



NAME: John Diercks "J.D." Schroeder
TITLE: Manager (one of many)
COMPANY: Schroeder Bros. Farms, Inc.
LOCATION: Antigo, Wisconsin
HOMETOWN: Antigo
YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Seven
PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Daubert Law Firm, Wausau, for three years
SCHOOLING: Juris Doctor, Mitchell Hamline School of Law, University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison with a double major in Agricultural Business Management and Political Science, class of 2008; various motor control/PLC (programmable logic controller) classes at Northcentral Technical College; and Antigo High School class of 2004
ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board President, Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board member, WPVGA Research Committee member, WPVGA Government Affairs Committee member, United of Wisconsin Board member, vice president of the Unified School District of Antigo, treasurer of the Antigo branch of the UW-Madison Alumni Club and a Community Health Foundation Board member
AWARDS/HONORS: WPVGA Young Grower of the Year and Agri-Communicator awards
FAMILY: "John Winston is 5 years old, Elloise is almost 3, and then there's my wonderful wife, Hannah."

HOBBIES: "I like reading books, spending time with my family, watching sports and travel."

INTERVIEW

J.D. SCHROEDER, manager, Schroeder Bros. Farms Inc.

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

One of the largest Frito-Lay seed potato producers in the country, Schroeder Brothers Farms, Inc. of Antigo, Wisconsin, was originally homesteaded and founded in 1879.

The certified and foundation seed potato operation has evolved exponentially since it began with a few dairy cows and some crops to feed the family and animals.

Diversification is the name of the game, and Schroeder Bros. Farms, a four-time winner of Frito-Lay's "Seed Grower of the Year" award, has it in spades.

"In the late 1980's, we grew around 250 acres of Burbank potatoes, and now we only grow 40. We have a lot more acres of chips, russets and reds instead," says John Diercks "J.D." Schroeder, a fifth-generation grower and one of several managers at Schroeder Brothers Farms.

"We started growing seed for Frito-Lay, in 1996, and for The Little Potato Company, in 2017," J.D., who holds



Above: Whether picking rocks, grading potatoes or working on a nitrogen plan, J.D. Schroeder of Schroeder Brothers Farms, Inc., Antigo, Wisconsin, says he knows he's feeding the world, and tries to always maintain that positive perspective.



a law degree, details.

J.D.'s great-grandpa, Henry Schroeder, and his son, Tom, grew seed potatoes in the 1960's. When Tom got injured in a snowmobile accident, in 1972, J.D.'s grandpa, John, started working on the farm as well.

"And my father, John T., worked on the farm during high school and college, and became full time circa 1980. His brothers, Pete and Rob, joined the farm in the years after that," J.D., who is the current president of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board, relates.

What about Schroeder Bros. Farms and its history make the biggest impression on you, J.D., as a fifth-generation grower? As a team of around 50 full-time employees, we try to provide quality seed potatoes, year after year, to help our customers have great crops and feed the world, while hopefully making a little money in the process.

The goal is to provide such good seed that your customer wants to keep coming back. We have been doing that for a long time, and we need to keep doing that, trying to get a little better at things every year.

There are a lot of good seed growers in Antigo, and I think we push each other to be better.

What are your main roles or duties on the farm? I have a wide range of jobs. I spend a month each year hilling potatoes, and I work on the nitrogen plan.

I recently gained the storage management job, including crop rotation planning, after one of our best long-term employees, Gene Huebner, passed away. I also put together the various spray plans.

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Above: Cut foundation seed potatoes are trucked, loaded into a planter and ready to plant at Schroeder Bros. Farms. That's John T. Schroeder, J.D.'s father, driving the John Deere Tractor.

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Sometimes, I help with frequency drive or PLC (programmable logic controller) issues on the grader or harvest equipment, and I am the main food safety person.

I also spend quite a bit of time picking rocks and grading potatoes, and I take a lot of size profiles. I work on legal issues when they come up, but I prefer it when they don't come up.

How many family members work daily for Schroeder Bros. Farms and what are their positions? There are 10 of us. The guys in our family all spend a decent amount of time picking rocks and grading potatoes.

John T., president, drives a potato planter and harvester, works on irrigation and makes many plans related to seed planting, storage, sales and shipping.

