timely manner and you can always do it.

People who put in most of hours are those who have been around a long time, and it is harder on them than people who are part time or those who miss a day here or there.

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"I like to help out, driving tractor, doing what I like to do. Sons can't holler at their fathers if they take a day off. We've earned it."

— Steve Diercks



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We have been lucky with people who come back each year for harvest. They get older, and we don't get the kids like we'd like to.

Harvest has gotten much more efficient, faster. Harvesting

equipment and cleaners to clean up have made it a lot easier. Harvest is always a fun time of year, and then you get to harvest corn and soybeans, which makes it really nice for Andy and I because you only have two or three guys doing it.

Above: Andy Diercks, right, judges a potato dish at the 2018 WPVGA Chef's Competition, held during the "Celebrate Plover" village festival in Wisconsin.

What are your hopes for the coming years and future of Coloma Farms, Steve?

At my age, Andy is going to be running it by himself pretty soon. He's got two nephews out in California talking about wanting to come work in the summer. If they want to try it, that's great.

I have stopped making guesses. We have had a long run of it, so it's up to Andy and Crystal. I won't tell them what to do or how to do it.

Anything you'd like to add that I've missed, Steve? Farming is a good way to live, a good life. It is work, but you can get a lot of satisfaction, too. In one way, you can do what you want; you are your own boss. But if it you screw it up, it's your fault. It is hard to fail if you keep working at it, though. **BCT**

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