Pete, vice president, drives a potato planter, sprayer and harvester, and



Wisconsin silt loam soil is cultivated in preparation for planting on Schroeder Brothers Farms, Antigo, Wisconsin.

makes many plans related to the reds and russets we wash as table stock for grocery stores. That represents around 15 percent of our acres, depending on the year.

Rob, treasurer, drives a harvester, does seed cutting, handles seed

potato shipping at our north farm location, and runs irrigation.

Gina, secretary of the corporation, performs many human resources and accounting tasks, pays bills and assists with the gift store, including item selection.

Eric does windrowing, hilling, invoicing of seed, irrigation, food safety and certification paperwork, he works with the CropTrak supply chain software, and handles Healthy Grown and sustainability duties.

SCOPING POTATOES

Andy is charged with spraying, windrowing, seed shipping and scoping potatoes.

Luke is not quite back full time from college, but he runs an unloading crew at harvest, as well as seed cutting and irrigation, and works in the shop when not busy with other things.

My wife, Hannah, does inventory at our gift store, and Andy's wife, Erin, handles online clothing sales and social media at the gift store.

Judy, my mother, manages our gift store, which includes a lot of item selection. Check out "Schroeder's Gifts" on Facebook to see lots of fashionable women's clothing, along with other gift ideas.

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My grandma, Jackie, started it in the 1970's as a farmer's market, and it has gradually transitioned over the years. They would even set potatoes out on the side of Highway 45 and people would leave money in a cashbox and take 50 pounds.

We have a lot of very good employees helping in all aspects of the farm, and they let us know when they think we are making the wrong call.

How many acres of seed potatoes are grown on the farm, and what percentage are Frito-Lay varieties?

Around 2,250 acres of seed depending on the rotational year, and around 35 percent of it is for Frito-Lay.

Are vegetables part of the equation, and if so, on what rotation?

It is a three-year potato rotation that goes something like potato, alfalfa, alfalfa, potato, corn, oats/clover, potato. Once in a while, soybeans get in the mix.

Where are most fields, and how far does the property in and outside of Antigo stretch?

Most of the fields are in the Antigo Flats/Bryant area on Antigo silt loam, the Wisconsin state



soil. We also travel 30 miles north by Post Lake, 30 miles east to Mountain, 50 miles east to Suring and 7 miles south to the Aniwa area.

What are your fondest memories on the farm, J.D.?

My uncle, Pete, used to make maple syrup, and I can remember trying to carry sap buckets through the deep snow when I was little and spilling it all over the woods.

What's your favorite part of farming?

There are lots of interesting things to learn all the time, and many incredible customers, employees, suppliers and professors to talk to. When I get appointed a tractor job on the farm, I can usually listen to an audio book.

In the book "Happier, No Matter What," by Tal Ben Shahar, the former Harvard happiness professor tells

Above: A proud father, J.D. Schroeder says, "John Winston [front right] is 5 years old, Elloise [front left] is almost 3, and then there's my wonderful wife, Hannah."

the story of a man who comes upon three builders.

He asks the first man what he is doing, and he responds, "I am laying bricks." He walks 20 yards away and sees another builder doing exactly the same thing and asks, "What are you doing?" That man answers, "I am building a wall."

He sees a third builder performing the same work as the other two, and when asked what he is doing, the man says, "I am building a cathedral to the glory of God."

Shahar explains that our perspective matters a great deal and can make



Lamoka chipping potatoes are sorted and then transferred to storage via a new bin piler on Schroeder Bros. Farms.



a large difference in how happy we are.

It varies how you feel on a daily basis, but when I am grading potatoes, I can ask, "Am I picking rocks or am I helping to feed the world?" That perspective provides me with a lot more purpose and motivation.

How did harvest go this year?

Anything of note as far as weather, rain, bulking, yield? This year's harvest has gone very well. No one can remember a year like this in Antigo where we didn't get rained out several days for at least one period, nor any other time when we have had such good weather during the day.

It could have been a touch cooler during the day, along with cool nights to help the fans run.

We finished earlier than we ever have; it usually takes us until Oct 15-20, and this year we finished in the first week of October after taking

a rest day or three on the weekends.

Just a few years ago, we had to dig 100 acres of potatoes at the start of October that got froze more than once. The ground was wet, so it helped the tubers store heat, but it was very cold when we dug them, and it was not fun to grade out the frozen potatoes, some of which we graded twice.

They did still end up growing OK. I am grateful to the customer for buying them even though they didn't meet our normal quality standards.

"The goal is to provide such good seed that your customer wants to keep coming back."

– J.D. Schroeder

What about farming in 2021 is most challenging? And what is most rewarding to you?

This year, the weather was much better in Antigo. In 2020, we got one 6- or 7-inch blast at the end of July and the rows stayed under water in Bryant for a week. It seemed like they never started growing again after that, so yields were way down last year.

This year, yields seem like they have been pretty good compared to the last two years, but still average historically. A few varieties did real

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As we count our many blessings, we are thankful for all you do. You make us who we are. We wish you and your family a holiday filled with happiness, gratitude and laughter.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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well, and a couple were below average.

Talk about food safety and sustainable farming, J.D., and some of the practices Schroeder Bros. Farms puts into place.

In terms of food safety, we do the USDA Harmonized Gap Plus audit on the field size, a Primus GFSI Farm and

Harvest audit on a couple hundred acres and a Primus GFSI packaging shed audit.

Dr. Richard Lankau from UW-Madison has been taking soil samples from Antigo potato growers, including us, and from farmers in the Central Sands, and doing DNA analysis on microbiome and big data collection to see what we can learn to improve soil health.

Discovery Farms has recently come to Antigo and installed edge-of-field monitors so we can learn about phosphorus and soil runoff, and which rotations may lower it. We

Above: J.D. Schroeder says the weather in Antigo was just about as good as it could get for this year's potato harvest.

have also done some work with the Nature Conservancy to get a third monitor up and running.

We have done the Healthy Grown audit a couple times in the past.

In terms of nitrogen, we don't want to use too much because we have a shorter growing season as seed growers, and we need to have skin set when we are digging during our shorter harvest window.

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J.D. Schroeder sizes and grades fresh Lamokas at harvest.

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In fact, it doesn't seem like many acres in Antigo have nitrogen applied through the pivots, which is different from the Central Sands.

Professor Yi Wang is going to hopefully do some nitrogen work at the Langlade Agricultural Research

Station next year to help us continue optimizing the amount we are using and avoid leaching as much as possible.

Frito-Lay is looking at requiring some different low-pressure nozzles on pivots covering their potatoes, which

could reduce the amount of energy and water used.

Our Antigo Flats grower group has been working with Chuck Bolte of VAS Laboratories on soil health measures using soil tests.

What do you foresee on the horizon for changes in farming practices? As Yogi Berra said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." I agree.

I hope, in the coming 10 or 20 years, that between advances in true potato seed and diploid potato breeding, we don't get such a huge explosion in yields that supply and demand get out of whack and really lower the price.

Professor Jesse Ausubel gave a talk on "Peak Farmland" several years back at a United conference. The idea is that, even as the world population grows, the need for more farmland is

Above: The generational certified seed potato operation includes, from left to right, Pete, J.D., Eric and Andy Schroeder, as well as six other family members.

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Above: An attraction at Schroeder Bros. Farms' southern location is a Potato Museum, complete with antique tractors, tools and implements.

decreasing as yields rise faster than the demand for food.

If that is true, it could lower the value of farmland over the long term, but more yield on less acres is likely more sustainable for the environment.

It will also be neat if UW gets affordable hyperspectral imaging devices with only the five best bands on drones or sprayer booms, so we can get good data on nitrogen use and disease management. Through her research, Dr. Amanda Gevens is detecting late blight several days before the human eye can see it.

I'm also looking forward to Dr. Russ Groves' work on being able to knock out genes on Colorado potato beetles so they are no longer resistant to insecticides.

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Proud grandpa John T. Schroeder (left) sits in the tractor with his daughter-in-law, Hannah (right), and grandkids John Winston (middle) and little Elloise, on mom's lap.

What do you hope for the future of Schroeder Bros. Farms? I just hope we can keep going successfully as our family has before us, so our kids have the option to farm if they want to. **BC'T**



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